CHERRY RIPE: "CULT OF THE LITTLE GIRL"
NARRATIVES IN LATE-VICTORIAN BRITAIN

By
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTERS</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1  ANGELS AND/AS PARAMOURS: THE CULT OF THE LITTLE GIRL IN LATE-VICTORIAN ENGLAND</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2  &quot;MY OWN CHIEF PET&quot;: JOHN RUSKIN'S PURSUIT OF SAINTS AND LILIES</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3  &quot;DREAMING AS THE SUMMERS DIE&quot;: LEWIS CARROLL'S FADING GIRL</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4  VISUALIZING PARADOX: DODGSON, CAMERON, AND THE CULTURE OF GIRL-PHOTOGRAPH</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5  &quot;HER DOUBLE PERVERSITY&quot;: ERNEST DOWSON AND THE DUALITY OF LATE-VICTORIAN GIRLHOOD</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6  BABES IN BOYLAND: J.M. BARRIE AND THE EDWARDIAN GIRL</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School
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CHERRY RIPE:
“CULT OF THE LITTLE GIRL” NARRATIVES IN LATE-VICTORIAN BRITAIN

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This dissertation is the first substantial study of the literary, artistic, and cultural
phenomenon of the Cult of the Little Girl. It focuses on the ways in which English
female children were constructed and obsessively worshipped as amie-enfants between
1860 and 1911, a period of time spanning from the heyday of music hall, through the
cultish interest in girls at Oxford in the 1860s, to the publication of J.M. Barrie’s Peter
Pan. Whether inspiring Oxford undergraduates to place little girl “mascots” on the
sidelines at sporting matches or fueling John Ruskin’s maddening pursuit of his “own St.
Ursula” among Winnington school girls, the startling intensity of the Cult of the Little
Girl is most evident in its cultural manifestations. Yet, its literary, historical, and
theoretical implications are best measured in texts that reveal paradoxical constructions
of the nineteenth-century girl as chaste/innocent in some cases and sexual/worldly in
others, based largely on markers of class. For artists and writers like John Everett Millais,
John Ruskin, Charles Dodgson, Julia Margaret Cameron, O.G. Rejlander, Ernest
Dowson, and J.M. Barrie, this ambiguity supported a titillating paradoxical construction of little girls as simultaneously erotic and innocent, worldly and ethereal, scandalous and blessed. Their texts rely on a tension created by the irreconcilable schism between the ideal and the mundane—a schism created and sustained by girls who exist within a space that constantly negotiates two equally important ends of a spectrum. At one end of the spectrum, the girl figures as a corruptible (and corrupting) agent of transgression and sexual vice. At the other, she possesses an invulnerable chastity that aligns her with domesticity and a sense of moral duty. In short, the ideal girl for these writers and artists embodies some fundamental duality (innocent/corrupt, virginal/carnal, sacred/profane) and is able to keep that duality in tension, so that the “dainty eyes” and the “bought red mouth” become contending sides of the same girl figure. Neither side can complete the formula without the other, because if they are isolated, the ideal girl becomes distant and cold, and the “real” girl becomes fallen, aesthetically flawed, and utterly forgettable.
CHAPTER 1
ANGELS AND/AS PARAMOURS: THE CULT OF THE LITTLE GIRL IN LATE NINETEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

How is the indescribable beauty of that most lovely face to be described—the dark soft curls parting back from the pure white transparent brow, the exquisite mouth and pearly white teeth, the pure straight delicate features, the long dark fringes and white eyelids that droop over and curtain her eyes...Oh, child, child, if you did but know your own power. Oh, Gipsy, if you only grow up as good as you are fair. Oh, that you might grow up good.

Francis Kilvert, Kilvert's Diary, 4 July 1870

As she stood and lifted those blue eyes, those soft dark loving eyes shyly to mine, it seemed to me as if the doors and windows of heaven were suddenly opened. It was one of the supreme moments of life. As I stood by the roadside holding her hand, lost to all else and conscious only of her presence, I was in heaven already, or if still on earth in the body, the flights of golden stairs sloped to my feet and one of the angels had come down to me. Florence, Florence Hill, my darling, my darling. It was well nigh all I could say in my emotion.

Francis Kilvert, Kilvert's Diary, 24 March 1874

Like many middle-class men of the nineteenth century, the Reverend Francis Kilvert filled his diaries with praise and longing for little girls, anecdotes about them, and detailed, rapturous narratives of his encounters with them. Many writers and artists of the last few decades of the century spent innumerable pages trying to describe “indescribable beauty.” It was a beauty that was, in most cases, profoundly paradoxical. On the one hand, it reflected the ineffable effect of “dark soft curls” and “pure white transparent brow,” of “soft dark loving” eyes that suggest “windows of
heaven”; and yet, on the other hand, it also captured “curtained” eyes that suggest the more earthly pleasures of a Gipsy with a questionable future. The ambiguous sexuality of little girls suggested to Victorian observers like Kilvert both virtuous, dutiful affections and depraved, corrupted desires. The girls’ duality made them the subject of feverish interest in a culture that both sentimentalized and eroticized them.

In May of 1876, Reverend Francis Kilvert (1840-1879) spent a week in Oxford, visiting the university where he was ordained, attending church services and reveling in the company of local little girls. According to his diary, he spent his final evening gushing over the daughters of his host and hostess. He was particularly affected when he was led to the nursery, where the youngest child slept: “So we went in and found her pretty and rosy with tumbled curly hair lying in her little soft white nest contentedly sucking chocolates” (Kilvert 256). Throughout his diaries, Reverend Francis Kilvert savors descriptions of parish girls and their features that threw him into rapturous adoration and an “ecstasy of happiness” (191). Yet, in his account of the nursery visit, as in his other diary entries, Kilvert does not simply recognize a girl child’s ethereal qualities. Rather, he balances quasi-religious adoration for her angelic intangibility with lust for her physical body. The reverend does not praise her spiritual qualities over her physical ones; he praises them alongside each other. The girl as emblem of spiritual and physical sanctity and the girl as object of physical desire and corruption are celebrated equally.

Individually, each side of the equation is one-dimensional, but together they create a titillating paradox. Kilvert writes, “I sat down upon her bed and the rest gathered and so Queen Janet held her court as pleased as possible. But she was not
satisfied to remain in bed and soon had her round plump limbs out from under the sheets with the innocent simplicity of childhood and her pretty little white feet in my lap, as she sat bolstered up by the pillows smiling, rosy and curly” (256). He couches a rapturous celebration of “round plump limbs” in “the innocent simplicity of childhood,” and he characterizes the girl as desirous and amorous by noting that she came out of the sheets because she “was not satisfied” to remain under them.

“Bolstered up by the pillows smiling,” the girl appears in control of the scene. She is initiating physical contact with Kilvert, while he and “her court” watch her pleasure from their places around her bed. Yet, when she moves her feet to his lap, Kilvert again offsets the scene’s sensuality by describing her body as “little,” “white,” “rosy,” and “curly.” These words, “little” and “white,” indicate an innocence that discourages suspicion about the location of the girl’s feet. Particularly, the word “little” affords a special status to the word that it modifies—a strategy used in novels (Little Nell) and innumerable music hall acts (Little Victoria, Little Dot Hetherington, Little Gitana, Les Jolies Petites, and La Petite Quartette, among others). The character described as “little” can say, do, and feel things that would be considered volatile in adult situations. In this case, the adjective miniaturizes the girl’s feet and transforms them into a playful version of larger, adult (women’s) feet. The miniaturization allows Kilvert to simultaneously acknowledge and diffuse the eroticism of the bedroom visit.

