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9

A Jungian Perspective on the Enduring Appeal of *Peter Rabbit*

Alice Byrnes

When anyone reaches a hundredth birthday, people invariably wonder about the secret of that person's longevity. As we commemorate the hundredth anniversary of *Peter Rabbit's* publication, people might also speculate about the phenomenon of *Peter Rabbit's* enduring appeal. Since its initial publication, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* has enjoyed a sustained degree of popularity. For generations, the "little book" has appealed to children throughout the world. In fact, *Peter Rabbit* has been translated into at least thirty-six languages including French, German, Dutch, Italian, and Japanese.

One explanation for *Peter Rabbit's* pervasive appeal may be found in Carl Jung's theory of the archetypes. Jung believed that there are basic, psychic instincts shared by all humans. He attributed each of those instincts to an individual archetype. Among the varying archetypes defined by Jung is that of the child. We can explore how the archetypal symbol of the child seems to have influenced Beatrix Potter in her life and in her creation of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit,* and we might conjecture how the archetypal quality of *Peter Rabbit* holds a universal appeal for readers of all ages.

JUNG'S ARCHETYPE OF THE CHILD

Carl Jung introduced the concept that archetypes emanate from the unconscious. He claimed that each human being functions out of a personal unconscious, while humanity as a whole operates from a collective unconscious. There is a parallel in the processes of the personal and collective unconscious that might explain the paradox that what is most personal is invariably most universal. Jung believed that each person is a microcosm within a macrocosm and that "the psyche of the individual contains *reflections* of that larger universe."[1] Jung claimed that, "We shall probably get nearest to the truth if we think of the conscious and personal psyche as resting upon the broad basis of an inherited and universal psychic disposition which is as such unconscious, and that our personal psyche bears the same relation to the collective psyche as the individual to society."[2]

Because archetypes are embedded in the realm of the unconscious, they cannot be known directly. Therefore, archetypes are represented indirectly in the form of symbols. It might be said that symbols are the language of the unconscious. Because symbols are an integral feature of literary expression, archetypes frequently appear in literature. Stories containing archetypal symbols might arise from unconscious stirrings within the author's psyche. Also, archetypal literature resonates with a quality, so mysterious and powerful, that readers of all ages and cultures are drawn to it.

The child is one of the archetypes identified by Jung, and it frequently appears in children's literature. What is key to an understanding of the archetypal child is that it be regarded as a symbol and not as a child per se. Jung cautioned that one should not mistake the literal meaning of the child for the psychological reality that the archetype represents. Jung believed that "all we can do is to circumscribe and give an approximate description of an *unconscious core of meaning*."[3] References to the archetype of the child are made in a positive context of child-like, as opposed to a negative connotation of childish. In discussing the child archetype, Jung described qualities of abandonment, wholeness, invincibility, and immortality.[4] In this chapter, I consider how these distinguishing characteristics are reflected in the life of Beatrix Potter and in her *Tale of Peter Rabbit.*

THE CHILD ARCHETYPE AND BEATRIX POTTER

Abandonment and Beatrix Potter

Beatrix Potter did not experience physical abandonment in the sense of being orphaned, as frequently occurs in stories of the archetypal child.

Nevertheless, she did suffer a rather solitary existence in an environment that was not especially friendly to children. Biographer Margaret Lane said that Beatrix Potter was "born into a period and a class which seemed to have had little understanding of childhood."[5] Beatrix's loneliness was exacerbated by the fact that she did not enjoy the friendship of other children. Her Victorian parents did not permit her to go to school for fear that she would contract illness. Her only childhood companion was her younger brother, who was born when Beatrix was six years old. Beatrix was fond of Bertram and was heartbroken when he was sent away to boarding school.

Wholeness and Beatrix Potter

Although the feeling of abandonment typically experienced by the archetypal child is painful, there might be a positive aspect to it. That sense of isolation could offer a child like Beatrix Potter an opportunity to move beyond the limits of childish dependency into a healthier spirit of self-reliance. Jung described the archetypal child as maturing into adulthood and achieving a sense of wholeness. Wholeness is achieved when there is a healthy balance of opposites.

