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Advent of Denial of Death in Children's Literature

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THE ADVENT OF DENIAL OF DEATH
IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

by

M. TYLER SASSER

(Under the Direction of Richard Flynn)

ABSTRACT

After creating and sustaining highly Romanticized notions of childhood, society begins to protect children from the dangers that supposedly exist exclusively in adult reality, particularly death. Taking into consideration society's attitude towards childhood, this thesis closely examines the different ways in which authors deny death in children's literature.

Nineteenth-century authors often use enchantment to create ways for children to survive in an otherwise cruel and deadly Victorian world. As social issues slowly begin to improve, death in children's literature moves away from an event that without magic cannot be ignored, to an occurrence far less likely to happen during childhood. However, as a result of such improvements, when death does occur during childhood, denial becomes an unavoidable emotional response to death. By evaluating the different ways in which authors deny childhood death in their literature, this thesis makes a connection between contemporary attitudes of children and denial of death.

INDEX WORDS: Denial, Death, Children's Literature, Childhood, Fairy Tales, Enchantment, Grimms, Andersen, Carroll, Collodi, *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, Barrie, *Peter and Wendy*, Burnett, *The Secret Garden*, White, *Charlotte's Web*, Patterson, *Bridge to Terabithia*

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IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial
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DEDICATION

For Daddy, who taught me the importance of education.

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“Reality is a cliché from which we escape by metaphor.”

Wallace Stevens

INTRODUCTION

“God has his small interpreter- / The child must teach man”- John Greenleaf Whittier

“He had no breath left to say anything else. He closed his eyes, opened his mouth, straightened his legs and, giving a great shudder, hung there as if frozen stiff”: thus ends the original version of *Pinocchio*. Nevertheless, after receiving hundreds of letters from children unwilling to accept Pinocchio’s death and begging for a sequel, Italian author Carlo Collodi chose to improve upon his puppet’s fate. When the story resumes, Pinocchio becomes only “evidently” dead, fortunately not “thoroughly dead” (49). But he is not able to defy his predicament alone. He first needs assistance if he hopes to regain life in the sequel and receive a second chance at becoming a boy. The second part of *Pinocchio* immediately launches into the world of make-believe with an Indigo Fairy calling to the great Hawk and a magnificent bipedal Poodle dressed in court garb to help Pinocchio off the Great Oak tree. But it is only through the assistance of a hundred pairs of mice, two doctors (a Crow and a Little Owl) and a Talking Cricket is Pinocchio able to continue safely with his adventures.

As demonstrated with *Pinocchio*, enchantment in children’s literature often provides the opportunity for the child characters to become stronger and survive situations that otherwise would be more akin to real world difficulties, or as Perry Nodelman puts it, “the most significant truth about fairy tales is that they represent things not as they really are but as the implied audiences imagine they ought to be” (316). In *The Natural History of Make-Believe* John Goldthwaite writes: “For the

stock-in-trade of make-believe is simple and outrageous: this is a literature that deals in miracles” (3). While authors’ use of enchantment may appear in any number of fashions, one common instance concerns the death of children. The Victorians, in an effort to cope with the harsh realities of child mortality in the 1800s, often deny death within their texts primarily in one of two ways: (1) they create a world where enchantment somehow strengthens the child protagonist so that she might overcome an otherwise deadly situation, or (2) the author romanticizes the child’s suffering and ennobles her by allowing her to die a beautiful death with the promise of immortality in a heavenly world superior to her harsh and cruel contemporary one. However, as medical and social conditions improved and more children survived childhood, society began to remove the child from any knowledge of death whatsoever. Since it was unlikely that she would ever experience death during childhood, her own or another’s, parents chose to conceal such matters from their child. As a result, when death occurs in more modern works, the text reveals an unwillingness to accept what has happened within the text. Death becomes both taboo and foreign for most modern children and authors illustrate this concept in their texts by their characters struggling to accept death.

Once we follow a white rabbit deep underground, fall through a mirror, or fly past the second star to the right and straight on till morning, we enter a very different realm. We enter a world where wooden puppets begin to talk, literate spiders save pigs, and magical forest can at once liberate and empower but still entail danger. We

enter the death denying world of enchantment and make-believe. The Victorians' denial occurs as an unwillingness to accept what is happening outside of the text, specifically the number of deaths during childhood. The modern authors participate in such denial but more so by illustrating an unwillingness to accept, at least without great difficulty, what happens within a text. Both Victorian and Modern children's literature participate in the denial of death, and it is their subtle differences that the present study hopes to investigate and expose.

Children's literature is one of the few bodies of texts defined by its audience; thus, the lives of children and society's attitude toward children play a vital role in the construction of such literature. The desire to protect children with make-believe and magic has not always existed and neither has the idea that parents should keep from them the realities of death. The present idea of childhood is relatively modern and occurs mostly as a result of Romantic ideas regarding childhood. In "A Victorian Comfort Book: Juliana Ewing's *The Story of a Short Life*," Judith A. Plotz discusses the evolution of society's reaction to childhood deaths, specifically regarding its prevalence in the Victorian world. She writes, "Nothing in literary history quite compares with the sudden turn between 1840 and 1910 to searching treatments of childhood death and dying both in works intended for children and those for adults" (168). Childhood death becomes a central theme in much of Victorian literature. The Romantics had promoted childhood so vigorously that it becomes almost impossible to make any sort of reference to this meaningful time of one's life without feeling the

Romantics' influence. And given that children's literature is the only body of text defined by its audience, it is necessary to understand some of society's ideas regarding children and childhood since such ideas have never been homogenous and a change in attitude guarantees a change in the depiction of childhood.

In *The Pleasures of Children's Literature*, Perry Nodelman writes, "a society's idea about children is a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy" (79). The adult simply creates how and what they desire to remember about childhood. More often than not, the adult elects to remember childhood as a pure and trouble-free time. However, anyone who suggests that children are innocent and worry free overlooks the millions of impoverished children who die of starvation every year. Nodelman outlines many of these assumptions about childhood that he considers common. Most importantly, he notes that adults decide what the child is and is not capable of understanding (79). Once adults believe in their own design, their ideas "operate as a part of society's *ideology*: the body of ideas that controls (or at least tries to control) how members of the society view the world and understand their place within it" (79-80).

In his *Centuries of Childhood*, cultural historian Philip Ariès thoroughly reveals the many changing facets of childhood throughout western civilization. His chapter "The Discovery of Childhood" specifically discusses the advent of childhood. According to Ariès, medieval art until the twelfth century fails to indicate that childhood exists or at least does not attempt to portray this time in one's life (33). He writes, "It is hard to believe that this neglect was due to incompetence or incapacity;

it seems more probable that there was no place for childhood in the medieval world” (33). He also adds that children always dressed as adults throughout the Middle Ages, not as children should do today (50). The idea that children do not differ from adults, that they are merely “little people,” continues until the Romantic era.

Starting in the 1700s, society began to consider the child as an “other,” so much that one might argue that children were often perceived as existing in a sort of pre-human state. The Romantics consider children “different” and even “opposite” from the adult; Nodelman notes how adults “tend to interpret what children do according to how it differs from what they themselves as adults do” (95). Children act differently from the rest of the “normal” humans, and the parent must train them on how to develop into a real person. It was during this time that society creates many of the assumptions about childhood that continue today.

William Wordsworth, though not alone, is arguably the poet most responsible for establishing these ideas of childhood. His “Ode: Imitations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood” makes explicit his belief that life on earth is simply a pale reflection of an earlier, purer, and simpler existence that we only dimly recall briefly during childhood. In the fifth strophe he famously claims:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:

The soul that rises with us, our life’s Star,

Hath had elsewhere setting,

And cometh from afar:

Not in entire forgetfulness,
 And not in utter nakedness,
 But trailing clouds of glory do we come
 From God, who is our home:
 Heaven lies about us in our infancy! (58-66)

From attitudes such as this, the contemporary idea of a simple, innocent, worry and care-free childhood emerges. Children become separated from the rest of mankind. Nodelman most develops this idea in his article “The Other: Orientalism, Colonialism, and Children’s Literature.” Though terms such as “orientalism” and “colonialism” usually focus more directly on national and regional ideas of imperialism, here Nodelman notes how these terms also apply to attitudes toward the child. Just as nations use categories of race and ethnicity throughout history to empower and oppress other regions, so might adults create similar prejudices to children in an attempt to limit them.

Henry Jenkins, in his introduction to *The Children’s Culture Reader* claims:

Too often, our culture imagines childhood as a utopian space, separate from adult cares and worries, free from sexuality, outside social divisions, closer to nature and the primitive world, more fluid in its identity and its access to the realms of imagination, beyond historical change, more just, pure, and innocent, and in the end, waiting to be corrupted or protected by adults. (Jenkins 3-4)

The idea that children innocently live outside of society and culture, patiently waiting for parents to mold them into real people, became a new way of thinking introduced mostly by 1920's child rearing "experts." In her essay "Seducing the Innocent," Lynn Spigel argues that childhood became something that adults attempted to "maintain through various systems of governance, surveillance, and prescriptive science" (114). Therefore, the innocent child only exists once parents create her through direct and constant intervention and protection from certain types of knowledge. Perhaps the greatest illustration of the adult's desperate attempt to create and then glorify the beautiful and innocent child is seen through the five billion dollar industry spent on children's beauty pageants each year (Giroux 272). If something does not exist naturally, one can always create it synthetically.

In *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood*, writer Steven Mintz persuasively argues that "there has never been an age of innocence [...] for most children. Childhood has never been insulated from the pressures and demands of the surrounding society, and each generation of children has had to wrestle with the social, political, and economic constraints of its own historical period" (vii). In addition to the ideologies already present in Victorian literature, new beliefs continued to contribute to the formation of modern childhood. For instance, before the twentieth century society understood children simply as another part of the family financial asset. Viviana A. Zelizer notes that until 1938, "every major attempt to pass national regulation of child labor was defeated" (85). This research also

indicates how economically important children were to the family. Zelizer outlines many of the significant events in America regarding the introduction of child labor laws. She argues that it was only after people were not allowed legally to consider the child as an “agent of production” that society brands her an “object of sentiment” (90). Understanding the effects of the child labor conflict is chief to recognizing the continued transformation in the economic and sentimental value of children throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Once society no longer views the child as an agent of production, she becomes sentimentalized.

After creating and then sustaining these highly romanticized notions of childhood that began during the Romantic period and were maintained by nineteenth and twentieth-century culture, society begins to protect the child from the dangers that supposedly exist exclusively in adult reality, and one of the prominent realities where parents especially feel the need to protect their child is from death. During the nineteenth century, authors denied children’s death in their literature most likely as a way to cope with the harsh realities of Victorian life. They created scenarios where the child protagonist could survive an otherwise perilous world, or where death itself was glorified. Denial of death acquired such resonance in fairy tale *oeuvre* because it focuses on successful ways to contend with such harsh realities. Later, as social conditions improve, death in children’s literature would become a taboo subject largely repressed, and as a result, when it does occur in the text, characters are often confused and have trouble accepting death.

Inevitably my selection of texts is subjective. Nevertheless, my intentions are to survey a variety of popular nineteenth and twentieth century texts where death occurs in the story and observe how the authors handle it in relation to children. It is important to distinguish between books about death and books where death occurs. While death may not be *the* theme of all of these works, each text includes it in some manner. What is important for my study is how the authors approach and illustrate the child's reaction to death or at least to the threat of it.

CHAPTER 1

THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY'S MAGICAL SUSPENSION OF REALITY

“Good night, Pinocchio, and may Heaven preserve you from dangers and from assassins.” The Talking Cricket

In *Nineteenth Century Children* Gillian Avery argues that “Death, which for fifty years or more has been banished from the children’s book, throughout the whole of the nineteenth century was a commonplace. One might say that it was abandoned as much because the situation had been sucked dry as because of changing taste” (212). Likewise, Evelyn J. Swenson notes how death themes appear “widely in literature for children throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries” (401). There are a number of circumstances during the nineteenth century which are responsible for the prevalence of death, especially of the young. For instance, harsh conditions prevented many families from being able to maintain a steady income. Both mass immigration and the industrial revolution played a significant role in creating a large lower class. The parents’ low wages forced many children to work long hours in dangerous jobs. Their small bodies allowed some children to find employment as chimney sweeps or retrieving fallen objects from beneath heavy machinery. The strict Victorian class system also forced several children to live in unsanitary slum housing. Journalist Henry Mayhew wrote a series of articles in 1849 for the *Morning Chronicle* regarding the conditions of the poor living in London. He describes a tidal ditch running through London Street where

drains and sewers emptied. The ditch was the only source of drinking water for the tens of thousands of people living in the streets: “[It] was the color of strong green tea, in fact, it was more like watery mud than muddy water. [...] As we gazed in horror at it, we saw drains and sewers emptying their filthy contents into it, we saw a whole tier of doorless privies in the open road, common to men and women. [...] We heard bucket after bucket of filth splashed into it” (2). Obviously children were just as susceptible to these conditions as were adults. Cultural historian Pamela Horn reports that in 1848, “there were more than thirty thousand naked, filthy, roaming lawless and deserted children in and around the metropolis” (5).

Given such harsh conditions, it is not surprising that child mortality rates escalated during this period. Most families had anywhere from eight to ten children and were lucky if half survived childhood. In *Take up thy Bed and Walk*, Lois Keith chronicles how many authors handle death and disability in several nineteenth century works for girls. She specifically discusses the significant effects of inadequate medical practices on the nineteenth century child:

There were no antibiotics and doctors frequently made things worse rather than better. A diagnosis of a condition like tuberculosis was received as a death sentence, cholera epidemics were widespread and an infection could kill a child in a matter of days. (10)

Such threats and concerns carry over into the literature about and for children, though some critics remain skeptical. In *Don't Tell the Grown-ups: Subversive*

Children's Literature, Alison Lurie writes, "Of the three principal preoccupations of adult fiction – sex, money, and death – the first is absent from children's literature and the other two either absent or much muted" (Lurie xiv). While I disagree with Lurie on all three accounts, death is especially everywhere present in children's literature, particularly during the nineteenth century.¹ Although Lurie allows for some "interesting exceptions," according to her, most children's books "portray an ideal world of perfectible beings, free of the necessity for survival and reproduction: not only a pastoral, but a paradisaical universe – for without sex and death, humans may become as angels" (xiv). However, as I illustrate, what Lurie brands as "interesting exceptions" are actually a great number of popular and important texts.

The authors discussed in this chapter commonly associate the threat of death with poverty, hunger, and sickness as these are the significant issues for both the Victorian adult and the child. The child characters are weak and defenseless against death, unable survive without the help of enchantment. I begin by examining shorter fairy tales by the Grimm brothers and Andersen and conclude with longer novels such as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *The Adventures of Pinocchio*. These texts, discussed chronologically based on their publication, cast an incisive but subtle

¹Money often comes in the form of treasure in children's literature such as seen in *Treasure Island*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Story of the Treasure Seekers*. Pinocchio also goes to great lengths to protect his three coins, and his desire for more causes him to lose them. Sexuality also surfaces in a number of books for children. In *Charlotte's Web* Fern eventually abandons Wilbur in order to run off with Henry at the fair. Alice constantly has to work with the changes her body experiences in *Wonderland*. Maurice Sendak also explores sexuality in *In the Night Kitchen*. These are but just a few examples of sexuality and money as a theme in children's literature.

commentary on Victorian childhood. The stories' depiction of child protagonists as weak, passive, and unable to contend with controlling and evil forces mirrors the true lack of power and inability to control one's circumstances children experienced in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, these texts, though never once far removed from nightmare, will always deliver their protagonists into a world completely unlike reality. Magic replaces the child's lack of ability and allows her to exchange places with those in power. The authors thus comment on how life should be, with children able to defy death or at least return to the heaven from which they first came. While the treatment of death in these texts, or any group of texts, is neither static nor homogenous, they all share similarities in how many Victorian authors created texts that denied contemporary realities such as hunger, poverty, and child mortality.

The Brothers Grimm

Wilhelm and Jacom Grimm published their first collection of fairy tales in 1812 under the title *Kinder- und Hausmärchen (Children's and Household Tales)*. As a result of its immediate success, the Grimms elected to publish a second edition in 1815. Though the Grimms annotated the first edition for scholarly purposes, the brothers printed the succeeding editions with children and household uses in mind. The first edition contained 156 tales and appeared in two volumes, and after 1857 the stories appeared in only one volume. An abbreviated version included the fifty more popular tales and underwent ten editions from 1825 to 1858. Jack Zipes writes in the

Norton Anthology of Children's Literature that "the history of these texts reveals how assiduously the Grimms sought through constant revision to influence our notions of how to socialize and rear children" (209). Comparing the changes made in their adaptations with previous versions of the stories also sheds light on how the notions of childhood changed over time. The multiple volumes produced just in the brothers' lifetimes reveal how well known and accepted these tales were for the nineteenth century reader.¹ Moreover, Edgar Taylor's 1823 English translation of *Children's and Household Tales* also quickly gained a considerable amount of attention.