The words “white,” “rosy,” and “curly” work in similar ways, diluting the erotic connotations behind a “flushed” and “tangled” appearance with a “rosy,” “curly” one that focuses on playfulness and triviality. In his diaries, he balances his
adoration for the angelic qualities in young female parishioners and his rapture over their earthly bodies by juxtaposing light, innocent adjectives with more serious ones: “lithe, lissome, high-spirited, romping girls with their young supple limbs, their white round arms, white shoulders and brows, their rosy flushed cheeks, their dark and fair curls tangled, tossed and blown back by the wind, their bright and saucy eyes, their red sweet full lips and white laughing teeth” (45). In this passage, Kilvert begins with a blatant contradiction between “lithe, lissome” and “high-spirited, romping.” The effortless grace of the girls is offset by a childlike boisterousness. He goes on to create similar paradoxes between the girls’ sensuality and their childlike innocuousness: “young supple limbs,” “rosy flushed cheeks,” “bright and saucy eyes,” and “red sweet full lips.” Without the words “young,” “rosy,” “bright,” and “sweet,” the “supple limbs,” “flushed cheeks,” “saucy eyes,” and “red full lips” would seem suggestively erotic. The juxtaposition of the two keeps the paradoxical nature of the little girl in tension.

In other passages, Kilvert maintains this ambivalent balance by stressing the girls’ agency in the narratives. They make playful advances as children and he reacts to them in asides as an adult. Then, once he has secured the girls’ “control” over the situations, he casts them in situations that have adult sexual parallels, in which they simultaneously appear as frolicking children and miniature seductresses, but any eroticism is strictly connotative:

Being tub night, Polly with great celerity and satisfaction stripped herself naked to her drawers before me and was very anxious to take off her drawers too for my benefit, but her grandmother would not allow her. As it happened the drawers in question were so inadequately constituted that it made uncommonly little difference whether they were off or on, and there was a most interesting view from the rear (242).
The thwarted striptease in this diary entry begins with Polly’s own desire to take off her clothes “for my [Kilvert’s] benefit.” He is not involved directly; only the “anxious” child acts with any concern for “celerity and satisfaction.” Kilvert’s passivity enables her to disrobe without any sense of impropriety. Yet, he does not let the account end without any tension. Instead, he revels in the fact that he defied her watchful grandmother by getting a peek of the child’s body through her open garments. Again, the child’s erotic appeal works against the more innocuous appeal of the little girl. The child remains partially clothed, but Kilvert’s view is not marred—“it made uncommonly little difference whether they were off or on.” She is simultaneously hidden and exposed, guarded and accessible. Also, the girl is admired from the back, allowing Kilvert to enjoy another surreptitious view of her. Polly is not aware of Kilvert’s desiring gaze; but, for the reader, this gaze associates her with adult sexual desire. She acts as a child but is watched as a miniature woman, keeping both sides of the duality in tension.

It is not surprising that Kilvert and others should conceptualize girls in this way. These same conflicts between iconographic and real girls are also present in much of the artwork of the nineteenth century—John Everett Millais’s Cherry Ripe from 1880 (figure 1-1) and For the Squire from 1888 (figure 1-2), for example. Laurel Bradley and Pamela Tarkin Reis began to explore these issues of duality in their considerations of Penelope Boothby, the subject of Cherry Ripe, between 1991 and 1992 in Victorian Studies.² The changing image of Penelope Boothby provides a concise and illustrative example of the sexual innuendo behind seemingly innocuous portraits of girls. The original portrait of Boothby by Sir Joshua Reynolds
Figure 1-1: 
*Cherry Ripe*  
John Everett Millais

Figure 1-2: 
*For the Squire*  
John Everett Millais
depicts a benign child who was praised as embodying “the truest and happiest spirit of comedy,” “the tenderest, heartiest sympathy” and “the playful, sighed with the sorrowful” (Bradley 284). Then according to Laurel Bradley, the same little girl, as portrayed by Millais, became the embodiment of the most positive attributes of nineteenth-century English culture. She is “the ideal past” that “anchors the whirlwind present by offering hope for an arcadian future” (192). However, she is also, according to Pamela Tarkin Reis, the object of “pronounced pedophilic appeal” (201): “The child’s smile and flirtatious gaze coupled with her hand arrangement held provocatively between the legs constitute a nonverbal request for sexual liaison” (204).

Eight years after painting Cherry Ripe, Millais re-visited the theme of paradoxical girlhood sexuality in For the Squire, which brings together the girl’s “marketability and pricelessness, eroticism and innocence” (Williams 124). The child’s upward gaze, presumably rested on the unseen squire, suggests a power dynamic and gender/age differential that make her an object of control and possession. As a result, “the title may mean that the letter belongs to the squire and/or that this little girl is being presented to him (and us) with just a titillating touch of nostalgia for the droit de seigneur” (150). While Millais’s iconic paintings of girls met his audience’s desire for nostalgic comfort and moralizing, they also testify to the girl’s “complicated symbolic value” (124). As Carol Mavor’s essay on Charles Dodgson makes clear, Victorian assumptions about girlhood were sometimes undermined even while they were being celebrated; simultaneously eroticized and pure, these girls were carefully constructed to embody a sexual contradiction.
The little girl was a cultural trope for an angel-seductress paradox. In the case of a man like Kilvert, an obsessive fascination with young middle-class girls did not reveal an aberrant sexuality in the otherwise respectable reverend. Nor does it misrepresent a purely spiritual attraction to creatures whom he saw as solely angelic. Yet, the trend in most academic studies of literary and cultural girl-worshippers would suggest that we need to choose between these two extremes. In truth, his fascination with female children emerged from a cultural “enthusiasm for perambulators”:

Du Maurier’s aesthetes go into ecstasies over Mary and her little lamb, Max Beerbohm views society through a cloud of pinafores, May Belfort complains to an enraptured audience that Daddy wouldn’t give her a bow-wow and . . . Ruskin pointed to the strength of children’s designs (Bell 80).

Like Du Maurier, Beerbohm, and Ruskin, Kilvert was not alone when he “thanked God for little girls over-enthusiastically” (80). Nor was an adoration for a Victorian girl’s ability to embody both earthly and unearthly female ideals unique to Kilvert. The highest artistic and social ideals of the nineteenth century were explored and articulated through the iconographic innocence and fetishized physical features of little girls. Throughout the last half of the century, female “perambulators” were overwhelmingly popular obsessions in paintings, photographs, poetry, fiction, diaries, music halls and theatres. The reverend’s diaries illustrate a wildly popular formulation of the nineteenth-century girl as simultaneously sensual and ethereal, scandalous and blessed. It is this enthusiasm for the dual nature in female children that is evident in the often mentioned but rarely discussed Cult of the Little Girl in nineteenth-century England.

* * * * *
This dissertation focuses on the ways English female children were constructed and obsessively worshipped as *amie-enfants* between 1860 and 1911, a period of time spanning from the heyday of music hall, through the cultish interest in little girls at Oxford in the 1860s, to the publication of J.M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan*. The English little girl’s potential for duality established the grounds on which the Cult of the Little Girl would emerge as a force of culture available to late nineteenth-century artists and writers searching for articulations of a paradoxical and enigmatic femininity.