A well-integrated personality is a composite of corresponding traits such as male and female, consciousness and unconsciousness, freedom and responsibility, as well as imagination and practical intelligence. The archetypal child integrates the positive traits of both the child and adult. While Beatrix Potter grew up in the society of adults, she enjoyed the inner life of a child. She entertained a vivid sense of imagination, and she loved to draw. That sense of wonder remained with Beatrix into adulthood. Margaret Lane asserted that when Beatrix Potter began to compose *The Tale of Peter Rabbit,* "The child in her had not been superseded or outgrown, and the bright areas of first discovery and experience were still real to her."[6] Fifty years after the publication of *Peter Rabbit,* Beatrix Potter acknowledged, "I have just made stories to please myself, because I never grew up."[7] In response, Margaret Lane commented that "there is truth, of a limited kind, in this assertion. But it would have been truer still to say, 'because the child in me lived on.' "[8] This idea seems validated by one of the last entries that Beatrix Potter recorded in her journal: "What heaven can be more real than to retain the spirit-world of childhood, tempered and balanced by knowledge and common-sense."[9]

Beatrix Potter's childlike spirit of reverie was kindled in the country. That is where Beatrix was at home. During family vacations, she and her younger brother would romp freely through the countryside exploring

nature. Invariably, she would try to keep her country vacation alive by bringing pets back to her nursery in London.

The adult side of Beatrix Potter was cultivated in her city home in London. Life at 2 Bolton Gardens was restricted, and her human interactions were limited mostly to her governesses. Her superior intelligence was cultivated by the tutoring she received in subjects such as literature, foreign language, mathematics, science, and art. She inherited a natural talent for art that was encouraged by her father and tutors. She would visit science displays at the nearby Victoria and Albert Museum and sketch pictures of plants and animals. Even today, her sketches of fungi are regarded as scientifically accurate. Beatrix took pains to make drawings of her pets that accurately depict the natural characteristics of their species. At the same time, she endowed their portraits with human personalities.

Her artistic leanings gave way to her literary expression. Her striking watercolors seem to drive the story. Few authors possess the artistic and literary talent both to illustrate and narrate a story. Beatrix Potter "knew exactly what interested children, and was able to do magic things with paint-brush and pencil."[10] Consequently, there is an organic unity that singularly distinguishes Potter's work. In contemporary psychology, one might hypothesize that Beatrix Potter, the artist and storyteller, was able to exercise both the right and left sides of her brain in a unified act of creation. Such a fullness of expression has a powerful impact on the reader. In Beatrix Potter, the child-adult, all aspects of her experience seemed to coalesce—city and country life, animal and human interactions, science and drawing, as well as art and storytelling.

Invincibility and Beatrix Potter

Beatrix Potter's creation of her picture books was a manifestation of her personal development. The sickly child, who had been isolated in the nursery of her parents' house, not only survived, but developed into a vibrant and independent adult who created a life for herself as an internationally acclaimed author of children's books. As Beatrix Potter matured, she was transformed from a vulnerable girl into an invincible woman.

In Jungian psychology, the process of personal growth and transformation is often symbolized by a journey. Physical movement represents psychological progression from the conscious world into the unconscious realm. While the device of the journey is a familiar literary device, it is also a common activity in everyday life. People frequently move

when they want to initiate a new life. People travel on vacation in order to relax. People go on retreat in order to renew themselves. Going to another location not only represents a change in one's life; it actually engenders such a revitalization.