Many of the Grimms' fairy tales begin in a realistic setting at first lacking any magical qualities. The reader usually encounters an impoverished miller or farmer who becomes a widower when his wife dies during the childbirth. This event leads to the introduction of the evil stepmother or some other sort of witch character. The child protagonist, often a beautiful, innocent, and passive girl, leaves her family for whatever reason and embarks on some sort of task or quest. Once she enters a forest, any number of dangerous events may occur, but with the assistance of a handsome and courageous male figure and nearly always some sort of helpful sidekick character, be it a dwarf, duck, mouse, or frog, the girl finds success in her task and returns to a restored home often at least having learned some lesson but at best with riches. Despite the enchantment thoroughly engrossed in the Grimms' fairy tales, their stories maintain a great deal of realism, specifically and almost certainly the child's

¹ The Grimms saw seven total editions printed during their life with new stories added to each.

helplessness and susceptibility to death. These tales frequently combine magic with contemporary issues, or as Eugene Weber puts it, “fairy tales can tell us much about the real conditions in the world of those who told and those who heard the tales” (96).

In *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*, Maria Tatar argues that these tales are “wholly realistic, reflecting premodern social conditions” (49). For instance, child abandonment is no less fictional in the Victorian world than it is in *Hansel and Gretel*. (49). Likewise, the popularity of the numerous stepmother figures in these fairy tales also comments on the number of maternal deaths that occurred during nineteenth century childbirth. Tatar writes, “As shocking as the deeds of Hansel and Gretel’s parents may seem to us (especially if we momentarily divorce them from their fairy-tale context), they may have tallied with the cruel social realities faced by readers and listeners of earlier generations. For the Grimms, in any case, the basic facts of fairy-tale family life often squared with the facts of everyday life” (50). Furthermore, Elizabeth Wanning Harris suggests that *Hansel and Gretel* also comments on the repeated famines that Germany experienced throughout the nineteenth century (227). In addition to the difficulties that Tatar and Harris note were prominent during the period in which the Grimms lived, these tales also share the common threat of death that all children experienced. Ultimately fear of extinction is the moving force behind many of these and other fairy-tales.

While the difficulties the child protagonists experience may mimic nineteenth-century struggles, they differ in their outcome. Though the Grimms incorporate contemporary struggles in their tales, they participate in the denial of death by allowing enchantment to provide a way for the child to escape it. Children never die permanently in these tales, only the wicked do. In the land of “once upon a time,” the magical elements permit certain life saving events to take place that normally would remain impracticable. Magic allows the Grimms to conclude so many of their tales like they do in *Hansel and Gretel*, by affirming that “their worries were over, and they lived together in perfect happiness,” as opposed to the more realistic ending that many children experienced in the nineteenth century (190). Though the tales are indeed dangerous, or at least offer an opportunity for danger to exist, the Grimms deny death when they use magic to create a world where children remain safe.

Like all folk tale authors, the Grimms simply base many of their stories on older versions of fairy tales. Though the most familiar version in the Little Red Riding Hood tradition would probably be either Charles Perrault or the Grimms’ texts, both of these versions are indebted to Paul Delarue’s *The Story of Grandmother*. This French folklorist claims his tale remains faithful to an oral tradition preceding both Perrault and the Grimms. The most significant difference between these stories exists with the heroine, who in Delarue’s text is a much stronger and independent child than the girl who would replace her in later adaptations:

“Oh, granny, I need to go badly. Let me go outside!”

“Do it in the bed, my child.”

“No, granny, I want to go outside.”

“All right, but don’t stay out long.”

The wolf tied a rope made of wool to her leg and let her go outside.

When the little girl got outside, she attached the end of the rope to a plum tree in the yard. The wolf became impatient and said: “Are you making cables out there? Are you making cables?”

When he realized that there was no answer, he jumped out of bed and discovered that the little girl had escaped. He followed her, but he reached her house only after she had gotten inside. (11)

In this text, the girl alone overpowers and outthinks her predator. She neither relies on magic nor any adult figure to save her. Such strength and intelligence again suggests the idea that society has not always considered children helpless and weak. Only recently did culture separate child from adult and, as demonstrated in this text, the girl proves fully capable of saving herself.

In his comprehensive *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, Jack Zipes labels both Perrault’s and the Grimms’ versions of Little Red Riding Hood as “warning tales” that comment on negligence and disobedience (26). According to Zipes, “the elaborate details added by Perrault to the oral tale all contribute to the

portrait of a pretty, defenseless girl” (26). Likewise, when the Grimm’s write their *Little Red Cap*, they further transform the protagonist into a “naïve, helpless, pretty girl” (33). While *Little Red Cap* may not incorporate any of the social conditions that plagued childhood during the eighteenth century, such as poverty or hunger, it nevertheless highlights the child’s weakness and vulnerability to death through the wolf. In neither Perrault nor the Grimms tale does the girl survive independently. In Perrault, the tale ends when the “wicked wolf [throws] himself on Little Red Riding Hood and gobble[s] her up” (13). The author includes a moral that encourages all “young girls” not to talk to strangers and especially refrain from inviting them into their “chambers” (13). Similar to Perrault, the Grimms also present a girl who is solely responsible for the violence she encounters at her grandmother’s house.

Whereas the violence in Perrault’s tale occurs as a result of Little Red Riding Hood talking to strangers, the Grimms punish their heroine for disobeying her mother and straying from the path:

One day her mother said to her: “Look, Little Red Cap. Here’s a piece of cake and a bottle of wine. Take them to your grandmother. She is ill and feels weak, and they give her strength. You’d better start now before it gets too hot, and when you’re out in the woods, walk properly and don’t stray from the path. Otherwise you’ll fall and break the glass, and then there’ll be nothing for Grandmother. (Grimm 14)

Nonetheless, at the first suggestion of the wolf, Little Red Cap “left the path and ran off into the woods” (14). Though the wolf has already spotted the little girl in the forest, it is only after she disregards her mother’s command and enters the seclusion of the woods that he is able to reach grandmother’s house first and “gobble her up” (15). Later, after Little Red Cap undergoes the same fate as her grandmother, the Grimms make their most significant revision to the Perrault text. Only by the luck of a traveling huntsman, who through a series of violent images performs a sort of metaphoric cesarean section on the wolf, do the old woman and her granddaughter survive:

Instead of firing, he took out a pair of scissors and began cutting open the belly of the sleeping wolf. After making a few snips, he could see a red cap faintly. After making a few more cuts, the girl jumped out crying: “Oh, how terrified I was! It was so dark in the wolf’s belly!” And then the old grandmother found her way out alive, though she could hardly breathe. (15)

Luckily for Little Red Cap and her grandmother, the wolf’s costume does not fool the traveling huntsman who happens to hear the wolf snoring after his meal. Unlike the girl in Perrault’s 1697 tale, here the child heroine survives the wolf’s attack. She is fortunate both that the wolf is able to swallow her whole, and the huntsman is able to retrieve her from the wolf’s belly without injury. Miraculously the wolf sleeps through the huntsman cutting open his belly and Little Red Cap filling it with large

stones. In the Grimms' version the authors change the protagonist's punishment from death, to simply momentary discomfort. Neither the girl in Perrault nor Little Red Cap can save herself. However, Perrault ends in death while, with the aid of the huntsman, Little Red Cap survives a potentially dangerous situation and supposedly learns to obey her mother. Without the help of magic and the huntsman, *Little Red Cap* would end the same way as Perrault's version. Through magic and suspended reality, Little Red Cap receives a happy ending, unlike many Victorian children.

The Grimms' version of *Snow White* might surprise those only familiar with modern adaptations of the text. Here the queen not only demands from the huntsman Snow White's heart, but she also requires that he retrieve "her lungs and liver as proof of [his] deed" (Grimm 84). Nevertheless, the huntsman takes pity on the seven-year-old girl and releases her in the forest; he removes the liver and lungs from a boar and presents them to his queen who "boils them in brine and [eats] them up," believing them to be the remains of the child (84). Despite the queen's influence and power, the Grimms refuse to allow such a gruesome death to come of the girl who is as "beautiful as the bright day" (83). In this story, the Grimms tell of an envious queen who is a "beautiful lady, but proud and arrogant" (83). After Snow White's mother dies during childbirth, her father remarries the "evil" queen. Once Snow White turns seven, she unknowingly challenges the stepmother's beauty and pride.

The most shocking element of this fairy tale is that the rich stepmother cares more for her mirror's opinion of her physical beauty than the life of her young

stepchild. While this detail often leads to feminist readings of the text, the queen also represents death, or at least the threat of death. Nevertheless, though she attempts to kill Snow White on four separate occasions, once by ordering a huntsman to stab the girl in the heart, another by disguising herself as a clothes salesman and strangling the little girl, a third instance with a deadly comb, and finally with a poisoned apple, her first three attempts are not at all successful, and her last effort merely succeeds for a “long, long time” (Grimm 84, 86, 87, 88). While Harriet Goldberg argues that “the stepmother’s rage and her determination to find Snow White confirm the idea that the daughter cannot escape, but must learn how to cope with danger,” the text suggests otherwise (479).

Snow White never learns to cope with danger. Despite having already had to convince the hunter to spare her life, though it is her beauty not her words that actually persuade the would be assassin¹, and surviving the disguised queen’s attempt to strangle and poison her, Snow White fails a fourth time to recognize danger when she innocently eats the poisoned apple. Death threatens the nineteenth-century child just as it does Snow White. Here, at age seven, she appears to struggle for her own existence on four separate occasions. But it is difficult and rather unconvincing to classify Snow White’s actions as a struggle since she never actively works to save

¹ The huntsman pulls out his knife and prepares to kill Snow White when she begins to cry and pleads “Alas, dear huntsman, spare my life. I promise to run into the woods and never return” (Grimms 84). Nevertheless, the huntsman only reconsiders after he notices her lovely innocence: “Snow White was so beautiful the huntsman took pity on her and said: ‘Just run away, you poor child’” (84).

herself but instead depends on magic for assistance, which again suggests her passive and helpless nature. She has the advantage of living in a fairy tale world where with the help of magic and seven dwarfs she overcomes these seemingly threatening situations. Similar to Little Red Cap, it matters little that Snow White continuously ignores the dwarfs' warnings, "Beware, and don't let anyone in unless we're at home. [...] Again they warned her to be on her guard and not to open the door to anyone" because none of the events are truly dangerous (Grimm 86, 87). Even when it appears that the queen succeeds in poisoning the girl "Not a breath of air was coming from her lips. She was dead," ultimately Snow White is only unconscious and awakens when the prince "stumble[s] over a shrub, and the jolt free[s] the poisonous piece of apple lodged in Snow White's throat" (89). Snow White is apparently immune to the poison and successfully holds her breath for several days. Like Little Red Cap, Snow White survives the Grimms' tale. With the help of magic and enchantment, she overcomes the powerful and evil stepmother. The Grimms capture specific aspects of the nineteenth-century social climates, specifically the prevalence of infant and child mortality, but suspend reality when they allow their child protagonists, with the help of magic, to deny death.

Hans Christian Andersen

One notable difference between the fairy tales of the Grimm Brothers and their Danish contemporary is that Andersen's protagonists rarely live to see the end of

their tales. Indeed, *Mary Poppins* creator P. L. Travers finds the German brothers “downright tame” when read next to Andersen:

How much rather would I see wicked stepmothers boiled in oil-- all over in half a second-- than bear the protracted agony of the Little Mermaid or the girl who wore the Red Shoes. There, if you like, is cruelty, sustained, deliberate, contrived. Hans Andersen lets no blood. But his tortures, disguised as piety, are subtle, often demoralizing. (qtd. in Tatar 212)

Andersen often reverses the violence and death in his tales; though the Grimms might burn witches alive, allow crows to pluck out the eyes of evil stepsisters, rip living creatures in half, and shove rocks into the stomachs of wolves, rarely do they allow any of their child characters to sustain any harsh treatment, especially at the end of the tale. Andersen, by contrast, “promotes what readers might perceive as a cult of suffering, death, and transcendence for children” (Tatar 212).

The endings of so many of Andersen’s tales conclude with the suffering or torment of the protagonist, such as a frozen seven-year-old girl in the city streets on New Year’s Eve and a mermaid sentenced to three centuries of good deeds. The melancholic view Andersen presents illustrates the reality of many Victorian children whose lives often end tragically.

Andersen also romanticizes the sufferings of his heroines as a sort of wish fulfillment or hope for a better place. He prefers, in his literature at least, that children die a

beautiful death and live eternally in heaven than remain in a harsh nineteenth century. Andersen depicts their deaths as ennobling. He favors a happily-ever-after in heaven with grandmother for the Little Match Girl and an opportunity to gain immortality as a human for the Little Mermaid over having his characters continue to face what he believes is a cruel and unfair contemporary society. The romanticized suffering of the Little Match Girl and the Little Mermaid, with the promise of redemption in an afterlife, illustrates how Andersen's chooses to deny death in his fiction.

Perhaps nowhere else does Andersen better portray physical distress and anguish than through the graphic suffering of the child in *The Little Match Girl*. Immediately Andersen paints a picture of a “poor little girl in bare feet,” who is “blue with cold” and “look[s] so downcast as she trudg[es] along hungry and shivering” (233). If the Grimms were writing this story, the girl would be beautiful, innocent, and naïve until an evil stepmother or witch caused her to suffer. With Andersen, it is her father who “would beat her” and her grandmother is the “only one who had been kind to her” (234). This girl, like so many Victorian children, suffers under the strict class systems of the day. These conditions force her to sell matches in hopes to earn enough money to pacify her abusive father. One could hardly label this girl naïve as she is doubly tortured both by the freezing temperatures and the knowledge of others' fortune. Andersen requires that she fantasize about the luxuries she knows others enjoy during the holiday season: “[T]he table was laid with a glittering white

cloth and with delicate china; and there, steaming deliciously, was the roast goose stuffed with prunes and apples. [...] Now she was sitting under the loveliest Christmas tree; it was even bigger and prettier than the one she had seen through the glass-door at the rich merchant's at Christmas" (234). She knows her place in society, and she knows how others fare. in

So how does a children's story that concludes with the "little dead body" of a girl "frozen to death" maintain such popularity for over a hundred and fifty years (Andersen 234)? The girl lives in a society where the industrial revolution and materialism exploit children, and she fears her father because "she hadn't sold a match nor earned a single penny" (233). Andersen captures the lack of emotion in the event when the townspeople find the dead girl's body the next morning, "leaning there with the matches, one lot of them nearly all used up," and they react objectively and with very little concern responding simply, "she was trying to get warm" (234). Indeed, the girl is unable to sell one match to these people who, according to Judith Plotz, witnessed the death of one out of every three children (169).

Whereas the Grimms use magic to guarantee eternal happiness for their child protagonist, Andersen melancholically suggests that that such bliss is not possible in this world. Unable to escape the influence of Rousseau and Wordsworth, Andersen depicts a situation where his heroine rises to heaven as a nobler being, better than the world in which she lives. After the little match girl witnesses a falling star, she remembers her grandmother once telling her before she died that "a falling star shows

that a soul is going up to God” (Andersen 234). As she gazes into the fire of one of matches in the last few moments of her life, she envisions her grandmother standing next to her, “looking so very bright and gentle and loving” (234). “Oh Grannie,” cries the girl, “do take me with you!” (234). The girl lights the last of her matches hoping they will keep her grandmother by her side, and when she does, the grandmother, who never “looked so tall and beautiful [...] take[s] the little girl into her arms, and together they flew in joy and splendor, up, up, to where there was no cold, no hunger, no fear. They were with God” (234). The Little Match Girl no longer has to endure her abusive father or life in the cold streets. Whereas the girl was “blue with cold” at the beginning of the story, Andersen now notes, despite her death, the “rosy cheeks” and “smile on her lips” (234). Andersen denies death when he turns the Little Match Girl into a martyr, too good for this world. He ameliorates her death, making the afterlife superior to the harsh world she escapes. The Romanticized suffering of the Little Match Girl with the promise of redemption in an afterlife is a form of denial for Andersen. Hers is a beautiful and transcendent death, a covetable ending that Victorian children could only hope for during the nineteenth century. Death is no longer a threat for the girl as she is able to now live eternally with her grandmother in heaven as joy and happiness culminates in the end of the tale.

Andersen’s *The Little Mermaid* tells the story of a mermaid who yearns not only for the love of a Prince, but more importantly for the chance at immortality. Niels Ingwersen argues that Andersen bases his story on the Christian folk belief that

supernatural beings, such as mermaids, are not endowed with an immortal soul and “will vanish into nothingness,” literally becoming sea foam, after their death (300).

While authors often depict folk lore sea creatures as demonic, seductive, and unsafe, the Siren sisters being the most popular illustration, these mermaids reflect “Romanticism’s longing for transcendence” (300). Note the Romantic language

Andersen uses to describe one mermaid’s view of the human world:

She saw delightful green slopes with grape-vines; manors and farms peeped out among magnificent woods; she heard all the birds singing; and the sun was so hot that she often had to dive under the water to cool her burning face. In a small cove she came upon a swarm of little human children splashing about quite naked in the water. She wanted to play with them, but they ran away terrified, and a little black animal came up; it was a dog. She had never seen a dog before. It barked at her so dreadfully that she got frightened and made for the open sea. But never could she forget the magnificent woods, the green slopes and the darling children, who swim on the water although they had no fishes’ tails. (219)

Andersen creates a world where, similar to the Little Match Girl, the Little Mermaid will receive the opportunity to gain immortality in an afterlife. While the Little Mermaid’s sacrifices are made with the intentions that the Prince will fall in love

with her, her primary objective is gaining immortality in this world described by her sister.