Of course, this balance between innocence and eroticism borrowed from pre-existing paradigms of femininity—ideals that also fueled politically- and socially-motivated constructions of virginal young women—but I do not intend to focus on formulations of the older “maiden” or why the men in this study did not focus on the many young ladies available to them in both Oxford and London music halls. A focus on causality would demand an answer to questions of “why”—a strategy that has resulted in previous scholarship’s habit of over-simplifying discussions of men like Dodgson and Ruskin by labeling them as perverse or neurotic. Instead, I am more interested in questions of “how” a specific construction of little girls created and sustained such obsessive, passionate enthusiasm among Victorian artists and writers. Even though I examine social and artistic trends in the particular societies of Oxford and London, and in texts by particular figure like Charles Dodgson, John Ruskin and Ernest Dowson, my larger point is always that the nineteenth-century Cult of the Little Girl was a cultural phenomenon that weaved through and extended beyond individual places and personalities.
Numerous critical texts make cursory references to a vague “cultish fascination with girls” at the end of the century, but this dissertation provides the first serious or substantial consideration of the phenomenon. For the most part, the cultural connections and consistencies between individual girl-worshippers have been overlooked, though the subjects of Victorian girlhood and paradoxical womanhood in general have been given considerable critical attention. On the one hand, James Kincaid (Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture) recognizes and catalogues the ways in which the genderless child has been assembled “in reference to desire”—specifically, an erotic desire that is simultaneously denied and maintained by the culture that produced it. On the other hand, Morten Cohen (Lewis Carroll: A Biography) defines little girls as Blakean creatures (based on a male model of childhood) who “possess a moral purity and exemplify unblemished and natural goodness,” brutalized by a “depraved society” from which “death is their only escape” (118).

Both arguments simplify the little girl figure’s appeal by choosing an either/or approach to her sexuality. Questions about age of consent and propriety separated the little girl from the little boy as sexually ambiguous; as a result, she could play both seductress and angel at once. Deborah Gorham begins to explore the middle ground between the two extremes of innocence and eroticism in The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal, but she also eventually reduces the female child to a one-dimensional icon of innocence and domesticity. As Gorham explains, women were supposed to remain “permanently childlike, childlike even in maturity” (6). By considering a girl to be the ideal of womanhood, Victorians were able to reconcile an implicitly asexual,
“pure” figure with the active sexuality inevitably associated with the duties of wife and mother. Gorham is absolutely correct in that girls were cast in this “pure” domestic role, but she presents only one side of the equation. Girls were also presented as sexually vulnerable and even alluring. They were not asexual. Instead, they were pre-sexual, both children and future women. The latency of their sexuality veiled their erotic appeal, but it certainly did not negate it.

This bifurcated view of girls is entirely unsurprising when considered in connection with class-based constructions of the nineteenth-century girl as chaste/innocent in some cases and sexual/worldly in others. As demonstrated by Deborah Gorham's *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal*, the middle class epitomized its privileged social position in their daughters and in their childlike wives—figures of saintly feminine purity who existed exclusively within the private sphere of domesticity. By safeguarding and sequestering the girls within a domestic sphere that denied any overt or accessible sexuality in the children, the ruling middle class could reassure itself that its wives and daughters embodied, both physically and spiritually, the feminine ideals of innocence and purity more successfully than their working-class counterparts. Thus, middle-class daughters, unlike working girls in the public sphere of business, remained childlike (if not legally "children") longer. The daughters symbolized spiritual and sexual purity—a sanctified "place of renewal" for men—and, within middle-class households, they remained "girls" until they became "girlish" wives and mothers (Gorham 4).

On the other hand, when a working-class counterpart entered service within that same middle-class household, she was legally recognized as a sexual person and
responsible for her own sexual conduct. Once a girl entered the middle-class home as an agent of the professional public sphere (as a domestic servant), she became a commodity, no longer worshipped and protected as an icon. As Claudia Nelson points out in her discussion of legal definitions of girlhood, “if upper-class girls were supposed to be the embodiment of purity, their working-class counterparts were acknowledged to be sexual beings at puberty” (Nelson 3). Working-class girls were defined and considered sexually available (or unavailable) according to the shifting age of consent. Their sexuality and sexual availability were negotiable legal issues that fell outside the unspoken spiritual and cultural restraints sheltering their middle-class counterparts from physical “corruption.”

Even William Stead in “Maiden Tribune of Modern Babylon,” his famous 1885 Pall Mall Gazette exposé, used to his benefit the class-determined distinctions between sexual working-class girls and asexual middle-class daughters. In his series of articles, Stead proclaimed that working-class children—the “daughters of the people”—were forced into London brothels. Indeed, it was only Stead’s reference to the girls as “daughters” that identified them as children at all. Essentially, he reconstructed child prostitutes as middle-class daughters suffering sexual abuse. Wishing to focus on the youth and innocence of his subjects, Stead manipulated the prevailing understanding of girlhood in order to situate working-class girls within a national family that could be united by moral outrage instead of by class. However, the victims of the story—the girls sold into prostitution—were, in fact, almost always working-class girls older than thirteen, the legal age of consent at the time.
If Stead wanted to incite public middle-class outrage against "child" prostitution, he had little choice but to try to align working-class prostitutes with middle-class daughters, because the ruling assumptions held that working-class girls were naturally more sexual and promiscuous, which would have undermined his efforts to characterize the girls as innocent victims. William Acton's famous 1870 study of the moral, social, and sanitary aspects of urban prostitution had claimed that working-class girls were sexually corrupt by nature: "[the girls'] seduction—if seduction it can be called—has been effected, with their own consent, by boys no older than themselves, and is all but a natural consequence of promiscuous herding, that mainspring of corruption among our lower orders" (207). In Acton's view (and in the view of most other Victorian "scientists"), working-class girls were not debauched by older men or men of higher classes, as Stead argued; instead, they willingly engaged in sexual activity with "boys no older than themselves." Thus, sexual promiscuity and prostitution were seen as a "natural consequence" of an inherited degeneracy in the lower orders, the unquestioned outcome being what Benjamin Jowett called "a class of sinners" (54). This construction portrayed lower-class girls as essentially less innocent than their middle-class counterparts—an economically-based construction that enabled men to see one girl as worldly and the other as ethereal, based almost solely on markers of class.

Given the inclination of Victorian social (and medical) science to portray girls as potential agents of degenerate sexuality, even as crusaders depicted them as innocent victims of criminal sexual assault, the hyper-sensitivity and sensationalism surrounding such exposés as the "Maiden Tribute" series led most Victorian readers
to consider the possibility that all thirteen- to sixteen-year-old “daughters,” working-
class and middle-class alike, might somehow be both ethereal children and sexually
active young women. Even the conventional fragile distinction between sexual and
non-sexual girls did not erase the implicit sexuality of the “virtuous child”; indeed, by
focusing on her innocence, Stead had only underscored the potential for her
corruption. Just as working-class girls could be reconstituted as innocent victims, so
seemingly innocent daughters could become incipient sex objects in waiting. The
slippage between the sexual and innocent identities of girls provided endless
titillation, always suggesting the possibility of both identities.