The frequent vacations that the Potter family enjoyed in Scotland and northwest England nurtured Beatrix's growing sense of freedom and creativity. Even in her youth, Beatrix Potter was inspired by the countryside with its animals, plants, and ordinary folks. The success of her "little books" financed her lifetime dream of buying property in the Lake District. In becoming the proud owner of Hill Top Farm, Beatrix Potter had come a long way in forging a new life for herself. The farmhouse provided a retreat where she could enjoy holidays away from the restrictions of her parents' house in London and a sanctuary where she could work on her books. Tourists who visit Beatrix Potter's house at Hill Top recognize the similarity between that charming setting and familiar scenes from her picture books.[11]

Eventually, Beatrix Potter became so involved in rural life that she assumed a leadership role in the conservation movement. She continued to purchase property in hopes of preserving the beautiful English countryside. In order to facilitate the business of buying property, Beatrix Potter procured the services of a country lawyer named William Heelis. In time, Beatrix's relation with Willy Heelis developed from a professional endeavor into a personal friendship. Eventually, they became engaged. Even though Beatrix was nearly forty-seven years old when Willy proposed to her, her parents were vehemently opposed to the prospective marriage. Beatrix asserted her independence by permanently leaving her parents' house and setting up household with her new husband. Beatrix Potter, the middle-aged spinster, became Mrs. William Heelis and committed herself to being a wife and farmer. Country living that she had romanticized in her stories now became her way of life.

It is interesting to note that the more immersed Beatrix actually became in rural life, the less inclined she was to write about it. Admittedly, her diminishing eyesight made it increasingly difficult for her to do the art and composition for her "little books." Also, her responsibilities on the farm did not provide much time to continue her career as an author of children's books. Nevertheless, one cannot dismiss the suspicion that Beatrix did not need to live vicariously through her writing after she felt fulfilled in real life. Ultimately, Beatrix Potter succeeded both in the world of children's literature and in her personal ambition to become part of the country life that she depicted in her books.

Immortality and Beatrix Potter

In the process of overcoming obstacles, the child archetype develops from a former existence into a future state of being. "The child motif represents not only something that existed in the distant past but also something that exists *now*."[12] Furthermore, there is an integral connection between past, present, and future: "One of the essential features of the child-motif is its *futurity*."[13] Stages of time seem to coalesce in the archetypal child. According to Jung's psychology, the " 'child' symbolizes the pre-conscious and the post-conscious nature of man. His pre-conscious nature is the unconscious state of earliest childhood; his post-conscious nature is an anticipation by analogy of life after death."[14] Jung believed that the child archetype evolves from a "dubious beginning" to a "triumphal end."[15] In referring to the "eternal child,"[16] Jung bestowed an aura of immortality on the archetype.

Because *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* has endured as such a popular classic for the past century, that little bunny seems to defy the limitations of time. Peter Rabbit never ages, while his readers continue to grow older and pass on. Although Beatrix Potter never gave birth to any biological children, her spirit remains forever alive in the generations of children who are the beneficiaries of her "little books."

THE CHILD ARCHETYPE AND PETER RABBIT

After considering how the child archetype seems to have been operative within Beatrix Potter herself, we might consider the possibility of how that archetype is reflected in her creation of *Peter Rabbit*. Of the many books that Beatrix Potter produced, *Peter Rabbit* was the first and most famous. With that in mind, it might be helpful to consider Beatrix Potter's relation to *Peter Rabbit* and her first pet rabbit, Peter Piper.

Because Potter was, for the most part, deprived of peer companionship during the early years of her life, her pets literally became her best friends and symbolically became extensions of herself. In her biography, *Beatrix Potter: Artist, Storyteller and Countrywoman,* Judy Taylor described Beatrix Potter's attachment to her pet rabbit saying that she "was utterly devoted to him."[17] When the rabbit died, Beatrix recorded in her journal that "his disposition was uniformly amiable and his temper unfailingly sweet. An affectionate companion and quiet friend."[18]

Based on the strong, personal affinity that Beatrix Potter felt for her pet rabbit, it is not surprising that he was reincarnated as a character in a picture letter that she wrote to Noel Moore, the first-born child of her favorite governess and faithful friend. It seems fitting that Beatrix would compose a story about Peter Rabbit recuperating in his mother's care in a letter to Noel while he was sick in bed with scarlet fever. Although that picture letter was only one of many letters that Beatrix wrote to children, it was the one that stood out in her mind seven years later when "Annie Moore suggested to Beatrix that some of her letters to the children might be turned into books."[19] How fortunate that young Noel had so treasured the picture letter that he still had it when Beatrix asked him to lend it to her! That letter became the basis for Beatrix Potter's first publication, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*.