“Why haven’t we got an immortal soul?” the mermaid asks her grandmother who, like a good twentieth-century parent, responds by discouraging her granddaughter from asking such questions, “You mustn’t go worrying about that” (Andersen 224). Yet the thought of her own mortality troubles the little mermaid and she responds, “So then I’m doomed to die and float like foam on the sea, never to hear music of the waves or see the lovely flowers and the red sun. Isn’t there anything at all I can do to win an immortal soul?” she continues to ask her grandmother who only responds with a “No” (224). According to Andersen, mermaids only gain immortality when they unite their soul with that of a human’s. At this moment the mermaid’s concern with escaping death takes precedence over any romantic feelings she might have for the prince: “[H]er thoughts soon returned to the world above her; she couldn’t forget the handsome Prince and her sorrow at not possessing, like him, an immortal soul” (224). Andersen writes of a mermaid whose primary focus is defying death, not marrying a prince, and with the help of the author, she will find a way to escape mortality in an afterlife. Despite having seen the surface, rescued the Prince, and “kissed his fine forehead,” he does not become worth the risk until after the mermaid learns that with him comes an escape from her own death (222).

The first opportunity Andersen gives the mermaid to escape death occurs when she decides to visit the sea witch: “I will dare anything to win him and an

immortal soul. While my sisters are dancing there in my father's palace, I will go to the sea witch; I've always been dreadfully afraid of her, but perhaps she can help me and tell me what to do" (Andersen 225). Tatar reads the sea witch as being "diametrically opposed to the promise of eternal salvation" (215). She writes:

The 'slimy open space' where she resides, the fat water-snakes that feed on her 'great spongy bosom' and the bones of human folk that support her house all point to a regime that is emphatically anchored in nature rather than culture, pointing to the condition of human mortality and bodily decay. (215)

Such death-like and decaying imagery does not seem very promising for anyone hoping to find immortality. Nevertheless, when the witch makes her the offer, the little mermaid, though trembling, unhesitatingly replies "Yes," thinking of the prince, but more importantly the "prize of an immortal soul" (Andersen 226). In addition to losing her family, the little mermaid sacrifices her beautiful voice to the sea witch who cuts out her tongue and replaces her tail with two legs that feel like "sharp knives and pricking garments" whenever she walks (227). However, if the "Prince marries someone else," warns the witch, "your heart must break and you become the foam on the water (226). This punishment becomes the mermaid equivalent of God's penalty to Adam and Eve: "[F]or out of [the ground] you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3.19b). The mermaid, "pale as death," replies that

she is “ready” (Andersen 226). Though the Little Mermaid recognizes the danger in her decision, Andersen protects his heroine.

When the Prince marries another, the mermaid’s sisters inform the little mermaid that the witch has offered to removed the curse if she will, “before sunrise, [...] stab [the knife] into the Prince’s heart. Then, when his warm blood splashes over [her] feet, they will grow together into a fish’s tail, and [she] will become a mermaid once more” (Andersen 231). But despite how much the mermaid fears her own death, she is not a murderer: “With a last glance at the Prince from eyes half-dimmed in death she hurled herself from the ship into the sea and felt her body dissolving into foam” (231). The sun then rises and its rays begin to slowly warm the “death chilled foam” that houses the remains of the mermaid (231).

Like the little match girl, the Little Mermaid also goes through a series of violent and painful events. But just as Andersen juxtaposes the little match girl’s freezing to death with her smiling at the warm images of her grandmother, though the little mermaid may momentarily die, the author assures the reader that she has “no feelings of death” (231). She sees a number of wonderful and bright images, lovely creatures, and her beautiful voice returns to her and becomes “so spiritual that no human ear could hear it” and “more spiritual than any earthly music can record” (232). Andersen then denies death a second time when he promises her immortality after she completes three centuries of good deeds. She becomes part of a group of

“lovely creatures” and she floats away on a “rose-red cloud” until she and all the “children of the air” reach the “heavenly kingdom” (232).

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass

Throughout the events of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and its sequel *Through the Looking Glass*, although Lewis Carroll secures Alice's safety within a dream she continually finds herself in situations in which she appears to risk death. She fears shrinking into nothing, worries the Queen will stay true to her threats of decapitation, and receives threats from Humpty Dumpty. Nevertheless, while such events again suggest the constant threat Victorian children experienced during childhood, what Alice is fortunate enough to encounter only *appears* dangerous. Her episodes are actually nothing but a series of ridiculous absurdities nearer to humor than peril. Death may appear threatening in Wonderland and on the other side of the looking-glass but, Carroll protects Alice throughout both of her adventures.

Carroll begins *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* with a prefatory poem that fully establishes his Romanticized notions of all children but more specifically of the three Liddell children. He writes:

All in the golden afternoon

Full leisurely we glide;

For both our oars, with little skill,

By little arms are piled,

While little hands make vain pretence

Our wanderings to guide. (3)

The novel that many often consider terrifying and nightmarish actually begins with the soft, poetic words of a “golden afternoon” with these three “little” girls (3).

Returning to fantasy seven years later, Carroll also ends his sequel with a poem:

A boat beneath a sunny sky

Lingering onward dreamily

In a evening in July- [...]

Long has paled that sunny sky:

Echoes fade and memories die.

Autumn frosts have slain July. (199)

Of his readers, Carroll writes:

In a Wonderland they lie,

Dreaming as the days go by,

Dreaming as the summer die:

Ever drifting down the stream-

Lingering in the golden gleam-

Life, what is it but a dream? (209)

These poems that Carroll uses to bookmark his novels firmly establish his attempt to create a world that excludes the perils of the nineteenth century. The so-called “danger” in the events in *Wonderland* and through the looking-glass is meaningless. The last six lines he uses to close his sequel firmly establish his longing to preserve safety and innocence in childhood. Such idealization introduces and concludes his Alice books and any actual danger is completely absent from the texts.

In addition to the abovementioned poems, Carroll also frames the episodes in both *Wonderland* and through the looking-glass with highly idealized notions of childhood at the beginning and end of the narratives. In *Wonderland*, Alice and her sister rest peacefully on the riverbank before she drifts off to sleep, and in *Looking-Glass*, Alice sits “curled up in a corner of the great armchair, half talking to herself and half asleep” playing with a young kitten (Carroll 107). Alice will return to both of these pleasant realities when she awakens. She tells her sister, before running off for tea, “what a wonderful dream” *Wonderland* has been, and she responds similarly to the “nice dream” she had of falling through the looking-glass (98,207). In *Wonderland*, her sister, appearing somewhat jealous of Alice’s adventures, thinks to herself how her sister, as a “grown woman,” will maintain the “simple and loving heart of her childhood” and take away the “simple sorrows” of other children and replace them with the “pleasure” of “simple joys” as she remembers “her own child-life, and the happy summer days” (99). Alice and her sister live a world very different from that of Victorian children. Sorrows are neither simple, nor easily replaced by

happy summer days. Here Carroll denies the reality of the Victorian world for children.

So while there are a number of what appear to be threats in both novels, Carroll protects Alice by framing all of the danger within a dream. As soon as Alice awakens, she returns to the romanticized reality Carroll creates for her. Yet on the surface, the events in the dreams do appear dangerous. But even here, Carroll always protects his heroine however deadly the events appear.

Carroll denies death as early as the first chapter of *Wonderland*. After chasing the White Rabbit across the field and into a “large rabbit-hole under the hedge,” she falls through a “tunnel for some way,” and suddenly finds herself “falling down what seemed to be a very deep well” (Carroll 8). Yet Alice learns nothing from the fall and comments during her long descent that “after such a fall as this, I shall think nothing of tumbling down-stairs! How brave they’ll all think me at home! Why, I wouldn’t say anything about it, even if I fell of the top off the house!” (8). Just as there appears to be no real danger in Carroll’s aboveground world, Alice is safe from this fall.

As a Victorian child, Alice is most likely familiar with the popular fairy tales previously discussed. When she observes a bottle labeled “DRINK ME,” she recalls many of these tales she has read and heard during her life:

It was all very well to say “Drink me,” but the wise little Alice was not going to do *that* in a hurry. “No, I’ll look first,” she said, “and see whether it’s marked ‘*poison*’ or not”; for she had read several nice little

stories about children who had got burnt, and eaten up by wild beasts, and other unpleasant things, all because they *would* not remember the simple rules their friends had taught them: [...] she had never forgotten that, if you drink much from a bottle marked “poison,” it is almost certain to disagree with you, sooner or later. (Carroll 11)

Just as few of the child characters in fairy tales ever die permanently, Alice knows that at worst the potion may “disagree” with her but it definitely will not kill her (11).

The empty threats of death continue to follow Alice, and though she may momentarily become nervous or afraid, she remains perfectly safe in all of her endeavors. She might have a “curious feeling” after drinking the aforementioned potion, but she will neither “shut up like a telescope” nor extinguish “altogether” like the candle she visions (Carroll 11,12). A mouse later shares with her a poem of slaughter written on her tail: “‘I’ll be judge, I’ll be jury,’ said cunning old Fury: ‘I’ll try the whole cause, and condemn you to death,’” yet this is the same mouse that saves her from drowning, and Alice seems anything but worried since she responds to the poem with excitement, concerned only with whether or not the Mouse will let her untie a knot in its tail (25). Once, while she is just a few inches tall, she comes face to face with an “enormous puppy” and becomes “terribly frightened [...] at the thought that it might be hungry, in which case it would be very likely to eat her up in spite of all her coaxing” (32). Nevertheless, Alice plays fetch with the puppy and later wishes she had continued to play with the dog and even teach it some tricks. She thinks she

saves a baby from a fanatical chef and a senseless Duchess, but the baby turns out to be only a pig. When she encounters Humpty Dumpty in *Through the Looking Glass*, the giant egg tells her that “with proper assistance [she] might have left off at seven,” but it is rather unconvincing to conclude that Humpty Dumpty is truly threatening when he is unable to even stay seated on the wall (162). Finally, what may at first seem the most violent element of Wonderland proves to be just the opposite. With every incessant command of “off with her head” or “off with his hand” that the Queen of Hearts decrees, the King grants equally as many pardons and there becomes yet another example of the denial of death in Carroll (73). No one is ever beheaded, or even dies, for that matter, in *Wonderland*.

Despite the number of hollow threats Carroll uses to threaten and then deny death, in many ways the characters simply avoid even discussing it. On more than one occasion characters change the subject whenever the possibility of death, or a sort of death, emerges. For instance, when Alice encounters the Hatter, Hare, and Dormouse, she observes that the time remains six o'clock and these characters are condemned to a life of endless repetition of tea parties and attempting to solve unsolvable riddles. Wonderland is a place that combines nothingness with eternity, but only for the inhabitants, and Alice fails to understand such eternal repetition:

“Then you keep moving round, I suppose?” said Alice.

“Exactly so,” said the Hatter: “as the things get used up.”

“But what happens when you come to the beginning again?”

Alice ventured to ask.

“Suppose we change the subject,” the March Hare interrupted, yawning. “I’m getting tired of this.” (Carroll 58)

The March Hare, who has just looked at his watch “gloomily,” does not wish to continue to focus on their eternal state of affairs and hopes to change the subject. Likewise, later in a discussion about various school lessons, the Mock Turtle and the Gryphon share a similar feeling with the March Hare. Alice, herself “hurrying to change the subject” from school, asks, “And how many hours a day did you do lessons?” (76). The Mock Turtle replies, “Ten hours the first day [...] nine the next, and so on” (76). “That’s why they’re called lessons,” adds the Gryphon, “because they lessen from day to day” (76). But when Alice pushes them and asks what happened at the end, the Gryphon interrupts in a “very decided tone” and says, “That’s enough about lessons [...] Tell her something about the games now” and the chapter closes (76). Whenever the topic of death emerges as the threat of extinction or nothingness, these characters are quick to avoid it and change subjects. Whereas the two worlds Alice visit combine the threat of “nothingness” with eternity and certainly depict death in various forms, Alice does not recognize or feel its presence. For Carroll, death does not apply to her.

Carroll believes, or at the least wants to believe, that Alice, and ultimately all children, are impervious to death, and he creates this opportunity in his fiction.

While Alice's stay in Wonderland may not be enjoyable, it is difficult to take seriously any of the instances where it appears she risks death. One might conclude based on the books' surface that there exist an element of danger, but all of the hollow threats indicate that her life is never really in jeopardy, and Carroll actually depicts many of the events as farcical: scary poems written on a mouse's tail, an ominous egg, and of the character potentially capable of causing the most deaths via decapitation, Alice herself realizes that the Queen of Hearts is "nothing but a pack of cards" (97). Although John Tenniel's celebrated illustrations unarguably depict a worried and troubled girl, whatever struggles she endures stem from her frustration with maturation, puberty, or worse, a severe identify crisis, not a concern for her life. Moreover, on both occasions she awakens with a smile from a "wonderful" and "nice" dream, not a nightmare (98, 207). Carroll denies death both in Alice's dreams and when he returns her to a safe, romanticized, aboveground world.

Le aventure di Pinocchio (The Adventures of Pinocchio)

La storia di un burattino (The Story of a Puppet) appeared intermittently during 1881 in the Italian children's weekly paper *Il Giornale per I bambini*. Tuscan author Carlos Collodi would later return to his creation and fully develop the short story into *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, starring a long-nosed puppet who immediately becomes one of the most recognizable characters in all of literature. As a result of its enormous success, by 1883 Collodi completed a sequel for the story and

published the entire work with the illustrations of Enrico Mazzanti, which underwent eighteen editions before 1900. The first English translation occurred in 1892 by Mary A. Murray and was equally successful across the rest of Europe and America.

Like the rest of Europe, Italy experienced high infant mortality rates throughout the nineteenth century. Lorenzo del Panta points out in “Infant and Child Mortality in Italy” that in the first half of the century, four to five out of every ten children born died during their first year (18). These conditions improved, but only slightly, and by 1900 out of every ten children born, between two and three died in their infancy (9). Historians locate the turning point of child mortality in Italy, like in other countries, “around the end of the nineteenth century, when the first substantial changes can be registered in the health and living standards of a relevant part of the Italian population” (9). Much like famine for the Grimms and the industrial revolution for Carroll, Italy’s political and social climate was responsible for the harsh conditions that Panta claims were worse in Italy than many other countries in Europe: “immediately after National Unification (1862-3), the probability of dying before the fifth birthday was around 47 per cent, while in the same period it was [...] around 25 per cent in England” (9). Nancy Canepa understands *Pinocchio* within the context of these difficult conditions. She writes, “In short, *Pinocchio* tells the story of how its homonymous protagonist, a wooden puppet, is induced both by the harsh-socio-economic conditions in which he lives and by his own cheerfully transgressive

nature to undergo a series of perilous adventures that eventually lead to his transformation into a real boy” (259).

As with the other writers discussed, Collodi wishes to create a text that provides the opportunity for the child to escape a dangerous environment. Pinocchio runs freely throughout his world, guaranteed to survive one dangerous episode after another, finally to return safely home to his father. “Of all works of make believe,” argues John Goldthwaite in *The Natural History of Make-Believe*, “*Pinocchio* is the most passionate” (185). Goldthwaite sees Collodi as the one children’s author who “most closely approximates how a child makes believe” (185). Indeed, excitement and adventure follow Pinocchio’s every move, but Pinocchio would not experience early as many of these dangerous episodes if it was not for the protection of his magical wooden body. Whereas Carroll secures Alice by simply giving the *appearance* of danger in her adventures, Collodi shields Pinocchio from any peril through his wooden armor.

Pinocchio combines elements from both fairy tale tradition and the more realistic novels that also experienced great popularity in the 1880s. Though Collodi introduces his text with what appears to be a traditional fairy-tale opening, this narrative differs from other fairy tales: “Once upon a time there was... ‘A king!’ my little readers will say straight away. No, children you are mistaken. Once upon a time there was a piece of wood” (Collodi 1). The opening lines couple convention with innovation as the narrator asks the children to forgo the traditional “once upon a

time” fairy tale world and consider something simple, basic, and mundane- a piece of wood. Yet the novel is not without enchantment. Like with the Grimms, Collodi uses magical elements to allow certain life saving events to take place that normally could not.