The phenomenal popularity of London scandals like the Stead case
couraged Victorians to regard little girls as paradoxical figures of virtue and sin;
and, though these tabloids fueled a cultish obsession with little girls, they were not the
only institutions to do so. At Oxford in the 1880’s, where the popular culture of
London commingled with a rarefied space devoted to religious, intellectual, and
artistic ideals, the twin poles of sanctity and sin in little girls’ characters held equal
charm and intrigue. University men “courted” and “worshipped” the middle-class
little girls whose families lived in the colleges. In his Memories of a Victorian, Edgar
Jepson recalls, “There was at Oxford in the eighties a cult of little girls, the daughters
of dons and residents: men used to have them to tea and take them on the river and
write verses to them” (219). Students and professors treated daughters of middle-
class dons in ways that made the cultish fascination with little girls as carnally
fixating as it was abstractly idealizing. Girls were immortalized as beatific icons in
poems, stories, and artwork by men at Oxford, but apparently they were also present
as mascots during sporting events and sought after for private tea parties and walks. John Ruskin, for instance, competed with Charles Dodgson for tea parties with Alice Liddell, the famous Dean’s daughter at Christ Church College, and Ruskin describes his despair after losing an evening completely alone with her by writing that “there was a sudden sense of some stars having been blown out by the wind” (Ruskin, Praeterita 470). Like many men associated with this “cult of the little girl,” he associated his child pet with ethereal, celestial forces—in this case, stars and wind—but his disappointment and despair stemmed from his inability to spend intimate time physically close to her. The girls were celebrated as ideals, but they were also pursued and adored as physically alluring bodies. They were both angels and paramours, knowing young women as well as innocent children.

The Oxford cult of the little girl always exhibited a somewhat contradictory mentality reflective of the dual status of the girls; during the week students and professors would idolize the dons’ daughters, while on the weekend they observed working-class girls in London music halls and restaurants during frequent trips to the city’s West End. Often, as in the case of Dodgson, Ruskin, and Dowson, the Oxford child-pets were physically incorporated into a liminal duality by accompanying their admirers to music halls. At the halls, the men could watch as middle-class daughters watched working-class girls (in middle-class costume) make sexual innuendo to an adoring audience. It required only the most modest voyeuristic transposition to have the middle-class girl create an effect equivalent to the one produced by streetwise music hall girls dressed as nursery children. The girl herself—whether a professor’s daughter or a music hall child actress—existed somewhere between two paradoxical
definitions of her; these stagings of streetwise actresses in starched pinafores, as well as the popular images of middle-class girls dressed as beggar maids, transformed each girl into a pastiche of innocence and corruption.

For this reason, London music halls, which experienced their boom between 1860 and 1890, provided an epicenter for girl-worship. The allure and fascination for the girl-actress were celebrated and examined by artists and critics in popular media. For Ernest Dowson, the value of the child-actress rested in her inherent artificiality—her ability to take up poses and role-playing (with the focus on playing) more easily than adult actresses. Dowson articulates this value of artificiality in the girls in “The Cult of the Child,” a literary response to the 1889 controversy surrounding potential emotional and physical harm to young children employed in London theatres. Although the title of the essay infers a cross-gendered consideration of stage children, Dowson focuses quickly on the child-actress and then on the little girl in general:

> It is only when we have turned our first decade that we begin to grow out of the ‘passion for making believe.’ Anyone who has been a sympathetic observer of a little girl with her doll must admit the truth of this. What dramas! what romances! what a wealth of histrionic power is lavished on the wooden puppet! (Dowson “Cult” 434).

Children are thus suited for the stage in their ability to “take up poses the most delightfully naive in the world. Tragedy, comedy, romantic drama, they play it by all turns” (433). As James Kincaid reminds us, the “child lives in a world that is not only made but made-up” (210). According to Dowson, little girls are inherently artificial; they embody primacy of artifice and playfulness. The fin-de-siècle desire to violate nature, to live à rebours, is transcribed onto the girl and the way admirers relate to her. In the end, not only is the artificiality of the girl-actress preferred, but
also the artificiality of the staged relationship with her. The superficial enchantment of her cosmetics, attire, and coquettish roles mask a corrupted lifestyle backstage and offers a “counterfeit presentment” of middle-class girlhood (Dowson “Cult” 435).

The actress presents an image that is both debutante and debauched simultaneously.

For eminent dramatic critic and stage historian Dutton Cook, the child-actress’s smallness contributed to the fanatical reactions she received from her audiences. In an 1880 Theatre Magazine article on famed child-actresses Ellen and Kate Terry, Cook remembers the frenzied theatrical phenomenon caused by these girls:

> There was a special pathos in the involuntary trembling of their baby fingers, and the unconscious wringing of their tiny hands; their voices were particularly endowed with musically thrilling qualities. I have never seen audiences so agitated and distressed, even to the point of anguish, as were the patrons of the Princess’s Theatre on those bygone nights...touchingly eloquent of voice and action; a childish simplicity attendant ever upon all the frenzy, the terror, the vehemence, and the despair of the speeches and the situation (quoted in Pemberton 35).

The simultaneously “thrilling” and “agitated and distressed” pleasure elicited by the girls’ “baby fingers,” “tiny hands,” and voices once again relies on a paradoxical view of the female child. The Terry children’s “childish simplicity” and smallness juxtapose the “frenzy,” “terror,” “vehemence,” and “despair” of the dramatic scene, and their untrained “involuntary trembling” and “unconscious wringing” of their hands belie their theatrical roles. They are both unaffected, nervous children and trained professionals on stage. In both Dowson’s and Cook’s articles, female children are inherently suited for the stage, and the London theaters and music halls provided an arena in which both child-lovers could engage in rapturous adoration for them.
Most importantly, popular London theatres and music halls brought both the street waif and the middle-class innocent together in the figure of the “naughty girl” character—a stock female role that combined innocuous costume (usually a white nightgown or schoolgirl uniform) and sexual innuendo. She was an “ambivalent embodiment of both innocence and experience” (Kift 47): “One the one hand she wore a little-girl costume and sang a text which was superficially respectable. But hidden beneath both costume and text was something distinctly more worldly and knowing” (47). Victorian writers and artists flocked to the halls featuring girls who looked like middle-class children but existed within a space that was not safe or protected. The safeguarded and shielded girls whom they worshipped within a middle-class context were fetishized on the worldly working-class bodies displayed in the halls for public consumption. Most obviously, the little girl’s white cotton nightdress—a costume commonly used in portraits of middle-class girls, like Charles Dodgson’s photograph of Mary Millais (figure 1-3)—stresses the children’s innocence and position within a protected domestic space.

In fact, by the end of the century, it was almost impossible to find a theatre or music hall in central London that did not cater to the public’s enthusiasm for child performers. As Jerome K. Jerome describes in Stageland (1890), “We got up to the Strand and dropped into the first theater we came to. The curtain went up, and on the stage was a small child standing in its nightshirt and screaming for its mother” (105). In this scene, the child on stage imitated a familiar domestic pose, appearing both vulnerable and protected. On the one hand, the child is alone on stage in just its bedclothes, a physical spectacle open to whatever desires or imputations the audience
Figure 1-3:
Portrait of Mary Millais, daughter of John Everett Millais
Charles Dodgson
might cast upon it. On the other hand, the child is calling for its mother, calling attention to a protective domestic space without imposing it on the scene itself.

In his narrative, Jerome’s group finds similar displays in two more theaters, and they decide to visit the music halls: “Our friend said he would not venture into another theater. He said he had heard there were places called music-halls, and he begged us to take him to one of these and not to tell his wife” (104). Hoping to find adult performers, the group seems to regard the music halls as an inappropriate venue for children. The music halls are set up as antithetical, or at least offensive, to a domestic middle-class sense of propriety. Once the group arrives at the hall, they witness “an infant phenomenon who sang and danced in fourteen different costumes” (106). Although the girl is identified as an “infant,” her presence in the theater associates her with a desirous gaze (feared by the patron’s wife at home) and puts her into circulation in the public world of London theatres, substituting the surveillance of voracious audiences for the surveillance of middle-class mothers and governesses. Her middle-class costume only veiled a more worldly, vulnerable young woman beneath it: according to music-hall historian Archibald Haddon, “young innocents who drifted into these places were inevitably contaminated” (Haddon 18). Their chaste appearances were contrived, masking a worldliness and vice that was immediately associated with the halls, and it was this tension between the girls’ identification as “young innocents” and their certain “contamination” behind the scenes that made them so fascinating and appealing to middle-class audiences.