The life of Beatrix Potter and the spirit of the child archetype seem to infuse the creation of Peter Rabbit. It might seem appropriate, at this point, to explore how characteristics of Jung's archetypal child are also reflected in *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*.

Abandonment and Peter Rabbit

Many children in archetypal literature suffer an experience of abandonment because of the death of a parent. Peter's father had come to a tragic end when Mrs. McGregor made a pie out of him. Like the orphaned child in fairy tales, Peter has to confront the world on his own. This literary motif addresses a primeval fear of losing one's parents. What is significant is that the lone child survives and ultimately achieves a sense of independence and victory. This success bolsters confidence in the reader that he or she can also be self-sufficient enough to survive the vicissitudes of life.

Wholeness and Peter Rabbit

Self-reliance demands a sense of archetypal wholeness. A child archetype manifests complementary characteristics of child and adult, as well as male and female. Because Peter Rabbit is immature, he needs an adult to protect and nurture him. Although Peter is quite resourceful in his efforts to escape from Mr. McGregor, he reverts to the position of a dependent child who needs his mother to take care of him when he comes home sick. Children of all ages can relate to these contradictory urges of wanting to be free and yet wishing to be cared for in times of

need. The scene of Mrs. Rabbit tending her child circumscribes *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* from the frontispiece to the concluding description of how, "His mother put him to bed, and made some camomile tea."[20] The familiar picture of Mrs. Rabbit and Peter is somewhat reminiscent of a classic portrait of Madonna and child. In fact, a portrait of Madonna and child might be regarded as an expression of Jungian wholeness representing the union of child and adult, as well as male and female.

The most charming aspect of Peter's duality is in terms of his human and animal attributes. As his name implies, Peter Rabbit is a hybrid of boy and animal. Potter's watercolors accurately depict the physical characteristics of a real rabbit. Peter performs activities that are possible for a rabbit, but impossible for a human. He squeezes under the gate leading to Mr. McGregor's garden. In trying to escape from the garden, Peter gains speed by running on four legs. Then, Peter Rabbit hides inside a watering can, jumps out a window, and props himself in a wheelbarrow.

It is delightfully ironic that the little rabbit dresses like a child wearing a blue jacket with brass buttons and a pair of black shoes. In that regard and in many others, Peter seems more like a little boy than a bunny. He cries when he feels frightened. He sneezes, sits down to rest, and asks for directions. The narrator mentions his cognitive activities of forgetting the way, plotting an escape, and deciding not to talk to the cat. When Peter returns home, he goes to bed and is given a tablespoonful of camomile tea.

Because Peter Rabbit is presented as a composite of animal instincts and human behavior, we tend to apply a dual set of standards to his harebrained activity. On one hand, the reader is impressed with Peter's impulsiveness, but, on the other hand, one recognizes that he has been disobedient. Like Adam, the father of the human race, Peter commits the forbidden crime in the garden. Normally, the reader would just take it for granted that a bunny would romp freely in a garden without paying attention to anyone who cautioned him not to do so. Who would expect a rabbit to function within the restraints of a jacket and shoes? If Peter Rabbit were judged as an animal, one would simply think that he was acting like a typical bunny. Because Peter is judged by human standards, he is dubbed as a naughty rabbit.