Like with many fairy tales, the *Pinocchio* incorporates many of the difficult issues children faced in the nineteenth century, including high mortality rates. Specifically, poverty plays an important role in the text and unmistakably becomes the moving force behind much of the novel’s action. Gepetto obtains the talking piece of wood from Anthony, his neighbor, hoping to prosper financially from the marionette he plans to carve from it. Similar to the father of the Little Match Girl, though somewhat kinder, Gepetto relies on Pinocchio to make his fortune as a puppeteer, and only out of the need to escape poverty does Pinocchio even receive life. He is not a toy; he is meant for income. Collodi also reveals Gepetto’s poverty when he is unable to afford the alphabet book Pinocchio needs for school. Later, Collodi uses allegory to comment on the strict class system of the day. After acquiring five gold coins from a generous puppeteer, Pinocchio loses his wealth to a pair of tricksters, the Fox and Cat. After enjoying a hearty meal at the puppet’s expense, they steal the rest of his money when they exhume his gold coins after suggesting he try and grow a money tree. The two tricksters represent the thieving noble class that prospers on the lower working class during the nineteenth century. Collodi reinforces this allegory when Pinocchio turns into a donkey in order to make money for a

business man. As a member of the lower class, Pinocchio's strings are metaphorically connected to and controlled by those above him. Collodi tells his readers: "And, though he was a thoroughly cheerful boy, Pinocchio looked gloomy too. For poverty, when it's real, is something that everybody understands, even children" (23). When Collodi writes his story, poverty is something that children understand and experience during their early life. After all, Pinocchio is not made of exotic wood, but simply firewood.

Indeed, many of Pinocchio's other struggles also stem from his place on the social order. For instance, also sharing in the fairy tale tradition is the novel's recurring attention to food and its relation to survival. Specifically regarding hunger, Ann Lawson Lucas comments that "the book surreptitiously provides many sidelong comments on the condition of the poor" (174). Indeed, Pinocchio immediately experiences the pain of hunger only moments after his creation as he darts around the room desperately looking for anything to eat: "a bit of bread, even a bit of dry bread, a little crust, a bone left by the dog, a spot of moldy pasta, a fish bone, a cherry stone, in other words, something to chew" (Collodi 14). But Pinocchio is unfortunate, for in this house, there is "nothing, nothing at all, really and truly nothing" to eat (14). The narrator comments that "all the while his hunger was growing, growing all the time, and poor Pinocchio had no relief other than to yawn. [...] After yawning [...] he felt as if his stomach was collapsing" (14). Then, while the puppet is "weeping and in despair," he says to himself, "Oh, what a terrible disease hunger is!" (14). Though

Collodi recognizes how important food is for children, he does not ignore the struggle many nineteenth-century lower class children endure while trying to obtain it (Lucas xli). Likewise, hunger is often responsible for the misfortunes that befall the puppet. For instance, during one episode Pinocchio is “no longer able to resist the agonizing pangs of hunger” and decides to “pick a few clusters of muscat grapes” (Collodi 69). However, immediately after climbing into the vines, his legs are “gripped by two sharp irons” trapping him in place (70). When a Firefly reprimands Pinocchio for attempting to take another’s belongings, the puppet simply and earnestly replies, “I was hungry” (71). Pinocchio is fortunate that all he experiences is the pains of hunger. As a piece of wood, food is not necessary for his survival. The puppet is also fortunate that he is made of wood and the traps do not cause permanent damage.

Collodi uses these harsh realities, the need for food and shelter, to comment on the threat of death throughout his novel, and while many of Pinocchio’s adventures entail “danger, fear, loss, and grief” and more often than not revolve around death, magic somehow always saves Pinocchio from dying (Lucas xli). In the article “Death and Rebirth in *Pinocchio*” Thomas J. Morrissey and Richard Wunderlich discuss the number of symbolic deaths the puppet undergoes:

“The book’s fictive world does not exclude injury, pain, or even death--they are stylized but not absent. How could Collodi write a true picaresque novel without accommodating the harsher facts of mortal existence? [...] On the road to rebirth, Pinocchio suffers setbacks that are themselves symbolic deaths and resurrections”

(65). Nevertheless, these “setbacks” are opportunities for the puppet to learn from his mistakes, and Collodi grants him numerous second chances, opportunities the nineteenth century does not grant real children.

Collodi’s use of language specifically captures and illuminates what the world looks like through the eyes of a nineteenth-century child. When Pinocchio leaves Gepetto’s home, he enters a “diabolical night” where he alone wanders through a town resembling “the land of the dead” (Collodi 16). Though “driven by separation and hunger,” he is unable to find food; he returns home where he falls asleep a little too close to the fire, and while he sleeps, “his wooden feet caught alight, and little by little they burned away and turned to ashes” (17). These death images are real for the contemporary child, yet Pinocchio, with the aid of make-believe and enchantment, is able to wander around aimlessly and carelessly since Collodi protects him with magic. Though the Blue Fairy dies twice but returns from each death, as does the talking cricket, the numerous deaths Pinocchio survives become almost monotonous: murderers, a donkey halter, and a dog collar all nearly choke Pinocchio; he laughs in vain when more murderers try to stab him to death; a shark eats him, but because the shark has asthma, he sleeps with his mouth open and Pinocchio easily walks right out; he survives drowning on multiple occasions; he almost starves to death, but the Blue Fairy comes and feeds him a three-course meal, his only meal in the book; a large serpent threatens the puppet but dies of laughter; a dog chases him, but unable to swim, stops when the puppet jumps into water; a net traps Pinocchio underwater but

a fisherman rescues him hoping to cook him in a frying pan; and Pinocchio risks incineration on no fewer than five occasions: he falls asleep next to a fire which burns off his legs, one man wants to use him as fuel to cook mutton, another sells him for firewood, and several assassins try to burn him alive. Despite the numerous calamities the puppet faces, Collodi protects him from the ultimate catastrophe. Indeed, the only actual death the reader ever witnesses is that of Pinocchio's classmate Candlewick, who dies from exhaustion as an overworked donkey. The reason Pinocchio repeatedly survives stabbings, incineration, drowning, starvation, and suffocation, and his friend cannot even endure physical labor is because Candlewick, like so many nineteenth-century children, never receives any magical help or assistance. He dies unaided. Collodi may not provide Pinocchio with what the puppet wants, but he does provide him with what he needs to survive-- magic. And as indicated, Pinocchio always triumphs over death.

“Once upon a time” evokes for its readers a place where things were different, a longing for nostalgia. The Romantics believed that children came from heaven “trailing clouds of glory.” They do not belong in a world filled with unavoidable starvation, sickness, abandonment, and poverty. These Victorian tales shift from a realistic milieu to a fantastic world that suspends reality. More often than not the child characters are weak and passive, unable to survive in their world without the help of enchantment. These characters all depend on magic to help them survive otherwise dangerous situations. The authors deny death when they create situations

where the characters are able easily to evade it. And even when characters do die, such as the Little Match Girl and the Little Mermaid, the authors glorify their death, making the experience completely different from the harsh Victorian reality. Authors of nineteenth-century children's literature either create magical ways to escape difficulties, or simply return their protagonists to the idyllic and glorious heaven from which they came.

CHAPTER 2

A GRAND ADVENTURE THAT WILL LAST FOREVER

But now the world seemed to be changing and getting nicer.- “The Secret Garden”

In examining how children’s literature often denies death, it is necessary to comment on how authors approach the topic during the early twentieth century. This chapter illustrates the transitional qualities of *Peter and Wendy* and *The Secret Garden*. These early works, both written and published by 1911, help to illustrate the merging of denial of death inside and outside of the text. Death is ubiquitous in these novels, appearing almost everywhere in the stories. Nevertheless, none of the characters actually experience death and such removal partly explains the characters’ denial. Two critics have noted such duality when Neverland becomes both the “land of the dead” for Alison Lurie, and a “mythical land of immortality” for Maria Nikolajeva (130, 90). Neither of these identifications exists exclusively. Rather, the arguments work together to convey the historical and sociological significance of the texts. Neverland at once becomes both the “land of the dead” and a “mythical land of immortality” when it encompasses make-believe. Indeed, Neverland may be the definition of make believe, complete with pirates, mermaids, Indians, fairies, and most importantly, the opportunity to escape death. Following a somewhat similar progression, *The Secret Garden* creates a world where positive thinking and magic helps one transcend mortality. The books suggest that despite a life filled with

sickness, it is only Colin's attitudes and beliefs that render him bedridden. Barrie and Burnett both depict death as a real and constant threat for their characters.

Nevertheless, denial arises in these characters when despite death's threat, they are able to escape their mortality.

Much children's literature concerns the fantasies adults wish to create about childhood. *Peter and Wendy* and *The Secret Garden*, in particular, combine recognizing and rejecting death's existence in childhood. Just as Barrie allows his characters to escape safely to an apparently dangerous land of make-believe, where children can live forever, Burnett acknowledges the prevalence of terminal sickness in children with her description of both Mary and Colin, but she also creates an escape for her characters. As early twentieth-century writers, Barrie and Burnett were familiar with Victorian child mortality rates, each having personally experienced the death of a sibling. However, at the time of these novels' publication, there were a number of medical improvements that were slowly coming into existence during the turn of the century. Gillian Avery observes these early developments:

Once parents and communities lived knowing that many of their infants and children would fail to thrive and survive. It is only since the beginning of the twentieth century – and then only in relatively affluent and developed parts of the world – through improvements in

hygiene, diet and medicine, that death in childhood has become exceptional. (Avery 1)

Though the conditions that Avery mentions begin to improve during the turn of the century, the progress is not immediate. Nonetheless, Barrie and Burnett capture such change in their treatment of death in these works. Though death remains a prevalent force, the characters begin to deny the possibility of their own death. Barrie creates an imaginary world where time ceases to exist and children live forever, while Burnett allows Mary and Colin to recover from supposedly terminal sicknesses. Peter inhabits a land that allows him to live forever, and Colin even claims on a number of occasions that he will live forever. The authors' depiction of their characters in such a way suggests that children still need magic or make believe to escape death.

It is perhaps the most famous opening line of any children's book: "All children, except one, grow up" (Barrie 69). Immediately the reader knows that the story concerns the one exception, Peter Pan. Sir James Matthew Barrie, Scottish creator of *Peter and Wendy*, tells the story of a child who is reluctant to abandon childhood. Highly sentimental modern adaptations of the story are most likely responsible for the tendency to view Peter as a child who enjoys being frozen in delightful innocence. However, Barrie's character differs in that his protagonist constantly suffers as a result of permanent childhood. Readers often overlook Peter's affliction, choosing rather to envy his blissful youth. Yet one must remember that it is natural and healthy for a child to enter into adulthood, and the only way realistically

to escape maturity is to die during one's youth. Nonetheless, the opening line indicates that Peter varies from all others as the only one who can spend a lifetime as a child.

One way in which Peter differs from the other children regards how he came to inhabit Neverland. The readers learn that Peter's family betrayed him when he was just a few days old. In *From Mythic to Linear*, Maria Nikolajeva labels his existence in Neverland as one of "exile" (88-89). Barrie explains Peter's banishment in the 1906 *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* where he writes that "when [Peter] was seven days old; he escaped by the window and flew back to Kensington Gardens" (12). Later, when he wishes to return to his mother "for ever and always," he flies home only to discover that the nursery window, which "was always to be open for him," now closed:

[...] [T]here were iron bars on it, and peering inside he saw his mother sleeping peacefully with her arm round another little boy.

Peter called, 'Mother! mother!' but she heard him not; in vain he beat his little limbs against the iron bars. He had to fly back, sobbing, to the Gardens, and he never saw her again. What a glorious boy he had meant to be to her! Ah, Peter! we who have made the great mistake, how differently we should all act at the second chance. But Solomon was right – there is no second chance, not for most of us.

When we reach the window it is Lock-out Time. The iron bars are up for life. (40)

However, the other children accompany Peter to Neverland of their own “free will,” not because of exile (Nikolajeva 89). The other boys, and Wendy, are confident their mother will not lock them out as did Peter’s. Their belief in a mother’s love is “so great indeed” that they “felt they could afford to be callous a bit longer” and remain in Neverland without fearing the threat of being unable to return home (Barrie 167). Peter first inhabits Neverland as a result of betrayal, but the other children come to Neverland because of their own desire. Indeed, after the adventure with Hook, Wendy, John, Michael, and the other Lost Boys wish to return to the nursery, a desire not shared by Peter.

Alison Lurie accurately identifies Neverland as the “land of the dead” (130). According to Peter, the Lost Boys are the “children who fall out of their perambulators when the nurse is looking the other way. If they are not claimed in seven days they are sent far away to the Neverland to defray expenses” (Barrie 94-95). Nevertheless, when Wendy hears such an explanation, she responds not with terror or worry, but with excitement, exclaiming “What fun it must be!” (95). She is confident that her parents would always welcome her back home. Lurie interestingly notes that “in a euphemism of the time still in use today, to say someone had ‘lost’ a relative meant that this person had died” (130). Yet the title the “Lost Boys” is not permanent for any of the children, except Peter of course. The children are able to

enjoy the adventures they experience in Neverland because they are certain they will be able to return safely to their nursery. If permanent, an escape to the land of the dead would hardly be attractive or desirable.

Similar to Lurie's observation, Humphrey Carpenter refers to the Lost Boys who dwell in Neverland as "souls of [the] dead" (182). But in order for these "souls of [the] dead" to find their way to Neverland, they must first have a guide. Barrie biographer Andrew Birken records in *J. M. Barrie & The Lost Boys* that once while walking through Kensington Gardens, George Llewelyn Davies observed a pair of grey stones used to mark the boundary of the gardens that read "W ST. M" and "I 3a P.P. 1841" (68). When the boy asked what the stones were for, rather than reply honestly that the stones simply marked the borders between the Parish of Westminster St. Mary's and the Parish of Paddington, Barrie offered a slightly more creative explanation:

He told that when Peter Pan found dead children in the Gardens after Lock-out Time, he would dig a grave and bury them, preferably in pairs, erecting a tombstone to mark the spot. The initials 'W ST. M' and 'P.P.' indicated the mortal remains of Walter Stephen Matthews and Phoebe Phelps, two babies who had fallen from their perambulators while their nurse was looking away. (69)

According to Birken, Barrie also included that Peter had "quite an appetite for grave-digging, and was sometimes rather too quick with his spade--hence the profusion of

gravestones in Kensington Gardens” (69). George would have found such an embellished story quite believable given the prevalence of childhood death during the Victorian days.

Similar stories abound Barrie’s texts. According to Mrs. Darling’s own childhood recollections of Peter, “when children died he went part of the way with them, so that they should not be frightened” (Barrie 75). Only through Peter’s guidance can the children reach Neverland and become Lost Boys. Peter’s dress further indicates his Charon-like function. When he first appears, Barrie describes Peter’s clothing as not only “lovely,” but also “clad in skeleton leaves that ooze out of trees” (Barrie 77). Sarah Gilead remarks that as both “boy eternal and rotting corpse, [Peter] arrives like a dream, of immortality come true but also like a plague deadly to children – like ageing and death, he empties the nursery” (97). Gilead’s understanding of the text is especially revealing given the large number of child deaths during the eighteen hundreds. However, though Peter, resembling a plague or disease, steals the children from the safety and comfort of their nursery, their destination turns out to be far less fearsome or permanent than actual death. Nonetheless, much of the trip remains threatening. For instance, as Peter escorts the Darling children towards Neverland, the narrator calmly reveals Peter’s lack of concern for the children. The narrator tells the reader that he often becomes sidetracked while flying and at any moment, “there was always the possibility that the next time you fell he would let

you go” (103). Though all of the children will eventually return to their home, their trip to Neverland appears quite discomfoting.

The events on the island seem at first no less terrifying than the children’s experience traveling there. At the time of the Darling children’s arrival, there are six Lost Boys who already inhabitant the island, but there have been others: “The boys on the island vary, of course, in numbers according as they get killed and so on; and when they seem to be growing up; which is against the rules, Peter thins them out” (Barrie 113). Indeed, death appears to be an everyday concern for Neverland’s inhabitants, much as it is for the Victorians. In fact, the narrator deals with death quite casually:

Let us now kill a pirate, to show Hook’s method. Skylights will do. As they pass, Skylights lurches clumsily against [Hook], ruffling his lace collar; the hook shoots forth, there is a tearing sound and one screech, then the body is kicked aside, and the pirates pass on. He has not even taken the cigars from his mouth. (115)

Later, upon Tinker Bell’s encouragement and hoping to “please” Peter, the not-so-intelligent Tootles shoots Wendy out of the sky with his bow, and she “flutter[s] to the ground with an arrow in her breast” (122-23). The boys proudly rush to finish their kill; however, the girl is already dead: “If Wendy’s heart had been beating they would all have heard it” (124). Even the beloved Tinker Bell drinks poisoned medicine in an attempt to save Peter from Hook: “It was poisoned Peter, [...] and now

I am going to be dead” (184). Tinker Bell then lies down to die, and with every passing moment, her light grows fainter and Peter knows that when it goes out, “she would be no more” (184).