In fact, the “infant phenomenon” figure of Jerome’s narrative most likely resembled Ninetta Crummles, the “Infant Phenomenon” in Charles Dickens’s
Nicholas Nickleby – a child actress who must lie about being ten years old and stunt her growth by drinking gin-and-water in order to impress audiences with her precocity in playing mature roles:

the infant phenomenon, though of short stature, had a comparatively aged countenance, and had moreover been precisely the same age—not perhaps to the full extent of the memory of the oldest inhabitant, but certainly for five good years. But she had been kept up late every night, and put upon an unlimited allowance of gin-and-water from infancy, to prevent her growing tall (290).

The “infant phenomenon” in Dickens’s story masquerades as a little girl. She appears to be a child, but she only sustains the illusion by staying up late and drinking gin—activities that would undermine her role as middle-class child. Yet, the contradiction between the onstage appearance and backstage reality of these girls did not discourage their popularity within the Cult of the Little Girl. On the contrary, it encouraged it.

Music hall girls from the lower classes, like May Belfort, Little Dot Hetherington, Vesta Victoria (“Little Victoria”), Ada Reeve, and Marie Lloyd, transformed themselves into simulations of middle-class little girls. In so doing, they created a jarring contrast between the outward appearance of middle-class propriety (as represented by schoolgirl dresses, nightgowns, and neatly-combed ringlets of hair) and racy song lyrics that suggested a libidinous, worldly appreciation of adult sexuality, especially adult male sexuality. They used facial expression and body language to contrast their innocent appearance with risqué songs like “Daddy Wouldn’t Buy Me a Bow-Wow,” “Our Lodger’s Such a Nice Young Man,” “I’m a Merry Little Devil,” and “I’m a Little Too Young to Know.”
The girls on stage, often past the age of legal adulthood, presented an innocent image that belied the suggestive double entendres they insinuated into their song lyrics. Ada Reeve, who was born in Whitechapel in 1874 and made her first stage appearance in 1878, appeared as a child actress, both in London and surrounding provinces, until making her music hall debut at Sebright’s, Hackney, in 1886, at age twelve. At this age, she was able to hold in tenuous and titillating balance her childlike appearance and her incipient sexual maturity. Dressed in frilly white nightclothes, she fashioned an image of herself as a flirtatious, precocious middle-class little girl (figure 1-4).

Her publicity posters featured images of her running away from her guardian and socializing with upper-class gentleman from behind her garden wall. She immediately became in demand at all the famous halls when she performed “I’m a Merry Little Devil” and “I’m a Little too Young to Know,” facetious songs that belied the innocent image behind the voice singing them. Similarly, Vesta Victoria, who made her first appearance as “Little Victoria” in 1883, also dressed in white nightgown and relied on innuendo in her songs (figure 1-5). In 1897, her most popular song was “Our Lodger’s Such a Nice Young Man,” in which she sang, “At night he makes the bed and does the other little jobs” (Pope 83). Without any body language or inflection, the words seem innocuous, but with a wink or a strategically jutted hip, Vesta could suggest a titillating impropriety in the “other little jobs” performed by the “nice young man” who is “never going to leave.”

This art of double meaning and coquettish insinuation reached a feverish pitch with Marie Lloyd, who made her stage debut in 1884 at the age of fourteen. She
Figure 1-4:
Ada Reeve as a music hall “naughty girl”
Figure 1-5:
London advertisement for Vesta Victoria
quickly became a public idol in numerous minor halls, and she was engaged at the famous Oxford Music Hall for a year without a break in 1886 before transferring to the Theatre Royal-Old Drury. Lloyd was famous for her ability to add a beguiling, lurid flavor to these seemingly virtuous characters. Until Lloyd was well into her thirties, both she and her audiences preferred to see her perform songs as the “knowing female, the sophisticated young person for whom life has no secrets,” coupled with the virtuous child heroine (Hibbert 73-75). The audience could never be sure if this chaste figure of a little girl was making a sexual innuendo or if they were projecting their own innuendo and desire onto her. Although in an 1887 interview in the New York Telegraph Lloyd claimed that “my songs are not blue—at least not half as blue as they are painted…I can’t help it…if [people] want to turn and twist my meanings,” she, in fact, prided herself in her ability to present “blue songs” in the guise of innocent ditties (73). The indecency of her songs relied on insinuation, and “a good performer like Marie Lloyd was able to reveal this [insinuation] merely by raising her eyebrows, pursing her lips, swinging her hips, by the wave of a hand or even a finger” (Kift 47). In answer to a complaint about the lewd content of her songs, she sang each of her songs “straight” without gesture or grimace. When judgment was passed in her favor, she sang one or two sentimental ballads in such a way that “every little movement had a meaning of its own” (Disher 35). Lloyd could alter her song’s meaning without disrupting the balance between respectability and lewdness; she forced her audience to interpret her body language and make their own assumptions. She never fully dropped the guise of innocent child, but she infused that construction with ribald humor and innuendo.
In the music hall, these girl performers were able to exist somewhere between the propriety of middle-class constructions of girlhood and a working-class young womanhood that was repeatedly referred to as premature, corrupting, and debauched. They had the costumes and songs to metamorphose themselves into either character: “Stage children were charmed and particular vehicles of transformation; in themselves and in their social class, they might become anything” (Auerbach 33). Their charm and seductiveness for audiences rested in their ability to embody Dickens’s Little Nell and Ninetta Crummles in a single body.

These music hall girls—who successfully combined both sides of the innocent/erotic duality—drew admirers from throughout the country and developed a cultish following during the 1890’s, and by the end of the century, girl serio-comics were a focus of artistic and literary fascination and adoration. Walter Sickert’s 1894 music hall illustrations in The Yellow Book—Marie Lloyd at “The Old Oxford Music Hall” (April 1894) (figure 1-6) and Dot Hetherington at “The Old Bedford Music Hall” (July 1894) (figure 1-7), for example, which feature young girls costumed in a loose white dress—testify to the girls’ mass appeal and celebrity.

These images of British music hall, like so many other illustrations in The Yellow Book—Robert Hall’s Portrait of a Girl (April 1895) (figure1-8) and A. Bauerle’s Fine Feathers Make Fine Birds (April 1897) (figure 1-9) among them—showcase little girls who infatuated audiences with their paradoxical blends of chaste surface and hints of coquettish substance beneath it. The construction of the paradoxical little girl, both in popular media and imaginative art and literature, relied on a balance between two equally important female prototypes. The incessant pursuit
Figure 1-6:
Marie Lloyd at the Old Oxford Music Hall

Figure 1-7:
Dot Hetherington at the Old Bedford Music Hall
Figure 1-8:  
*Portrait of a Girl*  
Robert Hall

Figure 1-9:  
*Fine Feathers Make Fine Birds*  
A. Bauerle
of a girl-child who could embody these two sides of the duality in tension evolved into a force of culture and literary/artistic phenomenon at the end of the nineteenth century in England that is commonly recognized as the Cult of the Little Girl.