The reader can identify with the plight of Peter Rabbit, who is criticized for succumbing to his natural instincts. M. L. von Franz, an associate of Jung, said that, "The Self is often symbolized as an animal, representing our instinctive nature and its connectedness with one's surroundings."[21] Jungian psychology addresses the tension of trying to reconcile our noble

desires with the shadow of our lower drives. According to Jung, the pinnacle of human development is achieved in a fully integrated personality that accepts the darker shadow of one's personality while striving to a higher level of development. Jung discussed the human struggle of dealing with one's lower or animal instincts that he refers to as the "shadow":[22] "Taking it in its deepest sense, the shadow is the invisible saurian tail that man still drags behind him."[23] Jung recognized that the repressed instincts of the human shadow are not essentially bad, but unacceptable according to social conventions. He believed that "the shadow is merely somewhat inferior, primitive, unadapted, and awkward; not wholly bad. It even contains childish or primitive qualities which would in a way vitalize and embellish human existence, but—convention forbids."[24] When we reflect on Peter Rabbit's behavior, we recognize that although he might be regarded as a naughty rabbit, there is something endearing in the fact that he gives vent to his basic instincts. The little rabbit simply does what comes naturally to him.

The child-like reader champions Peter Rabbit's freedom to be himself, while many adults harbor a hidden desire to cast off human conventions and to follow their own impulses. Inwardly, we delight in Peter's impetuous nature and his ability to survive. In discussing *The Tale of Peter Rabbit,* Alison Lurie recalls that when she "asked a class of students which character in the book they would have preferred to be, they voted unanimously for Peter, recognizing the concealed moral of the story: that disobedience and exploration are more fun than good behavior, and not really all that dangerous, whatever Mother may say. Consciously or not, children know that the author's sympathy and interest are with Peter."[25]

Invincibility and Peter Rabbit

Whether the child archetype is represented as a child or an animal, invincibility is a distinguishing characteristic of the archetype. Characteristically, the archetypal child is "delivered helpless into the power of terrible enemies and in continual danger of extinction."[26] Nevertheless, the classic myth of the archetype emphasizes "that the 'child' is endowed with superior powers and, despite all dangers, will unexpectedly pull through."[27] The archetype survives; the child triumphs. Invariably, the archetypal child embarks on a journey that symbolizes the transformation that takes place as one progresses from the area of the conscious to the realm of the unconscious.

We recognize changes in Peter Rabbit as he journeys into Mr. McGregor's garden. Peter follows the pattern of the archetypal hero who sets out in quest of his lost father. He ventures toward Mr. McGregor's garden to the place where Mr. Rabbit had come to his demise. During his dangerous adventure in the garden, Peter undergoes the rites of passage that test his endurance. Peter confronts obstacles and dangers along the way. He feels frightened and lost as Mr. McGregor pursues him. Peter's experience resembles the perennial theme of the fairy tales in which the youngster wanders into the primeval forest. Invariably, the estranged youngster overcomes obstacles with the assistance of a mentor figure such as a fairy godmother. The mentor seems to bestow power that enables the archetypal child to move beyond the limitations of childish fears. In the case of Peter Rabbit, the troubled bunny rallies the incentive to overcome his plight in Mr. McGregor's garden through the inspiration of the friendly sparrows who "implored him to exert himself."[28]

Peter Rabbit survives. Ultimately, Peter outwits Mr. McGregor. The reader rejoices in the triumph of the underdog. Peter escapes from Mr. McGregor, and the "prodigal son" returns home.

Immortality and Peter Rabbit

In addition to attributes of abandonment, wholeness, and invincibility, the archetypal child characteristically emanates an eternal quality. The story opens with an aura of timelessness. The familiar phrase, "Once upon a time," magically transports the reader into a realm beyond the physical limitations of time and space.

As an archetype of the child, Peter Rabbit begets an ongoing cycle of generativity. Because the rabbit is such a prolific animal, it has long been regarded as a symbol of immortality. Peter himself belongs to a long line of Rabbits who will live after him. In the subsequent series of Beatrix Potter's stories, Peter's cousin, Benjamin Bunny, marries Peter's sister, Flopsy, who gives birth to many "Flopsy Bunnies."