Another way of understanding Neverland as the land of the dead is to look at how time exists, or rather does not exist, in this “mythical land of immortality” (90). Nikolajeva recognizes that time in Neverland is not linear as it is in England, but rather it is circular (90). Wendy observes such an inability to measure time with the other inhabitants of the island. The narrator explains: “It is quite impossible to say how time does wear in the Neverland, where it is calculated by moons and suns, and there are ever so many more of them than on the mainland” (Barrie 136). It is impossible to know if the children have been in Neverland for a short while or for many weeks or months. Indeed, none of the children appear to age while they are in Neverland. This phenomenon is particularly revealing for Peter because even as the permanent inhabitant of Neverland the narrator says that he “had no sense of time, and was so full of adventures that all I have told you about him is only a halfpenny-worth of them” (218). At the end of the novel, after waiting a year for Peter to return and take her away for his spring cleaning, it pains “to find that the past year was but as yesterday to Peter; it had seemed such a long year of waiting to her” (219). Furthermore, when he returns to the nursery the second time to take adult-Wendy back to Neverland, he is the same age while Wendy has become a grandmother. Alison Lurie notes in *Don't Tell the Grown-ups* that time does, however, affect the

adults in the novel: “the crocodile that follows Captain Hook, relentlessly ticking (it has swallowed a clock as well as Hook’s right hand), is one of the wittiest and most sinister symbols ever created of the way all of us except Peter Pan are stalked by devouring Time” (130). Therefore, time constantly stalks only Hook, the “adult” of Neverland, and when the clock winds down, he will no longer be able to anticipate the crocodile’s attack. Both grandmother Wendy and Hook experience and understand time’s effect on life. However, this should seem quite natural for the eternal land of the dead; time does not exist, at least not in linear form, rather, it continues on eternally.

The repeating nature of the events on the island also speaks to the eternal repetition that exists in Neverland. The narrator specifically uses cyclic imagery in order to relate how the events on the island carry on when Peter is away:

In his absence things are usually quiet on the island. The fairies take an hour longer the morning, the beasts attend to their young, the redskins feed heavily for six days and nights, and when pirates and lost boys meet they merely bite their thumbs at each other. But with the coming of Peter, who hates lethargy, they are all under way again. (Barrie 112)

Nikolajeva fully investigates Barrie’s use of “iterative description” in *From Mythic to Linear* (90). She contrasts the author’s use of circular time in Neverland, what she calls “mythical,” and linear adult time in England in order to compare it with other works where, according to her, time usually stands still in the adult world while “the

child protagonists are away in a magical realm” (90). However, I read Barrie’s use of cyclic imagery in Neverland as a way to illustrate how perpetually everlasting life and experiences are for Peter even after Wendy and her brothers return home. None of the events carry any importance or significance, for Peter especially. Neverland is land eternal. Indeed, only by chance does the audience even encounter the purported “great battle” between Peter and his rival Hook. The narrator considers several stories, presumably of equal excitement and importance:

Perhaps a better one would be the night attack of the redskins on the house under the ground. [...] Or we might tell how Peter saved Tiger Lily’s life in the Mermaids’ Lagoon, and so made her his ally. [...] Or we could tell of that cake the pirates cooked so that the boys might eat it and perish; [...] Or suppose we tell of the birds that were Peter’s friend, particularly of the Never bird that built in a tree overhanging the lagoon, [...] A shorter adventure, and quite as exciting, was Tinker Bell’s attempt, with the help of some street fairies, to have the sleeping Wendy conveyed on a great floating leaf to the mainland. [...] Or again, we might choose Peter’s defiance of the lions. (Barrie 139)

After listing some of the possibilities, all equally exciting, the narrator concludes that the best way to determine which story to tell is simply to “toss for it” (139). When the lagoon story wins, which happens to lead directly to Peter and Hook’s final battle, the narrator regrets the outcome: “This almost makes one wish that the gulch of the cake

or Tink's leaf had won" (139). The Hook story seems even less appealing to the narrator than the ones dealing with cake and leaves; he even momentarily considers making it the "best out of three" hoping another story, perhaps of greater interest, would win (139). Finally the narrator unenthusiastically decides to proceed with the given adventure. Thus, the story the reader then encounters is merely one of the many replayed or constant games, just another meaningless adventure that the Neverland inhabitants will soon forget.

Given the burgeoning number of deaths and death-like images that abound the novel, Peter's exclamation just before the Never bird saves him from drowning of "To die will be an awfully big adventure," seems properly placed (Barrie 152). All of these *near death* experiences are indeed full of excitement. There are pirates who, if Hook does not kill them first, stab one another and try and trick Peter into consuming poisoned medicine, Tootles shoots an arrow into Wendy's heart as she flies over the island, and even in this instance Peter saves Wendy's life from the mermaids only to have the Never bird rescue him. Furthermore, as Carpenter notes of Barrie's 1902 novel *The Little White Bird*¹, when children died Peter would "sing gaily to them when the bell tolls," and also "went part of the way with them, so that they should not be frightened" (185). It was stories such as these that prompted George Llewelyn Davies to respond to Barrie: "To die will be an awfully big adventure" (185). However, death's attractiveness can only be understood because of

¹ The novel where Peter first appears.

its magical, temporary setting. Though *Peter and Wendy* still encompasses numerous accounts of death similar to earlier works, these deaths are not final. Death is only an exciting adventure because these children can survive its threat.

The large numbers of resurrections in Peter and Wendy are mostly responsible for keeping the adventures light rather than tragic. While Tootles shoots Wendy in the heart causing her to fall from the sky, thanks to a thimble coincidentally placed over her breast, she escapes death. Likewise, though Tinker Bell knowingly swallows Peter's poisoned medicine, she also experiences a resurrection when Peter asks all the children to clap together to save the fairy, an act that encourages all participating children to accept that clapping and believing maintains life. Similar to Mary and Colin in Burnett's *The Secret Garden*, life for Tinker Bell depends merely on the children's faith. Swallowing poison is inconsequential as long as others believe she can recover. Finally, even if the Lost Boys are, as Lurie suggests, a euphemism referring to a person who has died, in the 1904 world of Neverland, these dead children abandon their warm underground tomb hoping that the Darlings might adopt them (131). As long as the children remain in Barrie's "mythical land of immortality," neither the arrow nor the fall from the sky will harm Wendy, Tinker Bell can survive poisoning by others simply believing, and the Lost Boys can trade their underground world for English nurseries.

A biographical approach to the novel might also illuminate such denial. Many critics believe that Peter Pan owes his life to the death of Barrie's brother David.

Barrie was nine years old when his thirteen year old brother died in a skating accident. Perhaps his mother's obsession over her dead son, one who would never age, and her disregard for Barrie explains why he created a story about an ageless child who longs for some sort of mother figure. According to Harry M. Geduld, when the mother figure Wendy attaches Peter to his shadow, Barrie symbolizes his own mother's desire to fuse both dead and living son (qtd. in Lurie 22). Likewise, many understand Peter as a sort of literary reincarnation of Barrie himself. Biographers constantly call attention to Barrie's short stature (barely five feet tall), his own youthful spirit, the fact that he never conceived a child and his close friendship with the neighboring Llewelyn Davies boys. This might explain why Peter "forgets" to visit Wendy for spring cleaning; Peter wishes to deny that Wendy will grow up. By not returning to the nursery, Wendy remains the same age for Peter. Regarding his brother, Barrie reportedly wrote in his diary, "When I first became a man [...] he was still a boy of thirteen" (Carpenter 177). During a time of high infant mortality, and as a result of his own experiences with his brother's death, Barrie creates a fantastical world where such worries cease to exist. Death only becomes grand when it ends with resurrection and homecoming for the children. In this "mythical land of immortality," the struggles and hardships the Lost Boys encounter are but insignificant adventures of entertainment. Unlike the London from which they escape, Neverland is a never-ending world void of any real or lasting harm for children though threats of death and extinction exist throughout.

Similar to Barrie, Frances Hodgson Burnett also creates a place where children can escape death, despite its constant looming presence. In *Waiting for the Party: The Life of Frances Hodgson Burnett*, Anne Thwaite records Burnett's belief that a "tremendous lot of natural splendid happiness" should fill every human life (75-76). And, as Alison Lurie puts it in her book *Don't Tell the Grown-Ups*, Burnett makes every attempt "to spread joy" in her writing (141). Such a conviction helps explain the happy endings the author prefers in her writing, and Burnett's optimism drives the themes of her most recognized novel, *The Secret Garden*. This story concerns the emotional and mental miracle that transpires between two thoroughly unpleasant and spoiled children, Mary and Colin. Their regeneration occurs within the context of a new metaphysical understanding of Christianity called Christian Science. Burnett was in her twenties when Mary Baker Eddy published the influential *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* (1875). The Christian Science movement enjoyed its greatest popularity during the turn of the century, and its teachings greatly influenced Burnett and her work. Proponents of Christian Science praise the power of positive thinking while encouraging fervent contemplation of what one wishes to happen. Like Christian Science, argues Lurie in her introduction to the text, "*The Secret Garden* suggests that illness and despair can sometimes be caused by dark, pessimistic thoughts, and cured by positive thinking" (xx). According to this belief, for better or for worse, one can ostensibly change one's illness through the power of thought.

Such is the case with Mary and Colin who identify this belief within the so called “magic” of the garden. Denial of death for Burnett emerges through the restorative properties of the garden and the proposed healing power of positive thinking. Though Burnett first describes the children as unhealthy and dying, their sickly natures change after exposure to the garden and positive thinking. Barrie illustrates denial when he creates a world where, despite the number of death associations and images, the children have the option of escaping their own mortality. Neverland is a safe world of make believe. He largely associates make believe with Neverland, and what one perceives as dangerous threats, in actuality is simply imagination. Similarly, Burnett’s denial occurs when she crafts a world where positive thinking and magical gardens overpower death

The Secret Garden is a curious amalgam of many traditional fairy tale plots. Throughout the novel, Burnett references several fairy tales when specifically describing the garden. Such an association is important as it establishes the influence of the nineteenth century fairy tale on how the novel approaches death. Following the death of Mary’s parents in India, the newly orphaned child goes to live with her uncle, who lives in a “queer place” in Yorkshire, England (Burnett 14). The housekeeper of Misselthwaite Manor, Mrs. Medlock, tells Mary that her uncle, Archibald Craven, is a widowed hunchback who lives in a mansion with hundreds of rooms surrounded by gardens. Her uncle’s story reminds Mary of a fairy tale, and after she learns of her uncle’s intensely reclusive nature, the narrator comments that

it all sounds like a “fairy story that [does] not make [her] feel cheerful” (16). Indeed, Mary’s life early on in the book somewhat resembles a fairy tale. After the death of her parents Mary lives with her malformed uncle in a fantastical house, and even as Medlock tells the story, it begins to rain “like something in a book” (16). As a young child, Mary grew up reading and hearing the stories of the Grimm brothers and Andersen and she recognizes these aspects from those tales.

Shortly after discovering the Secret Garden, Mary spends increasingly more time behind its locked walls. She enjoys the privacy and comments that “it seem[s] almost like being shut out of the world and in some fairy place” (77). Later, Colin makes a similar comment just before his first trip to the garden. He has spent “a good deal of time looking at wonderful books and pictures” and experiencing what he has only heard and read about in stories and pictures excites Colin (180). Burnett makes an explicit reference to fairy tales when Mary observes of her cousin, “What big eyes you’ve got, Colin” (180). A few moments later the narrator comments that his eyes are indeed as “big as the wolf’s in Red Riding-Hood” (183). Both Mary and Colin spent much of their lives seeing things in stories rather than real life: Mary’s reading of fairy tales in India, Colin’s reading of picture books, Martha’s stories to Mary, and then Mary’s tales to Colin. However, this garden’s influence on the two children differs from the stories they remember.

Though Burnett portrays her garden in a fairy tale setting throughout the novel, there still emerges one notable difference between her secret garden and those Mary remembers from childhood:

The few books she had read and liked had been fairy-story books, and she had read of secret gardens in some of the stories. Sometimes people went to sleep in them for a hundred years, which *she had thought must be rather stupid*. She had no intention of going to sleep, and, in fact, she was becoming wider awake every day which passed at Misselthwaite. (77; my emphasis)

In the tales that Mary has been reading, death represented as eternal sleep often comes to the children who are and remain passive and weak until some sort magical occurrence aids them. But Burnett's "fairy place" differs from the ones Mary encounters in her "fairy-story books"; the secret garden does not cause eternal sleep, but rather astounding wakefulness. Burnett is familiar with how many nineteenth-century fairy tales associated death with sleep: *Sleeping Beauty* and *Snow White* being the best known. Burnett denies this possibility for her protagonist. While characters such as Sleeping Beauty and Snow White do escape their eternal sleep, their rescue only occurs as a result of extraordinary events, such as a heroic magical kiss of life. With *The Secret Garden*, Colin and Mary preserve life simply with their own thinking. Though Burnett draws parallels between her garden and those the children remember from fairy tales, she makes an important distinction between the

stories and her secret garden. At the beginning of the novel, her child protagonists are sickly and dying; however, through the help of the magical garden, the children begin to grow healthier.

Throughout the novel, Burnett highlights the many similarities shared between Mary and Colin. At the beginning of the book, the author describes Mary as “the most disagreeable child ever seen” (Burnett 3). At the beginning she attacks one of her servants, and when she hears that her nurse has died, she does not cry because she is not an “affectionate child and had never cared much for anyone” (6). Likewise, the narrator comments on the equally spoiled and selfish Colin that “he could have anything he asked for and was never made to do anything he did not like to do” (111). Also like Mary, he abuses the servants around him: “‘Every one is obliged to do what pleases me,’ he said indifferently. ‘It makes me ill to be angry’” (112). However, more important than their actions are the similarities they share regarding their health, and both Barrie and Burnett acknowledge the health issues that surrounded the Victorian child.

Burnett introduces Mary’s poor physical health by giving her a “little thin face and a little thin body, thin light hair and a sour expression” (3). Colin too has a “delicate face the color of ivory and he seemed to have eyes too big for it” (108). His thin face indicates that he has been ill for quite some time; likewise, Mary’s face is “yellow because she had been in India and had always been ill in one way or another” (3). Barrie also knows the social and medical issues that surround Victorian

childhood. For a “week of two” after the birth of Wendy, Mr. and Mrs. Darling know it is “doubtful whether they would be able to keep her, as she was another mouth to feed” (Barrie 70). One night while calculating the expenses of a child, Mr. Darling warns, “remember the mumphs” (71). He continues by listing several sicknesses that children contracted during this time: measles, German measles, and whooping-cough (71). Later when their sons are born, the narrator observes that “there was the same excitement over John, and Michael had an even narrower squeak” (71). Like the Darling children, Mary and Colin undergo common, though potentially harmful, diseases during their childhood. Despite Mary and Colin’s affluent families, their malnourishment and abandonment, in addition to their outlook, causes their sicknesses. Colin, more so than Mary, believes his end is near.

When Mary first encounters Colin, she discovers a boy who has rarely left his room in over ten years. He believes he is dying and even tells Mary that “if I live I may be a hunchback, but I shan’t live” (Burnett 110). After he makes another similar comment, Mary replies:

‘Do you think you won’t live?’ [...]

‘I don’t suppose I shall,’ he answered as indifferently as he had spoken before. ‘Ever since I remember anything I have heard people say I shan’t. At first they thought I was too little to understand and now they think I don’t hear. But I do. [...]

‘Do you want to live?’ inquired Mary.

‘No,’ he answered, in a cross, tired fashion. ‘But I don’t want to die.’

(113)

When Mary later confronts Martha (her maidservant) about Colin, Martha tells her that Colin “had coughs an’ colds that’s nearly killed him two or three times. Once he had rheumatic fever an’ once he had typhoid. [...] He’ll die this time sure enough, an’ best thing for him an’ for everybody” (121). When Mary asks Colin how he knows he is dying he replies, “‘Oh, I’ve heard it ever since I remember.’ [...] ‘They are always whispering about it and thinking I don’t notice. They wish I would, too’” (126).

However, Mary is unsympathetic to his talks of death and illness and tells him that he need not die, even if everyone expects it: “If they wished I would, [...] I wouldn’t” (126). Mary does not want to talk about Colin’s failing health and quickly changes the subject: “See here, [...] Don’t let us talk about dying; I don’t like it” (127). Colin also wishes to forget it and their conversation turns to Dickon. Burnett’s depiction of Colin on his deathbed recalls similar images seen in many nineteenth-century children’s books, Beth in Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* being the most popular example. Romanticized deathbed scenes were popular in Victorian fiction, and Burnett’s description of Colin’s health recalls these previous narratives and leads one to believe that, given the number of infant mortalities in the nineteenth century, Colin will soon share the same fate. But there is hope for Colin in the magical garden.

The previous conversations between Mary and Colin provide some of the fullest elaborations on the principles of Christian Science seen in the novel. The idea

that Colin becomes ill only after his family, servants, and family tell him he is sick underlies the notion that negative thinking is responsible for his sufferings. However, one London doctor, as if guided by the author's beliefs, tells Colin that he might live if he would simply "make up his mind to do it" (127). The doctor's encouragement to deny his sickness influences the boy, and at the end of the chapter he declares, "I want to forget it" (130). Mary helps make it possible for Colin to silence his negative thoughts by encouraging the similar sentiments expressed by the doctor. Burnett provides a possibility for Colin to become healthy. He is to deny his sickness and overcome it simply by modifying his outlook and spending more time in the magical garden.