What many commentators see as a non-threatening glimpse of impending womanhood is not a non-sexual but a pre-sexual feminine ideal; the girls’ sexuality is centered on what the children will become with time. And obsession with innocence reveals an equal obsession with corruption and carnality. The meticulous composition of fantastically pure dream-girls suggests both an awareness and a preoccupation with the inevitable fall of real, more worldly girls. Their latent sexuality necessitates (by definition) an inevitable manifest sexuality. In other words, the obsession with a pre-sexual body anticipates and watches for the sexual one. As a result, artists and writers most often associated with the Cult of the Little Girl—for example, Francis Kilvert, John Everett Millais, John Ruskin, Charles Dodgson, and Ernest Dowson—suspend the girls between childhood (latent sexuality) and womanhood (manifest sexuality) by displacing them in time and space. The girls exist in budding gardens, fairylands, and ethereal afterlives, distanced from the decaying forces of the real world, but if they are to remain pure, there is no chance for any relationship between the fantasy girls and their admirers. Without any corporeality, an idealized girl remains indifferent and lifeless. The fleshiness and seductiveness of girls’ bodies counterbalance their intangible radiance. In fact, the physical features of Victorian girls are as alluring as the ethereal features: higher dresses, looser hair, soft cheeks, exquisite mouths and trembling hands—unencumbered bodies, open affections. Writers and artists obsessively itemized each
girl’s features, moving from body part to body part with ecstatic rabidity, as Kilvert did in his earlier diary entries: “the exquisite mouth and pearly white teeth, the pure straight delicate features, the long dark fringes and white eyelids . . . the soft clear cheek, and when the eyes are raised, that clear unfathomable blue depth of wide wonder and enquiry and unsullied and unsuspecting innocence” (168). They are “unsullied” and “unsuspecting”—innocent but erotically appealing to their admirers. Like the “naughty girls” of London music halls, the most celebrated figures within the Cult of the Little Girl were a combination of naiveté and innuendo, suspending the girls in a middle state between latent and manifest sexualities. These irreconcilable qualities are repeatedly mentioned in writers’ descriptions of real little girls, and they speak to a desire for tangibility and accessibility that contradicts a strictly nonsensual/uneartly admiration for an ideal.

As we will see in Ernest Dowson’s poems and stories, little girls were contrived as both “sacred lips” and “bought red mouths.” Fantasies of pristine, pedigreed girls in churches and blooming gardens blur into fantasies about dubious working girls in Soho restaurants and music halls. A completely innocent or completely fallen girl holds no interest in Dowson’s formula. The pre-sexual ideal is titillating only because it might be lost or corrupted at any moment. The Cult of the Little Girl revolved around this loss; the participants engaged in a nostalgic relationship with the dual girl figures by constantly looking forwards and backwards simultaneously. Writers and artists infused their desire for fading girls (girls whose class status, occupation, costume, or physical growth place them on the verge of sexual maturity) with a nostalgia that focused on a pre-sexual ideal that was fleeting.
The transience of the girls’ identities continually recalled both an elusive, ethereal ideal and its worldly antithesis; thus, the desire projected onto these figures was constructed as nostalgic—both created and sustained by impending loss.

These formulations of the little girl as paradoxical certainly do not resolve the conflict between the two constructions of the girl—earthbound and angel-bright—for that conflict proved to be unresolvable. In fact, the conflict is sustainable and titillating, both nostalgically and artistically, because the gap can never be closed. The images and stories, however, allow writers, artists, and their audiences to feel as if they are getting a peek at a world off-limits to them. They are not closing the gap, but traveling back and forth within it. The distances that are visualized in the images and stories suggest that the girls are safely sequestered away from the corruption and decay of the world but accessible to readers/viewers in need of their virtues or affections.

The nineteenth-century texts in this dissertation address the conflict between the two images of the little girl (fantasy and reality, innocent and corrupt, middle-class and working-class), as well as a real physical, growing girl’s inability to be a dream-child. They provide stories and images that focus on the gap between the ideal and the real girl—the opposition between embodiments and bodies, “fantasies of” and “fantasies about”—and the nostalgia produced in these gaps. In these texts, nostalgia is the ideal framework for a relationship with the girls (both fictional and real), because nostalgic desire is an attraction based on loss. Yet, as stated in the previous paragraph, it is not nostalgia for the writer’s or artist’s lost childhood (the argument in Catherine Robson’s book *Men in Wonderland: The Lost Girlhood of the Victorian*
Gentleman) but for the inability for the girl to embody an aestheticized one. The innocence, purity, and aesthetic perfection of the fantasy girls are lost in the physical sexualized reality of the earthly ones. Because images of real girls can never separate girlhood from latent womanhood, any desire for an ethereal fantasy of a perfectly pure little girl nourishes nostalgia. Since any physical, tangible access to a girl will only distance the unearthly ideal further, nostalgia provides a space that constantly protects and regenerates itself.

The works of John Ruskin, Charles Dodgson, O.G. Rejlander, Julia Margaret Cameron, and Ernest Dowson highlight the gap between the intangible, imagined girls and the real girls that typifies much of the cultish fascination with the paradoxical female child. Their texts and images are commentary on the nature, possibilities, and shortcomings of both theory and practice of such nostalgic desire. They define and showcase a fantasy girl, they set up scenarios for studying a worldly fallen girl, they illustrate the impossibility of the two merging, and they celebrate the tension created by the irreconcilable schism. They exist within a space that constantly negotiates two equally important ends of a spectrum. In the first end of the spectrum, the girl is fashioned as a corruptible and corrupting agent of sexual vice and taboo. In the second, the girl possesses a chastity and invulnerability that aligns her with domesticity and a sense of moral duty. Both extremes are necessary to keep the girl figure in a state of flux, and artists used both images to build narrative structures of desire—structures that both invent and distance their objects and thus inscribe again and again the gap between signifier and signified that is the place of generation for the nostalgic.
In the first chapter, John Ruskin’s lectures, letters and diaries illustrate the schism he created between real girls (vulnerable, morally weak, deceitful) and fantasy girls (intangible, pure, beatific) in his own relationships with Effie Gray, Rose LaTouche, the girls of Winnington School, and Kathleen Olander, as well as his consuming infatuations with female saints. When Ruskin writes that he “went crazy about St. Ursula and the other saints—chiefly young-lady saints,” he refers to his struggle not simply to adore the qualities found in these celestial girls, but to secure one of these female figures on his own (). He looked to artistic creations of the past for idealized images to project onto girls of the present—images that he found in Carpaccio’s St. Ursula, Correggio’s St. Catherine, and Dante’s Beatrice.

The second chapter examines the ways in which Charles Dodgson’s poems and stories (written under the nom de plume Lewis Carroll) celebrate little girls as amalgams of demoiselle and demimondaine. The Alice books, as well as poems like “Stolen Waters,” emphasize the tension between the fading girl and the imminent woman that must surely replace her. They provide allegories for the schism between the dual natures of little girl figures and the matrix of a relationship based on nostalgic desire (the play with temporal and spatial distance, backward/forward movement, and latent/manifest sexuality). They also provide commentary on the impossibilities of a real girl being completely integrated into an aesthetic, idealized, suspended fantasy. Yet, Carroll’s texts also suggest that eliminating either the real (earthly/carnal) or the ideal (eternally innocent) side of the duality would be injurious to the captivation and allure of the girls.
Popular photographs of by Henry Peach Robinson, O.G. Rejlander, Charles Dodgson and Julia Margaret Cameron extend this tension between two paradoxical extremes to portraits and visual fantasies of little girls. The third chapter proves that these images of female children do not exist within a vacuum of personal neuroses; they clearly operate within and through a cultural matrix of desire and representation that centered on the Victorian girl. Charles Dodgson’s and O.G. Rejlander’s photographs showcase budding sexuality that teases and titillates the viewers by eroticizing the forbidden bodies of the girls. However, Julia Margaret Cameron situates her little girls within an otherworldly, sequestered space, where the children are not pre-sexual but asexual. Cameron’s feminine girls and boys are infused with the supernatural authenticity of talismans or religious icons; girlhood as state-of-being is a tangible link to a pseudo-religious experience. Yet, despite these differences, all three photographers tapped into the nineteenth-century Cult of the Little Girl in England for paradigms of sexual, cultural, and spiritual paradox.