More importantly, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* lives on. It is a good story that has withstood the test of time. An editorial that appeared in the *New York Herald Tribune* on January 6, 1944, commemorating Beatrix Potter's death proclaimed that, "Her greatness lies in the fact that she was able again and again to create that rare thing—a book that brings grown-ups and children together in shared delight."[29] Because a good story has universal appeal, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* has remained popular for a century and certainly gives promise of continuing appeal for subsequent generations.

UNIVERSAL APPEAL OF BEATRIX POTTER'S ARCHETYPAL RABBIT

An examination of the text of *Peter Rabbit* and the life of Beatrix Potter reveals similarities in their archetypal journeys. We might say that writing *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* assisted Beatrix Potter in her process of self-realization. Through the dynamic interplay of her unconscious and conscious, Beatrix Potter's imagination gave birth to Peter Rabbit. The organic unity and unrivalled craft of her story and illustrations continue to speak to the hearts and minds of readers of all ages. Children identify with Peter, while adult readers recapture the spirit of childhood.

Because *Peter Rabbit* emanates from the core of Beatrix Potter's being, her creation resonates with all humanity. The depth of the author's inspiration and the reader's response suggests the archetypal quality of the story and accounts for the undying appeal of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*.

NOTES

1. Ira Progoff, *Jung, Synchronicity, and Human Destiny* (New York: Julian Press, 1973), 78.
2. Carl Jung, "The Relations between the Ego and the Unconscious," in *The Basic Writings of C. G. Jung*, ed. Violet Staub DeLaszlo (New York: Modern Library, 1959), 127.
3. Carl Jung, "The Psychology of the Child Archetype," in *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, Vol. 9, Part I, ed. Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, Gerhard Adler, and William McGuire, translated by R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 156.
4. Jung, "The Psychology of the Child Archetype," 151–81.
5. Margaret Lane, *The Tale of Beatrix Potter* (London: Frederick Warne, 1946), 16.
6. Lane, *The Tale of Beatrix Potter*, 54.
7. Lane, *The Tale of Beatrix Potter*, 54.
8. Lane, *The Tale of Beatrix Potter*, 54.
9. Timothy Foote, "A Tale of Some Tails, and the Story of Their Shy Creator," *Smithsonian* (January 1989): 90.
10. Lane, *The Tale of Beatrix Potter*, 53.
11. Judy Taylor, *Beatrix Potter and Hill Top* (London: The National Trust, 1989).
12. Jung, "The Psychology of the Child Archetype," 162.
13. Jung, "The Psychology of the Child Archetype," 164.
14. Jung, "The Psychology of the Child Archetype," 178.

15. Jung, "The Psychology of the Child Archetype," 179.
16. Jung, "The Psychology of the Child Archetype," 179.
17. Judy Taylor, *Beatrix Potter: Artist, Storyteller and Countrywoman* (London: Frederick Warne, 1986), 61.
18. Taylor, *Beatrix Potter: Artist, Storyteller, and Countrywoman*, 61.
19. Judy Taylor, *Letters to Children from Beatrix Potter* (London: Frederick Warne, 1992), 81.
20. Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (London: Frederick Warne, 1902).
21. M. L. von Franz, "The Process of Individuation," in *Man and His Symbols*, ed. Carl G. Jung (New York: Laurel, 1968), 220.
22. Jolande Jacobi, *The Psychology of C. G. Jung* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1973), 109–14.
23. Carl Jung, *Psychological Reflections*, ed. Jolande Jacobi and R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 243.
24. Jung, *Psychological Reflections*, 242.
25. Alison Lurie, *Don't Tell the Grown-Ups Why Kids Love the Books They Do* (New York: Avon, 1990), 95.
26. Jung, "The Psychology of the Child Archetype," 170.
27. Jung, "The Psychology of the Child Archetype," 170.
28. Potter, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit.*
29. *New York Herald Tribune*, 6 January 1944, Editorial, 18.

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