Burnett parallels the garden's spring awakening with the children's increase in health. When spring comes to Misselthwaite, Burnett describes the manor as "waking up": "there were things sprouting and pushing out from the roots of clumps of plants and there were actually here and there glimpses of royal purple and yellow unfurling among the stems of crocuses" (Burnett 135). The renaissance of the garden and children occurs simultaneously. Dickon's remark that bringing Colin into the garden would be "better than doctor's stuff" rings true when the boy finally does pass through the gates (141). Such a remark further reveals another the influence of Christian Science on Burnett's writing. According to the doctrine, no disease is wholly corporeal but only results from negative thinking. Colin must have contact with the living world of the garden if he hopes to survive his own sickness. He must

experience its rejuvenating qualities and absorb its magic, only then can he dispel any unhealthy and morbid notions. Dickon also believes that Colin “oughtn’t to lie there thinkin’ about things like that. [...] No lad could get well as thought them sort o’ things” (140). Just as tenets of Christian Science do not advocate medical intervention, only Colin is responsible for his future. Undeniably, his awakening results from nature, fresh air, spring, exercise and more pleasant thoughts.

While Mary’s transformation and rebirth occur before Colin’s, there is little doubt that their regeneration is similar. Burnett records the immediate changes her protagonist experiences the moment she begins playing outside:

[W]hen she began to walk quickly or even run along paths and down the avenue, she was stirring her slow blood and making herself strong by fighting with the wind.[...] [T]he big breaths of rough fresh air blown over the heather filled her lungs with something which was good for her whole thin body and whipped some red color into her cheeks and brightened her dull eyes when she did not know anything about it. (39)

Her appetite increases as she quickly becomes “healthily hungry for the first time in her life” (44). Mary tells Dickon on one occasion “I’m growing fatter, [...] and I’m growing stronger. I used to be tired. When I dig I’m not tired at all” (92). Then finally she realizes that she “looked quite a different creature from the child she had seen

when she arrived from India. This child looked nicer” (132). Colin’s experiences mirrors Mary’s:

After the ceremony Colin always took his walking exercise and throughout the day he exercised his newly found power at intervals. Each day he grew stronger and could walk more steadily and cover more ground. And each day his belief in the Magic grew stronger – as well it might. (220)

As the narrator comments, “the chief thing to be remembered, she had told him, was that Colin was getting well – getting well. The garden was doing it. No one must let him remember about having humps and dying” (196). Also like Mary, Colin’s nurse notices the change in the boy’s diet: “Your appetite is improving very much, Master Colin. [...] You used to eat nothing and so many things disagreed with you” (216). Dr. Craven even notices that Colin is “gaining flesh rapidly” and his “color is better” (217).

Yet it is difficult to imagine that Colin’s diseases are only a product of his mind and may be restored with positive thinking and time spent in the secret garden. In addition to the numerous severe coughing fits he has experienced throughout his young life, the reader knows that Colin also frequently suffers from typhoid and rheumatic fever, two diseases responsible for a number of fatalities amongst Victorian children. However, as medical and social conditions begin to improve within the first few decades of the twentieth century, mortality rates related to these diseases began

to lessen. Though it is difficult to imagine positive thinking and a blossoming garden being solely responsible for curing such sicknesses, within the novel's world of magic, it is possible. Furthermore, the reader knows that Colin receives weekly visits from at least two different doctors. The medical improvements and the influence of Christian Science over Burnett, in addition to the magical elements, explain why Colin begins to deny his mortality by the novel's close.

The thoughts of immortality, which naturally had never occurred to Colin before meeting Mary, excite the boy. He had always believed his servants and family members when they told him he was dying, but Mary convinces him otherwise. During one meeting with his cousin, Mary opens the windows and exclaims "That's fresh air" (Burnett 170). She tells Colin that Dickon "feels it in his veins and it makes him strong and he feels as if he could live forever and ever" (170). This idea intrigues Colin as he repeats, "Forever and ever!" (170). He continues with remarks of this nature for the rest of the book: when Colin first enters the secret garden he affirms "I shall get well! I shall get well. [...] I shall get well! and I shall live forever and ever and ever"; then again later during his first trip in the garden, "Every one thought I was going to die. [...] I'm not!"; regarding Dr. Craven, "he will never get Misselthwaite at all now I'm not going to die!"; and then finally near the close of the novel Colin offers one final "I am going to live forever and ever and ever!" (183, 195, 201, 244). Once while discussing what Colin identifies as "Magic," he states, "you learn things by saying them over and over and thinking about them until they stay in

your mind forever” (206). Like Colin, practitioners of Christian Science emphasize the necessity of positive thinking. By the close of the novel, Colin fully accepts the power of this magic: “Everything is made of Magic, [...] leaves and trees, flowers and birds, badgers and foxes and squirrels and people. So it must be all around us” (206).

Perhaps the underlying motif in *The Secret Garden* is that pleasure begets pleasure and sickness begets sickness. The source of such notions arises from the influence of Christian Science on Burnett and her writing. This form of denial holds that a positive outlook on life is necessary to maintain one’s health. Regarding Mary and Colin, positive thoughts and the secret garden’s presence provide the necessary healing powers to reverse their sicknesses. Colin in particular benefits from this philosophy as he undergoes the most dramatic change. Only when the children replace unpleasant thoughts with pleasant ones do they become healthy. But these “magical miracles” lead Colin to believe that he will now live “forever and ever and ever,” as he so frequently claims.

The gradual decline of childhood mortality slowly begins to emerge during the beginning of the twentieth century. Despite the near death experiences and deathlike imagery that abound *Peter and Wendy* and *The Secret Garden*, many of these characters reveal an element of denial regarding their mortality. The events in *Peter and Wendy* are only possible because of make-believe. No one, save Hook, the adult, experience real and eternal death. Interestingly, by 1953 this too will have changed. In the popular 1953 Disney adaptation, the film spares Hook from death. Time and

time again he falls into the mouth of the crocodile but always manages to jump out and cry for Smee. But for Peter, “make-believe and true were exactly the same thing” (Barrie 128). Even when he and the Lost Boys consume make-believe food the narrator comments that it “was so real to him that during a meal of it you could see him getting rounder” (135). Peter even ensures Wendy knows they are only pretending to be married at one point in the novel claiming, “It is only make-believe, isn’t it [...]” (161). Similar to Barrie, Burnett crafts a world where death only appears inescapable. Throughout *The Secret Garden*, Burnett presents climate, landscape, and positive thinking with the ability to influence one’s health and well being. Alison Lurie in *Boys and Girls Forever* even calls the conclusion a “splendid if somewhat supernatural happy ending” because of all the miraculous events that occur and guarantee the happiness and safety of the children (184). In this way, these novels recall the nineteenth-century texts previously discussed. Yet now the reader sees characters that begin to believe they are impervious to death and can live forever, and their authors provide opportunities where that can exist. Once this attitude becomes both established and common, however, characters will have great difficulty in accepting the death of child when it does occur.

CHAPTER 3

THAT COULD NEVER HAPPEN

“There are a lot of things Wilbur doesn’t know about life. [...] He’s really a very innocent little pig. He doesn’t know what’s going to happen to him around Christmastime; he has no idea that Mr. Zuckerman and Lurvy are plotting to kill him.” – The Goose

This chapter illustrates the connection between death and denial in much of twentieth-century children’s literature. I do not wish to explain this concept by demonstrating how modern children’s literature ignores death, though such a case could easily be made; rather, I hope to reveal that when death occurs, denial inevitably follows. In the first chapter I focus on various nineteenth-century texts and how their denial exists as a reaction to the difficult situations that exist outside of the text, principally infant and child mortality. Here I wish to focus on denial as an unavoidable part of the grieving process. In modern society children are far less likely to die during childhood. Moreover, parents tend to protect children from the realities of death, making it more taboo than a part of life needing discussion and straightforward explanation. As a result, when death, or even the threat of it, occurs, children are more likely to experience denial.

After the first decade of the twentieth century, the number of infant and child deaths dramatically decreased. In her essay on Victorian comfort books, “A Victorian Comfort Book: Juliana Ewing’s *The Story of a Short Life*,” Judith Plotz documents that between 1850 and 1900 one infant in every six died, but by 1950 the number declined

to only one in every thirty (169). In addition to the growing number of medical advancements taking place, the experience of death also moved away from the house. Compared with previous generations, twentieth century families no longer experienced death's close proximity. As a result, adults attempted to push the event out of the child's consciousness. Whereas Victorian parents protected their children from sexual knowledge, twentieth-century parents hoped to protect their children from knowledge about death.

During the twentieth century, death slowly moved outside the house. Whereas in generations past people were more likely to spend their last moments in their own bedroom, in more recent times death occurs in hospitals or nursing homes. Medical professional John Lydgate notes the difficulty many now experience as a result. He writes:

During a year as a house physician I can recall only one family who actually asked that that patient, in a hospital at the time, should be allowed to come home to die; compared to the hundreds who insisted that we should stage-manage that last act. Of those whose relatives did die in hospital few actually saw the moment of death or went in to view the body afterwards. In fact the whole business of death is gradually being bowdlerized out of common experience, giving place to the Gothic fantasies of horror films which now seem more acceptable to the public than the chilly details of the real thing. (308)

While Lydgate's comments refer specifically to British society, Edwin S. Schneidman makes similar observations after a lifetime spent caring for American patients:

The usual experiences with death in America have changed dramatically over the last two generations. It used to be that almost everyone, by the time he was an adolescent, had personally witnessed a death usually at home, or some loved one – a baby brother or sister, a mother or father. Today most dying is done in hospitals, largely out of sight and almost always under formal institutional regimen. (45)

Once society determined that death would no longer occur in the house, children were less likely to experience it. Physician Elisabeth Kübler Ross argues that today's society isolates the child from death thus depriving him from valuable and healthy learning:

People used to be born at home and die at home. In the old days, children were familiar with birth and death as part of life. This is perhaps the first generation of American youngsters who have never been close by during the birth of a baby and have never experienced the death of a beloved family member. [...] Nowadays when people grow old, we often send them to nursing homes. When they get sick, we transfer them to a hospital, where children are usually unwelcome and are forbidden to visit terminally ill patients- - even when those patients are their parents. This deprives the dying patient of significant

family members during the last few days of life and it deprives the children of an experience of death, which is an important learning experience. (30)

During the twentieth century, particularly the second half, usually only a medical specialist watched as another person died while the family avoided exposure to the person's final moments. Contemporary society tends to resist these events and elects to distance themselves as much as possible. The thought of someone dying alone and in a strange room or building would most likely have shocked previous generations.

Given twentieth-century's reluctance to deal with death in the adult world, it seems only natural, given the parent's tendency to protect the child, that such reluctance intensifies when regarding their child. Many adults find it very difficult to help a child face death and its implications. Consequentially, denial becomes an issue when death does occur. Parents seem to maintain that "children are not aware of such things," "children cannot understand these matters," and perhaps the idea most responsible for causing the child to experience denial, "Childhood is just too short to burden a child with worries and depressing thoughts." Studies by child psychologists Diane Becker and Faith Margolin reveal how surviving parents often attempt to help their children adapt to the loss of the other parent by not sharing with them the reality of the death. While all the parents in these studies would relate their feelings of pain and loss to their peers, such feelings were hidden from their children: "The parents in our study showed a marked tendency to insulate their young children from

the painful aspects of loss; they tended to promote avoidance and denial of the finality of death, and of feelings in relation to it” (755-57). The likelihood of a child surviving childhood is far greater in modern times than it was just a few generations ago. However, as a result, parents are less likely to explain death to the child and when death does occur, the child inevitably experiences some form of denial.

As a result of such protective behaviors, denial as a stage in the grieving process does not appear until the publication of physician Elisabeth Kübler Ross’s *On Death and Dying* in 1969. In this important work, Ross identifies and defines what she understands as the various stages of the grieving process, her first phase being important for my purpose:

Stage 1: Denial and isolation. Denial is a person’s reaction that “it cannot be true” and is experienced by most dying people. It is usually temporary and used when a dying person is no longer able to look at the situation realistically. Denial functions as a buffer after shocking news and allows a person to collect himself and mobilize less radical defenses. (34-35)

Physicians and psychologists now consider denial, not just of one’s own mortality but of other’s as well, a part of the grieving process. Previous generations understood the futility in attempting to conceal death from children so their literature incorporated magic in an effort to create circumstances where children might prevail. But as conditions improved, and children were kept farther from death, when writers do

decide to include a death in their text, they must account for how the child might react.

Both E.B. White and Katherine Patterson were aware that they were violating an established taboo with their realistic treatment of death. “Apparently,” said White in 1965 regarding *Charlotte’s Web*, “children are not supposed to be exposed to death, but I did not pay attention to this” (532-32). Indeed, Lucien L. Agosta notes in *E.B. White: The Children’s Books* that the author “had to resist pressures on him to change the ending from his editors and from some earlier readers as well as from later directors trying to adapt the work for the screen” (114). Paterson also responds to those who believe parents should not expose tragedy to their readers, “I can not, will not, withhold from my young readers the harsh realities of human hunger and suffering and loss” (139). Nevertheless, these books maintain their attractiveness in part because of the honest and realistic reactions the characters experiences regarding death when they truthfully depict their characters’ denial.

The threat of death follows Wilbur throughout *Charlotte’s Web*. As with most of the works discussed throughout this project, the child figure, in this case Wilbur, finds himself born into a threatening situation. Such danger becomes the central issue with which he must contend. It is important to remember that White unmistakably expects his readers to associate Wilbur with a human child. Perry Nodelman explains in his excellent study on methods to approaching children’s literature, *The Pleasures of Children’s Literature*, that often “characters in children’s literature are animals –

animals who represent the animal-like condition of children” (194). Contemporary society tends to consider children to be “animal-like” beings in need of training on how to act like civilized humans (194). Perhaps such an arrogant attitude explains why contemporary culture often refers to children as “kids,” the proper name for baby goats.

Nevertheless, Wilbur is the central character the child audience identifies with and relates to throughout the story. His is the denial that becomes common in the twentieth century. White illustrates such denial through the multiple deaths or threats of death in the novel. At one point or another, Fern denies the possibility of the runt Wilbur dying, both Charlotte and Wilbur deny his death, and Wilbur denies Charlotte’s death. And while Charlotte dies by the end of the novel, Wilbur appears as if he will live forever. The author makes an important distinction in the story. Though death constantly threatens Wilbur, the reader never encounters his death, in any form. According to John Griffith, “The prospect of death figures significantly in *Charlotte’s Web*, not, ultimately, as an eventuality that must be faced, [...] but rather as an unpleasantness to be averted or avoided” (41). Such a distinction proves irrefutable as Wilbur ultimately learns how to circumvent his death rather than fully acknowledge and accept it.

The book begins dramatically with Fern asking “Where’s Papa going with that ax?” (White 1). This sentence announces the central issue of the book: the constant threat of Wilbur’s death. Though Wilbur’s own thoughts, feelings, words, and actions

best convey his denial, White distills the matter into each of the characters who face his death. Presumably, before the runt pig becomes Wilbur the protagonist, he fails to recognize Mr. Arable as a potential threat. It is Fern, not Wilbur, who identifies the threat and goes out of her way to save Wilbur. White suggests that Fern, probably because of her identification with him as a child figure, feels a connection with Wilbur and perceives his threat as her own: “The pig couldn’t help being born small, could it? If *I* had been very small at birth, would you have killed *me*?” (White 3). The thought of killing the runt appears foreign to Fern and she does not understand why her father would kill the pig. Before Wilbur and Charlotte experience denial, Fern must endure the emotion.

Though only briefly, Fern is the first character who experiences denial in *Charlotte’s Web*. Even after her mother explains why Mr. Arable carries the axe, “Out to the hoghouse. [...] Some pigs were born last night,” Fern still does not associate the axe with killing one of the pigs (White 1). Mrs. Arable carefully chooses her words as she continues: “Well, [...] one of the pigs is a runt. It’s very small and weak, and it will never amount to anything. So your father has decided to do away with it” (1). Her mother’s explanation shocks Fern and she races outside to stop her father. After convincing her father to allow her to take care of the runt, Fern returns to the kitchen which smells of “coffee” and “bacon” (3). Despite eight years of living on a farm and eating pork for breakfast, her father’s attempt to kill one of the pigs upsets

Fern. Mr. Arable sarcastically claims that the pig was “saved from an untimely death” as he hands the newborn to his daughter (4). And for the first time, the pig is saved.

White returned to the beginning of *Charlotte's Web* after completing the first draft of the novel. Beverly Gherman explains that by 1951, two years after starting the novel, White began to rewrite the opening of his story (92). After nine various editions, he added Fern and what we now know as the two opening chapters. Perry Nodelman fully explains the importance of this addition in “Text as Teacher: The Beginning of *Charlotte's Web*.” In his insightful examination into the specific structure of the novel, Nodelman cogently argues that these chapters present a realistic and highly simplified microcosm of the book (119-20). Chapters three through twenty-two reinforce and extend the thematic concerns White establishes in the novel's first couple of chapters. Fern saves and nurtures Wilbur in the first section of the book followed by Charlotte's motherly behavior in the following section. Each female character believes his potential death both untimely and unjust. As Wilbur's first savior, Fern feeds and protects her infant. The feedings and afternoons spent with Fern are the happiest times for both Wilbur and his surrogate mother. Later, Wilbur transcends what Agosta labels as his “infantile orality” when he sacrifices his food for the benefit of another (78). Each element White densely crafts into the first two chapters is recapitulated in the novel's second and primary story- the relationship between Wilbur and Charlotte. More importantly, however, the reader sees denial of Wilbur's death experienced in both sections. The first chapters assure the reader that

despite how close Wilbur may come to death, there will always be someone, or something, to save him-- a promise certainly furthered through his relationship with the spider.