Finally, in Dowson’s poems and stories, the ideal girl is the one who can embody both sides of the duality and keep them in tension. The ethereal ideal and the “bought red mouth” in his poems are two contending sides of the same girl figure. Neither can complete the formula without the other. If they are isolated, the ideal becomes lifeless and cold and the reality becomes fallen and artistically flawed. In this context, it is useful to look at Dowson’s relationship with Adelaide Foltinowicz: she was a common waitress from Soho who was figuratively transfigured into the verses about ideal little girls in distant, sequestered locales.9 The streetwise and worldly girl of London and the spiritual, taintless girl of verse/fiction work together
(not only for Dowson, but for readers of his verse/fiction who were familiar with girls like Adelaide) to create an exhilarating, eternally-conflicted dual figure.

The fin-de-siècle little girl was free from the social and financial responsibilities associated with married women, but she also lacked the maternal, reproductive potential that legitimized any erotic qualities detected by her admirers. This unresolvable conflict allowed her to embody the absolutely purest ideals of a culture and its most degenerative and erotic fears/fantasies simultaneously.

Notes

1. Robert Francis Kilvert was born in Wiltshire in 1840. He went in due course to Wadham College, Oxford, at the same time as Charles Dodgson (a.k.a. Lewis Carroll), with whom he shared an obsessive interest in little girls. After university, Kilvert entered the clergy. He became a village vicar in Clyro, Wales and in the West Country of England on the Welsh border, where he recorded diaries that have been compared to those by Dorothy Wordsworth and Samuel Pepys.

Kilvert’s obsession with little girls comes across in his diaristic fixation on female children in his parish. His adoring descriptions of “their red sweet full lips,” the “vast spaces of white, skin as well as linen,” are particularly resonant. He even offered to administer the beatings to little girls in his parish, or at least witness them, to increase the young girl’s shame. And later he refers to a young girl’s bottom as “plump and smooth and in excellent whipping condition.”

2. See Laurel Bradley’s “From Eden to Empire: John Everett Millais’s Cherry Ripe” (Victorian Studies 34:2: 179-203) and Pamela Tarkin Reis’s “Victorian Centerfold: Another Look at Millais’s Cherry Ripe” (Victorian Studies 35:2: 201-205).

3. Frequent references to the Cult of the Little Girl have reduced the phenomenon to an abstract, immaterial allusion. In The Image of Childhood, Peter Coveney identifies a nondescript “cult of the child at the end of the century” (241). Carol Mavor introduces Pleasures Taken by writing, “I have always been interested in the “cult of the child” (as part of a larger framework that concerns my own gender bias toward the “cult of the little girl”) (2). In the Twayne critical review of Ernest Dowson’s work, Thomas Burnett Swann remarks that “little girls enjoyed a remarkable cult among students [at Oxford]” (36). Jad Adams also includes cursory discussion of the phenomenon in his biography of Dowson, Madder Music, Stronger Wine: “Another influence at Oxford was the cult of little girls who were considered the most delightful, almost magical creatures” (14). Yet, he does not spend more than a page explaining what this cult was or how it connected Dowson. Even Morten
Cohen, in his acclaimed biography of Lewis Carroll, attributes Carroll’s obsession with girls to “domestic, social, and cultural forces,” but he does not ever discuss the “cultural infatuation with female children” (105).

4. Traditional Blakean constructions of idealized, privileged childhood, as found in Songs of Innocence, feature pure, divine little boys—chimney-sweepers, vagabonds, schoolboys, lost and wild male children. Otherworldly children were also figured as male in Thomas Hughes’s Tom Brown stories and most of Dickens’s novels (with the obvious exception of Little Nell).

5. The age of consent, which was raised from 10 to 12 in 1861, to 13 in 1875, and to 16 in 1885

6. In Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982) Judith Walkowitz notes that “the cultural image of the female victim in the 1880s was several years younger than her popular stereotype in earlier decades... W.T. Stead’s exposé of child prostitution in London epitomized this new preoccupation with childhood sexuality” (246). She briefly discusses Stead’s attention to Josephine Butler’s use of the word “Daughter” as a way of “subverting and superceding patriarchal authority” and establishing “an authority relationship between older middle-class women and young workingwomen that, although caring and protective, was also hierarchical and custodial” (117). Within her discussion of these crusades, she also alludes to the constructedness of the victims’ sexual and social identities: “Their [defenders of the age of consent legislation] formal denial of girlhood sexuality reflected a ‘transitional’ view of childhood and adolescence as stages in life marked by dependency but not by any specific psychosexual development. Accordingly, reformers only rarely made reference to the actual sexual development of the girls they were seeking to protect. Nonetheless, anxiety over the sexual precocity of working-class girls existed just beneath the surface” (249).

7. As F. Anstey explains in his 1890 Harper’s New Monthly Magazine article:

London music halls might be roughly grouped into four classes—first, the aristocratic variety theatre of the West End, chiefly found in the immediate neighborhood of Leicester Square; then the smaller and less aristocratic West End halls; next, the large bourgeois music halls of the less fashionable parts and in the suburbs; last, the minor music halls of the poor and squalid districts (51).

The more famous “naughty girl” actresses played the first two classes of music hall and gathered devoted followings of middle-class men. The famous promenades outside these halls, where prostitutes solicited services from pedestrians and theatergoers, formed a paradoxical background for the “innocent children” portrayed on stage.
8. Jerome K. Jerome, London playwright and journalist, contributed a series of articles called “Stageland” to *The Playgoer* in the late 1880’s. These tongue-in-cheek essays satirize the “naïve assumption that all stage life is true” (Faurot 40). Jerome describes the “Stage child” as particularly obnoxious: “It is quite nice and it talks pretty. We have come across real infants, now and then, in the course of visits to married friends...And they have talked to us—but not pretty, not at all—rather rude we should call it. But the Stage child is very different. It is clean and tidy. You can touch it anywhere and nothing comes off” (97).

9. Here I am referring to Dowson’s “In Preface: For Adelaide” at the beginning of his verses: “To you, who are my verses...Votre personne, vos moindres mouvements me semblaient avoir dans le monde une importance extrahumaine.”
CHAPTER 2:
“MY OWN CHIEF PET”: JOHN RUSKIN’S
Pursuit of Saints and Lilies

“As for Roses and Lilies they are the plague of my life. I dare’nt [sic] come to Winnington now because I know I should get so fond of Lily that I should fret because I couldn’t see as much of her as I like and I have her here and make a real daughter of her and for my own chief pet, her being in London is about as good for me as a sharp attack of fever, or a gunshot wound in the shoulder.”