White first demonstrates Wilbur's denial through the soft, indirect language and description used to explain Charlotte's eating habits. After Wilbur experiences a series of disasters followed by intense unhappiness, White introduces his second and more successful savior, Charlotte. The grey spider fascinates Wilbur. However, her methods of putting her web-caught prey out of misery, by "knock[ing] him out, so he'll be more comfortable," alarm Wilbur (38). "Wilbur watched in horror," writes White, "He could hardly believe what he was seeing" (38). After several days pass, however, Wilbur decides to appreciate what he chooses to believe as Charlotte's kindness: "He was particularly glad that she always put her victim to sleep before eating it. 'It's real thoughtful of you to do that, Charlotte,' he said" (48). Wilbur does not understand Charlotte's actions, and she only adds to his confusion when she misleadingly reports, "I always give them an anaesthetic so they won't feel pain. It's a little service I throw in" (48). Just as Fern's lack of awareness about why her father carries an ax to the hoghouse surfaces as she sits down to a breakfast of bacon, Wilbur, despite having seen Charlotte's daily eating routine, does not fully recognize what really occurs. Charlotte's use of misleading language to explain the circumstance to Wilbur also recalls Fern's mother's ambiguous language when she tells Fern that father needs an ax so he can "do away" with the runt pig in the first chapter (1). Like

Fern, Wilbur does not understand Charlotte's comments and asks for clarification, and such soft, indirect language implies a denial of her true killing process. Peter Neumeyer writes:

Note, a book that begins "Where's Papa going with the axe?", a book preferring always to see the real world there, and eschewing all obfuscation – such a book using the doily and antimacassar euphemism, the genteelism, "put to sleep" for the simple word "kill" or "dead," and juxtaposing the phrase outrageously with the eating of the "deceased." ("Would you like to view the remains?" Charlotte might now ask.). (71)

The young Wilbur believes that the insects are simply "knocked out" or "asleep" after Charlotte furnishes her anesthetic, or venom. Here Wilbur does not receive a full and honest explanation for the circle of life. Such dishonesty is later responsible for Wilbur's difficulty in accepting his own place on the food chain. Charlotte's "little service" for her food is no different than the service Mr. Arable attempts to provide with his axe or the one Mr. Zuckerman provides with all the food he gives to Wilbur in an effort to fatten him up. Furthermore, Charlotte no more puts her insects to sleep than the humans, save Fern, plan to do with Wilbur.

White uses this circuitous language to explain another death in the novel. Later, Wilbur naively asks the goose why she only has seven goslings when there were initially eight eggs: "What happened to the other egg? Why didn't it hatch?" (White 45). The goose simply replies, "It's a dud, I guess" (45). Even when White later

uses the egg to distract the Arables from tearing down Charlotte's web, the mother of the "dud egg" remarks how "delighted" she is "that the egg never hatched" (74).

Again, the goose's indirect language concerning life and death leaves Wilbur uninformed. He neither understands his place on the farm nor how life works. Such misapprehension disallows him from detecting the danger that threatens his own life.

Before deciding to convince himself that Charlotte's eating habits are kind, Wilbur describes her actions as "fierce, brutal, scheming, bloodthirsty" (White 41). Charlotte shocks the young and innocent Wilbur when she declares how much she "love[s] blood" (39). The goose, who eavesdrops on the first discussion between Charlotte and Wilbur, comments on his childlike naivety:

There are a lot of things Wilbur doesn't know about life. [...] He's really a very innocent little pig. He doesn't know what's going to happen to him around Christmastime; he has no idea that Mr. Zuckerman and Lurvy are plotting to kill him. (41)

Having already escaped death once, Wilbur does not recognize how life on the farm operates. Such lack of awareness of how the "food chain works in the world of experience" only encourages his denial (Agosta 85). Charlotte killing the fly becomes her simply putting the fly to sleep, though the fly, the only animal in the book without a voice, probably sees it otherwise. Charlotte's actions appall Wilbur, and, as the goose reveals, he is completely unaware of his own placement on the food chain (Agosta 85).

When the next attempt on Wilbur's life occurs, Charlotte replaces Fern as the savior. Only through her involvement will the pig be saved. Wilbur first learns of his intended future during a conversation with the sheep:

"You know why they're fattening you up, don't you?"

"No," said Wilbur.

"Well, I don't like to spread bad news," said the sheep, "but they're fattening you up because they're going to kill you, that's why."

"They're going to *what?*" screamed Wilbur. Fern grew rigid on her stool.

"Kill you. Turn you into smoked bacon and ham," continued the old sheep. "Almost all young pigs get murdered by the farmer as soon as the real cold weather sets in. There's a regular conspiracy around here to kill you at Christmastime. Everybody is in the plot--" (White 49)

Denial becomes evident the moment Wilbur discovers why Mr. Arable is fattening him. His resistance occurs immediately as he screams "Stop! [...] I don't want to die! Save me, somebody! Save me!" (White 50). The sheep's announcement also introduces the next challenge of the book, who will save the pig this time and by what means. The reader observes that as Wilbur begins to cry, "Fern was just about to jump up when a voice was heard" (50). In this moment, Charlotte replaces Fern as his savior; Charlotte, not Fern, steps in to save Wilbur. Eventually, hoping to calm Wilbur, Charlotte offers her assurance: "You shall not die" (51). Nevertheless, the author tells

the reader that Charlotte's offer comes "briskly" and it "remains to be seen" just how she plans to save the pig (51). Wilbur's hysterics annoy Charlotte, who wishes his cries would stop. Even Charlotte seems unsure as to why such an event would happen: "It's [...] the dirtiest trick I ever heard of. What people think of!" (51). Charlotte also appears to have forgotten the order on the food chain. Just as she needs her flies to survive, so do the Arables need their farm and livestock. Her assurance further fuels Wilbur's denial.

Wilbur questions Charlotte's ability to save him. When asked, she again replies in the affirmative: "I was never more serious in my life. I am not going to let you die, Wilbur" (White 63). She reveals her plan one night when she weaves the words "SOME PIG" into her web (77). Her plan works as Mr. Zuckerman then tells his wife that "we have a very unusual pig [...] completely out of the ordinary" (79-80). Mr. Zuckerman refuses to give any credit to Charlotte and insists "it's the pig that's unusual. It says so, right there in the middle of the web" (81). Indeed, the spider successfully changes Mr. Zuckerman's mind who now affirms that he thought "all along that that pig of ours was an extra good one. That pig is as solid as they come" (82). Lurvy agrees: "That's right. [...] He's as smooth as they come. He's some pig" (82). This first of four webs Charlotte weaves for Wilbur receives much attention from the county. She continues to supply Wilbur with equally affirming words, and he desperately attempts to live up to his preceding reputation of also being "TERRIFIC" and "RADIANT" (94, 114). However, despite these suggestive attributes,

Mr. Arable maintains that he will “get some extra good ham and bacon [...] when it comes time to kill *that* pig” (126). Charlotte does not fully secure Wilbur’s safety until after he wins a special award at the county fair for being the “HUMBLE” pig she suggests in her final web (153).

The words White uses to describe Wilbur are telling. Charlotte does not select words that are necessarily true to the character of the pig. If so, her webs would more than likely read “AFRAID,” “WHIMPERING,” or “NEEDY.” Rather, she creates a very different creature when she uses the language of advertising to “sell” Wilbur’s life to the Zuckermans, “HUMBLE” specifically coming from a newspaper clipping Templeton finds at the fair (White 139).

Even Wilbur recognizes the inaccuracy of the words, but Charlotte assures him that “people believe almost anything they see in print” (89). Nevertheless, because of Charlotte’s success, Wilbur never has to die. Once White, through Charlotte, creates a childish pig that becomes “some pig,” Wilbur is able to escape mortality and is impervious to the life cycle the other characters experience. The reader sees Fern maturing into her sexuality when she leaves her childhood pet in order to play with Henry Fussy who now “catches her attention” (White 111). Likewise, Charlotte naturally arrives at the end of her life after guaranteeing another generation will live after her. Yet, Wilbur transcends the natural order of things. Griffith explains:

White’s barnyard is not A.A. Milne’s Hundred-Acre Wood, where no one ever grows old or dies; and neither is it the world of *Little Women*

or *The Jungle Books*, where change and death are occurrences that are not only poignant but are also normal as well. The wheel of mortality turns in White's fictional world, but Wilbur is a peculiarly blessed creature, and it does not touch him. Wilbur is young and naïve, in need of care when he first emerges as a character; he is young and naïve and in need of care as the story ends. He has never had to grow up, to learn or to change, to deal with the world, to work or to sacrifice, or to take responsibility (even for himself). He has only had to accept the generous love of spiders, and his life has been an idyll. (44)

White grants Wilbur immortality, an immunity to the cycles of life that exist for all the other characters. For instance, the author parallels Wilbur's story with the changing seasons. Before Charlotte secures Wilbur's safety at the fair, the crickets sing a "sad, monotonous song" indicating the end of summer: "Summer is over and gone [...] Over and gone, over and gone. Summer is dying, dying" (112). The crickets, knowing "summertime cannot last forever," must "spread the rumor of sadness and change" (113). Yet, while Charlotte's life will end with summer, as Wilbur's should, he will survive. In this moment of transcendence the reader again observes denial of death, even before the County Fair Charlotte guarantees Wilbur that he has "nothing to fear" and "nothing to worry about" (White 142). "Maybe you'll live forever-- who knows?" she tells Wilbur (142). She convinces Wilbur of his exemption from death even as she nears the end of her own life cycle. Once more on her last day Charlotte

repeats her promise: “Your future is assured. You will live, secure and safe, Wilbur. Nothing can harm you now” and Zuckerman specifically “will not harm you, ever” (163-64).

White’s juxtaposition between the impending natural death of Charlotte and the magical escape from death Wilbur experiences further illuminates denial. Both of Wilbur’s saviors exist in the natural order of things. First, the reader observes Fern growing into adulthood as she develops a relationship with Henry, and Charlotte follows the expected scheme of things as she prepares to die of natural causes. Yet, while Fern and Charlotte follow their natural life cycle, White excuses Wilbur from following a similar progression. In Agosta’s view, Wilbur satisfies the “universal desire, fantastic as it may be, that the conclusion of this inexorable life cycle will be suspended and that Wilbur will somehow be exempted from the real death that awaits Charlotte imminently and Fern – and the novel’s readers – at a future date” (109). However, only after Charlotte pronounces Wilbur “SOME PIG” does such a possibility exist. Only Wilbur is special. Only Wilbur escapes.

After Charlotte successfully secures Wilbur’s life, her own existence begins to come to an end. The morning after she creates her “*magnum opus*,” or egg sac, she explains to Wilbur the likelihood that she will never see her children. Wilbur quickly turns to denial: “What do you mean you won’t see your children! Of *course* you will. We’ll *all* see them. It’s going to be simply wonderful next spring in the barn cellar with five hundred and fourteen baby spiders running around all over the place”

(White 146). As a result of all the “close calls” Wilbur experiences, he is unable to accept immediately that Charlotte is dying. Even Charlotte appears to undergo some denial of her own death when she responds with a somewhat hopeful “Maybe” (146). It is difficult to say whether she is further misleading Wilbur or denying her own death with this response. What is certain is that her response of “maybe” does indicate another instance of denial. Nevertheless, she continues, “I have a feeling I’m not going to see the results of last night’s efforts. I don’t feel good at all. I think I’m languishing, to tell you the truth” (146). Again the reader sees White replacing “dying” with a somewhat softer and more ambiguous “languishing.” As a result of his own evasion of death, Wilbur believes all are exempted from it. Charlotte denies Wilbur’s death when she promises that he will not die and here Wilbur denies the possibility that Charlotte will never see her children. Interestingly, though Charlotte believes that she secures Wilbur’s eternal safety, she still teaches him acceptance of her own death:

‘You have been my friend,’ replied Charlotte. ‘That in itself is a tremendous thing. I wove my webs for you because I liked you. After all, what’s a life, anyway? We’re born, we live a little while, we die. A spider’s life can’t help being something of a mess, with this trapping and eating flies. By helping you, perhaps I was trying to lift up my life a trifle. Heaven knows anyone’s life can stand a little of that.’ (164)

Wilbur not only faces the possibility of his own death but the certainty of Charlotte's. When potential death threatens Wilbur, Charlotte convinces him of his possible immortality. As a result, Wilbur denies that Charlotte is dying, and she therefore must teach him acceptance. Learning acceptance is not necessary for the nineteenth-century child, but it is for Wilbur if he is going to overcome his denial, even though he still escapes his own death.

Griffith understands Wilbur's fantastical promise of a future to represent a similar certainty he sees for the novel's audience of children:

A message of *Charlotte's Web* to its young readers is that they need not worry about dying; that for them to die would be an unnatural horror, which good guardians like Charlotte can prevent; that death is not for the young (like themselves and Wilbur), but for the old, who (like Charlotte) will very likely welcome it when it comes. There is no reason to suppose that White offers these assurances as guarantees or sober realistic appraisals of death in the real world; but they are dependable and plausible enough to provide foundations for the consoling fantasy. (44-45)

The critic also touches on his idea in an essay titled "*Charlotte's Web: A Lonely Fantasy of Love.*" Here, Griffith argues that the creative heart of the novel is a fantasy of consolation for the fear of loneliness and death: "Wilbur the young pig will not die; death is for the old and not the young. By the time one is old, the story shows, one

will accept and perhaps even welcome death” (115). The critic believes that “Wilbur is blessed with a permanent state of childhood in which he is cared for and protected ‘all of his days’” (113). The magic of Charlotte’s web is what saves Wilbur and becomes a “consoling fantasy” for those less fortunate. In contrast to the idea that Wilbur’s immortality exists because he is a symbol for a child and “death is for the old and not the young,” I believe White grants Wilbur the freedom to live in barnyard comfort for the remainder of his days only because he is special, like many consider children. While in many ways *Charlotte’s Web* is realistic, regarding Wilbur’s transcendence of death, it is not. The denial Wilbur, Fern and even Charlotte experience exists in relation to Wilbur’s, as a child, life. However, such luxury does not embrace real children, or, one might assume, Wilbur’s ten brothers and sisters. He alone is “some pig.”

Katherine Paterson’s Newberry book *Bridge to Terabithia* centers on the friendship between ten-year-old Jess Aarons and a newcomer to rural Virginia, Leslie Burke. One important resemblance between *Charlotte’s Web* and *Bridge to Terabithia* is the similarities shared between Wilbur and Jess in that each character needs a savior. However, unlike Wilbur, nothing physically threatens Jess at the beginning of *Bridge to Terabithia*; rather, his family contemptuously overlooks him and his art. His sisters torment him, his mother constantly pesters him, and his father provides him with little attention. His negligent family, complete with their own unfortunate circumstances, neither understands nor encourages his artistic impulses.

“Lacking self-worth, full of doubts, and obsessed with many fears, Jess is in dire need of Leslie,” suggests Marian Pyles in *Death and Dying in Children’s and Young People’s Literature* (55). The two friends create their own kingdom, a world where all fears disappear.

In *Katherine Paterson*, Gary D. Schmidt argues that all of Patterson’s characters have one thing in common, “a need for a place or, at the very least, hope that a place can be found” (73). Terabithia serves as such a place:

“We need a place,” [Leslie] said, “just for us. It would be so secret that we would never tell anyone in the whole world about it.”

Jess came swinging back and dragged his feet to stop. She lowered her voice almost to a whisper. “It might be a whole secret country,” she continued, “and you and I would be rulers of it.” (Paterson 58)

Sue Misheff fully develops this topic in “Beneath the Web and Over the Stream: The Search for Safe Places in *Charlotte’s Web* and *Bridge to Terabithia*.” Here she understands Charlotte and Leslie’s purpose in the novel being to establish a safe place for their weaker, male friends. According to Misheff, “Leslie creates a safe place for Jess and herself from her imaginative powers. She chooses a secluded spot in the woods, and although Jess helps with the building, it is Leslie who names the place, creates a language to be used there, and defines their roles in Terabithia” (133). Here in this realistic story exists a safe place of “pure imagination, built in midst of actual woods that becomes ‘not an ordinary place,’ a sacred place in which Jess and Leslie

come ‘only at times of greatest sorrow or of greatest joy’” (133). Misheff operates under the idea that once Leslie and Charlotte achieve their purpose, they are no longer needed. In contrast to the feminist reading Misheff observes, if one understand the novel’s principal purpose to be the focus on death of a friend, then the threat of death within the supposed safe place becomes important. Indeed, the reader later learns that what Misheff identifies as a “safe place” proves otherwise. When tragedy occurs, Jess’s belief that he and Leslie were safe in their kingdom further intensifies his struggle to accept her death.

In the article “Katherine Paterson’s ‘Secret Gardens,’” Joel D. Chaston establishes his argument within the framework of Humphrey Carpenter’s text *Secret Gardens*. Carpenter believes that more than any other children’s novel, *The Secret Garden* “describes and celebrates the central symbol of the Arcadian movement in English writing for children,” that symbol, of course, being “the garden” (188). Such influence crosses into Paterson’s work, and Chaston argues that she includes many of the thematic concerns of Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* in *Bridge to Terabithia*. Indeed, Jess and Leslie discover, or rather create, their own secret and fantastical place in the forest. This is the same “safe place” that Misheff identifies. However, though these characters need a safe place, they are ambivalent about the costs of establishing such a place and the price their search may exact. Though Burnett links the garden to the death of Colin’s mother, Mary’s discovery of the garden “brings renewal and new life” to those who enter it; with Paterson, the protagonists’ quest is often “fraught with

danger and may result in death” (Chaston 66). Burnett’s readers frequently identify the Edenic qualities in her garden. Likewise, Paterson notes that after imaginatively building their castle in the woods, “Like God in the Bible, they looked at what they had made and found it very good” (60-61). The reference to Eden is clear, and Paterson’s choice of language foreshadows future danger. The narrator states that there are “parts of the woods that Jess did not like. Dark places where it was almost like *being underwater*” (59, my italics). The two children swing across a creek bed on an “enchanted rope” (59). Leslie’s suggestion to build their magical castle just beyond the creek relieves Jess, since there was no longer a “need to *plunge deeper* into the woods” (59, my italics). Moreover, Paterson writes that “the sun flung itself in golden *streams* through the trees *to splash* warmly at their feet” (59, my italics). Readers later learn that Leslie dies when the rope they use to swing across breaks and she drowns in the creek. Here the author offers these presageful images of Leslie’s future. The reader, with Jess and Leslie, believe the children have established this safe place, but by the end of the novel, they know otherwise. Modern society tends to consider children safe during childhood, and as a result, it becomes even more difficult to accept the death of a child. Leslie’s death is not the only one included in the text but does differ from the others.

Much criticism focuses on the literary allusions Paterson incorporates into *Bridge to Terabithia*. A cursory glance at Paterson’s book reveals a number of references to *Moby Dick*, *Hamlet*, *The Secret Garden*, *Chronicles of Narnia*, and

various Biblical stories and verses. Death permeates the novel with these literary references. The stories Leslie and Jess discuss and reference all deal with death in some manner. Joel D. Chaston, in his essay “The Other Deaths in *Bridge to Terabithia*,” also sees the novel expanding beyond “a simple account of Leslie’s death and Jess’s reaction” (239). According to Chaston, unlike the deaths in the books Paterson includes (*Hamlet*, *Moby Dick*, and various Biblical stories), the author “does not imply that [Leslie’s] death is noble nor anyone’s fault. Leslie has not been urged to stampede off a cliff nor has she brought about her own death by a desire for revenge. Her death is immediate, unalterable, and accidental” (240). As a result of her sudden and unexpected death, Jess is unprepared to experience the real and permanent loss of his friend: “Leslie could not die any more than he himself could die” (Paterson 159). His reaction reveals a child’s attempt at self-deception. Jess’s resentment results from not being prepared to understand death as it occurs either in the literature he encounters or in his own life. While all the literary references deal with either death that comes as result of revenge, suicide or some political or religious cause, Jess is unprepared for the “purposeless” and “accidental death” of Leslie (Chaston 239). Such lack of preparation and understanding further fuels his denial.

The resistance and denial Jess experiences originate in his creator. It is evident from Paterson’s personal inspiration for *Bridge to Terabithia* the great trouble she endured when it became time to commit Leslie’s death to the page. She explains that the idea originally began during both her own brush with cancer and the tragic death

of her son's friend who was struck by lightning during a storm. During her 1978 Newberry acceptance speech, she communicated her difficulty to the audience:

After a few false starts, thirty-two smudged pages emerged, which made me feel that perhaps there might be a book after all. In a flush of optimism I moved to the typewriter and pounded out a few dozen more, only to find myself growing colder with every page until I was totally frozen. The time had come for my fictional child to die, and I could not let it happen.

I caught up on my correspondence, I rearranged my bookshelves, I even cleaned the kitchen – anything to keep the inevitable from happening. And then one day a friend asked, as friends will, “How is the new book coming?” and I blurted out – “I’m writing a book in which a child dies, and I can’t let her die. I guess,” I said, “I can’t face going through Lisa’s death again.”

“Katherine,” she said, looking me in the eye, for she is a true friend, “I don’t think it’s Lisa’s death you can’t face. I think it’s yours.”

I went straight home to my study and closed the door. If it was my death I could not face, then by God, I would face it. I began in a kind of fever, and in a day I had written the chapter, and within a few weeks I had completed the draft, the cold sweat pouring down my arms. (247 -48)

Paterson understands both Jess's denial and its position in the grieving process. She accepts that she must include the emotion in order to obtain an authentic reaction to Leslie's death. When her own son experienced the sudden death of his friend, she wrote that "David went through all the classical stages of grief, inventing a few the experts have yet to catalog" (246). Like David, Jess undergoes these stages as he struggles with the death of his friend. Leslie is responsible for empowering Jess and helping him gain the necessary confidence to become the mighty ruler of Terabithia. Jess resists the notion that the queen creator of his safe place has died and left him alone. The death of Leslie is unfortunate. The improved medical advances of the twentieth century fail to protect Leslie from fatal tragedy. Even in the twentieth century an absolute "safe place" remains unattainable, and when such tragedy arises, it is met with great resistance. While Paterson may not understand why such tragedy occurs, she accepts that she must record Jess's denial if she wishes to maintain realism in her novel, and denial seems an unavoidable emotion. Paterson expresses her reaction to children who fail to understand why Leslie dies, an outcome she herself finds difficult to grasp: "I still mourn for Leslie, and when children ask me why she had to die, I want to weep, because it is a question for which I have no answer" (249).

Not only does denial dominate Jess's reaction to the news of Leslie's death, it exists in a variety of forms. First, Jess returns from his trip to Washington D.C. with his music teacher, Miss Edmonds. As he walks in the kitchen, he immediately notices that something is amiss. Mrs. Aarons, trembling, begins to sob repeatedly "O my God.

O my God” (Paterson 154). After a few seconds Brenda blurts out: “Your girl friend’s dead, and Momma thought you was dead too” (154). His father bluntly adds, “They found the Burke girl this morning down in the creek” that flows near Terabithia (155). Jess has just experienced what the title of the chapter suggests was a “perfect day” (141). Now, the perfect day ends without warning. However, a perfect moment that suddenly turns to pain and anger is not only an adult reality. Given the idyllic stereotypes adults often associate with childhood, it is tempting to argue that Leslie’s death immediately tosses Jess into gritty adult reality. However, Paterson emphasizes that children share the same tragic and difficult reality with adults, not apart from them. Jess’s immediate reaction illustrates his denial: “No, [...] Leslie wouldn’t drown. She could swim real good” (155). Paterson’s choice of the contraction “wouldn’t” over “couldn’t” emphasizes that Jess’s belief that Leslie controlled whether or not she drowned. In his safe place, Jess believes dying is simply a choice and one Leslie would not make. The notion that Leslie may have had no say in the matter, that she simply fell into a creek and drowned, shocks Jess. Pyles writes, “The two [...] create their own kingdom [...] where they can reign supreme, where all the terrors of the world disappear” (55). As a result of believing all the terrors of the world disappear in Terabithia, when tragedy occurs, Jess quickly turns to denial. He further assures May Belle “No, [...] It’s a lie. Leslie ain’t dead,” because her eyes “were wide with terror” as she recalls how Leslie was not a Christian and, according to her fundamentalist background, “if you don’t believe the Bible [...] God’ll damn you to hell when you

die” (127). Jess angrily runs out of the house and down the gravel driveway to the road. He runs, “Knowing somehow that running was the only thing that could keep Leslie from being dead. It was up to him. He had to keep going” (156). His father follows him before picking him up in his truck, and after he returns home, Jess immediately falls asleep.

During the night Jess’s denial occurs in the form of self-deception. He awakes suddenly from a dream. “He could only remember the mood of dread it had brought with it,” Jess comments to himself (159). As if from a distance, he seems to recall someone telling him that “Leslie was dead,” but he passes this idea off as nothing but “part of a dreadful dream” (159). He thinks, “Leslie could not die any more than he himself could die” (159). Jess even momentarily considers visiting Leslie in the middle of the night:

If he got up now and went to the old Perkins place and knocked on the door, Leslie would come to open it, P.T. jumping at her heels like a star around the moon. It was a beautiful night. Perhaps they could run over the hill and across the fields to the stream and swing themselves into Terabithia. (159)

Jess recreates the conversation he will have with Leslie when she accepts his apology for not inviting her to Washington D.C. He lies awake that night planning to go see Leslie at her house in the morning.

Jess's denial continues the next morning. At the breakfast table, Jess's older sisters question why he does not show any emotion: "If Jimmy Dicks died, I wouldn't be able to eat a bit" Brenda taunts (163). His parents recognize that Jess has not yet admitted the truth. "Your friend Leslie is dead, Jess. You need to understand that" his father tells him (165). Even as Jess and his parents visit the Burke's house he continues to ask questions such as "Why wasn't Leslie here to help him out of this? Why didn't she come running in and make everyone laugh again?" (169). Not until Leslie's father tells Jess that she was cremated does he realize she is dead:

Cremated: Something clicked inside Jess's head. That meant Leslie was gone. Turned to ashes. He would never see her again. Not even dead. Never. How could they dare? Leslie belonged to him. More to him than anyone in the world. No one had even asked him. No one had even told him. And now he was never going to see her again, and all they could do was cry. [...] He, Jess, was the only one who really cared for Leslie. But Leslie had failed him. She went and died just when he needed her the most. She went and left him. [...] She was probably somewhere right now laughing at him. Making fun of him like he was Mrs. Myers. She had tricked him. She had made him leave his old self behind and come into her world, and then before he was really at home in it but too late to go back, she left him stranded there- (170-71)

Yet even in his admission Jess avoids his friend's death, creating a variety of circumstances where she might still be alive. He again feels the need to escape, and he dashes out of the house trying to outrun reality.

Paterson symbolizes ideal childhood with her creation of Terabithia, a perfect world where Leslie and Jess rule without the fears and difficulties of the adult world. Terabithia is an escape for the children. They think they are safe there, apparently free from the worries of adulthood. However, as the author illustrates with Leslie's death, this refuge is not an absolute sanctuary. When the children establish the idea of Terabithia, Leslie decrees that the only way to cross into the kingdom would be on the "enchanted rope" (59). When the rope snaps, Paterson symbolizes the potential for danger (and even death) that also exists in childhood. Patterson suggests that while Leslie is forever frozen in childhood, Jess eventually recognizes and understands the temporary nature of Terabithia and moves on:

Now it occurred to him that perhaps Terabithia was like a castle where you came to be knighted. After you stayed a while and grew strong you had to move on. For hadn't Leslie, even in Terabithia tried to push back the walls of his mind and make him see beyond to the shining world – huge and terrible and beautiful and very fragile? [...] Now it was time for him to move out. (188)

When Jess appears to have finally accepted his friend's death, he retrieves his paints and papers, a Christmas gift from her, and returns to Terabithia. He angrily flings the

papers and paints into the same current that killed Leslie, symbolizing his acceptance of Leslie's death (172). Jess, at least for the moment, moves beyond denial and turns to anger and grief. This action illustrates Jess's acceptance of Leslie's death as he matures into adulthood.

In her 1988 Regina Medal acceptance speech, Paterson states that there is a "fundamental disagreement" between the child and adult readers (139). "When [children] go to a serious novel they expect to find truth," Paterson argues, "They want hope rooted in reality, not wishful thinking" (139-40). Childhood becomes a corollary theme of death and friendship in the novel. Oftentimes people tend to summarize blithely childhood as a time of innocent bliss, where nothing goes wrong. However, Paterson paints a very different picture in her story. Jess struggles with his father's disregard, Leslie's suffers from the contempt of her classmates, and the reader discovers that even the school's bully, Janice Avery, suffers from domestic abuse. Paterson encourages her readers to look beyond the sugary stereotypes of romanticized childhood and see that children suffer from similar issues as adults. Though by the time of *Bridge to Terabithia's* publication the number of deaths in childhood had greatly reduced, children are not excluded from tragedy, or in the case with Leslie, death. Even the most beautiful fantasy land can never truly replace reality.

White and Paterson know that if they wish to preserve an authentic account of their characters' reaction to death, they must include their feelings of denial. The

authors convey this emotion by small, but often effective means. They each establish the illusion of a safe place; the barn for White and the forest for Paterson. However, children are not exempt from the dangers of reality. Wilbur suffers through the possibility of his own death--only later to have to experience the death of his friend. Though Wilbur obviously both fears his death and eventually accepts Charlotte's, there always remains an element of denial. Charlotte convinces him that he will live forever, and the text never refutes her assurance. Despite Wilbur's somewhat more mature role as parent to Charlotte's children, he remains forever in the idyllic realm of childhood, free from adult cares and responsibility. His trough will never be empty and his barn always warm. The book's fantasy concludes in this privileged condition for Wilbur. Jess never receives this promise of eternal childhood. He learns that children are not excluded from death, and he must accept the death of his friend. When faced with either death of a child, Leslie for Jess or the threat of death, as Wilbur experiences, these characters initially react as Ross suggests that "it cannot be true" (34). Neither is prepared for death and both have difficulty acknowledging its presence.

CONCLUSION

Among the many critics who interrogate the essence of children's literature, Jacqueline Rose, in her popular *The Case of Peter Pan: Or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, uses Peter Pan to explore the obsession with innocence and eternal childhood that exists in the modern age. She suggests that "writing for children can contribute to prolonging or preserving – not only for the child but also for us-- values which are constantly on the verge of collapse. The child, therefore, is innocent and can restore that innocence in us" (44). In the post-Romantic era, this phenomenon reveals not necessarily something about children and childhood, but rather about the investment adults have in childhood. While Rose uses *Peter Pan* as her primary reference, her thesis concerns all of children's literature. But the child of whom Rose speaks is more likely a fictional child, than an actual one.

The truth is that, with few exceptions, children's literature is written by adults for an audience of children. Adults write, publish and purchase the literature they choose to read to their children. Consequently, the notion of childhood and the ideas concerning maturation, sexuality and death are the adult's views and may or may not necessarily communicate the views of the child. Too often the literature becomes a sort of therapy for frustrated or discouraged adults. It is a way to create nostalgia for a time when life seemed simpler and without fear. Children's fiction often becomes how adults choose to remember childhood and only in instances of great writing can authors at best capture pale reflections of childhood.

Throughout this thesis I have discussed the subtle differences in how and why many works in children's literature deny death. After the Romantics invented the modern image of childhood, it becomes difficult to take childhood deaths lightly, despite their frequency, because people consider death to be reserved for the old, not the young. Magic, enchantment, and make-believe allow Victorian authors of children's literature to escape the harsh realities of the real world. Other "adult literature" does not seem to struggle with this phenomenon. Indeed, at the same time that Charles Dickens objectively writes his exposé on capitalist exploitation during the industrial revolution in *Hard Times* and Mark Twain clearly conveys the evils of slavery in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Lewis Carroll denies the ordinariness of child mortality in the Victorian world by protecting his heroine in an underground dream world filled with wonder that only appears risky. The standard for children differs from that of adults, and authors create stories where child characters are able to exist outside of society. Many nineteenth-century fairy tales incorporate magical element to allow certain life-saving events to take place that normally could not. The magic is given to those who are weak and need help to compensate for their lack of power. The enchantment serves as a sort of wish fulfillment for the author, a way for the children in the texts to exchange places with those with power. In other instances, authors elect to completely remove the child from danger and return her to a more peaceful and previous world. Though the child may indeed die, death becomes

not so much a destroyer but a preserver as the child returns to the heaven from where she first came.

By the twentieth century, death became a taboo topic for children, and they were heavily shielded from its reality. Society witnessed a number of medical and social advancements and experienced a dramatic decrease in infant and child mortality rates. As children became farther removed from death, when a death did occur, it became more difficult to accept. As a result, much of contemporary children's literature that includes a child's death, or at least the threat of death, illustrates the child's struggle to accept the death that occurs within the text. Denial becomes a necessary and unavoidable part of the grieving process.

The stories I have discussed cast a subtle but incisive commentary on life at the time of their publication. A poisonous apple jolting free from a throat, rabbits in trousers, hidden gardens, bridges to enchanted forests, adventures in Wonderland, and excursions across Neverland-- these are the worlds of make-believe and enchantment. But in these worlds, in addition to any entertainment feature, we find responses to society's investment in childhood. Denial of death moves from a fantastical world that offers an escape from the real-world dangers to an unavoidable response. By discussing these differences, we observe the different attitudes that emerge as society's idea of childhood changes. Resulting from many authors' unwillingness or inability to escape the influence of Romanticism, we witness the advent of denial of death in children's literature.

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