—Letter from John Ruskin to Julia Mary Cooke, 9 April 1866
(On child-pets Rose LaTouche and Lily Armstrong)

“The Doctors say it was over work and worry, which is partly true, and partly not. Mere overwork and worry, might have soon ended me, but it would not have driven me crazy. I went crazy about St. Ursula and the other saints—chiefly young-lady saints”

—Letter from John Ruskin to Charles Eliot Norton, 23 July 1878

For John Ruskin, St. Ursula was all girls and all girls were originally saintly.1 Girls were comforters and saviors as long as they were protected from the corrupt[ing] effects of social and domestic life. These corruptions led to what Ruskin termed “worldliness”—acumen, refinement, or carnality. Therefore, he searched for an ideal that was pre-sexual, unsophisticated, and ardently religious. When Ruskin writes that he “went crazy about St. Ursula and the other saints—chiefly young-lady saints,” he evokes the struggle he endured, not to adore the qualities found in these celestial girls, but to secure one of his own (76). As Linda Austin observes in her discussion of Ruskin’s “ideal woman,” girl figures were originally invoked as one-
dimensional models for his ideals of beauty and morality, but they soon gained a special status of their own: “[y]oung women began, perhaps, as vehicles for his ideas, but as they absorbed the reverences he had for art and religion, they became sanctified objects themselves” (29). Austin is absolutely correct in identifying girls as a distillation of Ruskin’s social, moral, and artistic ideals, like other critics who have addressed Ruskin’s treatment of women and children, she does not connect these figures (or his relationship with them) to any force of culture that would contextualize such a seemingly maladjusted and neurotic attraction. Instead, she echoes Dodgson scholars by invoking Ruskin’s “stillborn relationships with women” as a possible explanation for his enthusiasm for young girls.

The physical and ethereal qualities that Ruskin admired in his own girl saints would always be the vision of paradoxical girlhood that he dwelt upon, and they would always be necessarily superior to any sexual relationship that could be formed and consummated in this world of physical constraints. In order to reconcile his intuition of the supremacy of man’s immortal spiritual essence with the facts of material existence and carnal passion, Ruskin conceived of love not primarily in terms of momentary gratifications, but, as did the courtly poets and romanceurs, in ideal terms. For Ruskin, the timeless intellectual and spiritual experience suggested in
an adoration of little girls subsumes and is superior to transient physical and emotional experience of physical love:

In all Christian ages which have been remarkable for their purity of progress, there has been absolute yielding of obedient devotion, by the lover to his mistress. I say *obedient*,—not merely enthusiastic and worshipping in imagination, but entirely subject, receiving from the beloved woman, however young, not only the encouragement, the praise, and the reward of all toil, but so far as any choice is open, or any question difficult of decision, the *direction* of all toil (*Works* XVIII 141).

Ruskin manifested his desire to yield absolutely in “obedient devotion” to a feminine ideal—a common theme in Victorian re-inventions of chivalry—in a private mythology of little girls. He sought this “beloved woman, however young” in real girls. He constructed an ideal that balanced intangible aesthetic perfection with earthly tangibility. As he stresses in the *Modern Painters* chapter “The Naturalist Ideal,” the Madonna in Tintoretto’s *Adoration of the Magi* is “an ideal thing” because she is both a heavenly queen and an unaltered portrait of a Venetian girl. He explains that the artist’s power “to describe rightly what we call an ideal thing depends on its being thus, to him, not an ideal, but a *real* thing” (112).

Ruskin firmly believed “the art of any country is the exponent of its social and political virtues” (*Stones* 20.3). Great art, the product of a healthy, vital era, furnishes later times with an ideal to emulate. He therefore searched for artistic creations of the past for ideals that he could apply to the present—ideals that he found in Correggio’s St. Catherine, Carpaccio’s St. Ursula, and Dante’s Beatrice. Ruskin used the physical qualities of these girls to visualize his moral and intellectual ideals. These ideals, coupled with a desire to project them onto a real girl, inevitably led Ruskin to the Cult of the Little Girl and its celebration of paradoxical girl figures, which was
thriving not only within the cloisters and meadows of his own school at Oxford, but throughout England as well.

In 1843, Ruskin graduated MA from Oxford’s Christ Church College, the epicenter for the Victorian cult of the little girl in the 1860’s. During his course of study he started to develop ideas about the moral function of art and beauty, which were to find expression in *Modern Painters* (1843-60), *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849), *The Stones of Venice* (1851-3). Ruskin’s time at Oxford and exposure to the cult of the little girl there significantly shaped his professional convictions. He learned to cultivate his scholarly and personal lives, so that they fed each other. Ruskin’s diaries and correspondence were integral components of his corpus of work. In them, he gradually comes to the conclusion that the highest standard of beauty was represented by the aesthetic and moral value of pre-pubescent girls between childhood and womanhood—girls with distinctly feminine features, but without any overt sexuality. In an 1858 letter to his father, Ruskin contrasts adult French women—described as “unamiable” Dolls, “nutmeg-graters,” and “thumbscrews”—with an unspoiled pre-pubescent female ideal on a Turin beach:

One of the finest things I saw in Turin was a group of neglected children at play on a heap of sand—one girl of about ten, with her black hair over her eyes and half-naked, bare-limbed to above the knees, and beautifully limbed, lying on the sand like a snake...her little breasts, scarce dimpled yet,—white,—marble-like—but, as wasted marble, thin with the scorching and rains of Time (*Letters* 291).

In this description of the “half-naked, bare-limbed” girl, Ruskin constructs the child as both art form (intangible, pristine, fantastical) and human form (natural, sensual,
corruptible). Ruskin later reinforced this formulation of girlhood in *Ethics of Dust*:

> The wet eyes, round-open, and the little scarlet upper lips, lifed, and drawn slightly together, in passionate glow of utter wonder, became picture-like,—porcelain-like,—in motionless joy, as the sweet multitude of low notes fell in their timely infinities, like summer rain (79).

This illustration of the interplay between private and professional writing showcases ideal young mistresses as both immobile images of innocence and desirable bodies who hold flesh and art in tension.

When Ruskin found a little girl to his liking, he did not just praise her iconographic power; he inculcated and enforced it through his personal and professional treatment of her. Because Ruskin’s ideal was beatific and sanctifying (read female and pre-sexual) beauty, and any carnal knowledge or consummation would unavoidably lead to its corruption, his romances depended on an insurmountable distance. He ensured this distance by reviving the traditions of *amour courtois* that animated the texts and paintings that he spent his life studying—a tradition of Ruskin’s longed-for “obedient devotion by the lover to a mistress” that relied on the exclusive and total commitment of a lover to his idealized beloved, in spite of (if not because of) insuperable obstacles, ennobles a man and renders him worthy of reputation. For Ruskin, courtly love had a supra-literary reality: he reclaimed it as an ideology, an ethical system, a style of life, and a game played within an aristocratic Christian environment. Through his diaries and letters, many of which he included or referred to in his critical work, he authored his autobiographical tale in which unrequited carnal passions are spiritually ennobling
and devotion to a lady is eventually equivalent to devotion to God.

From the first volume of *Modern Painters* to *The Stones of Venice*, Ruskin's early writings begin to formulate his private mythology of paradoxical girl figures—both heavenly and earthbound, sexually alluring and angelically chaste. By placing himself within the cult of the little girl, Ruskin was able to practice the essential assumptions of courtly love: the social rank and nobility of the lovers, the insuperable distance between him and the lady, and the exalting nature of the devotion. He was not only absorbed by the figures of powerful and/or unattainable demoiselles at a very early age; he also seems always to have been fascinated by the idea of ill-starred love.

For Ruskin, the strength of the early lyric treatment of love is that it allows for the human need to attribute a higher purpose to sensual impulses, to attempt to refine them through constant and self-consciously imposed or accepted suffering. The physical need for sexual satisfaction could be inherently destructive to the pre-sexual ideal, but, if properly directed, it could be used to serve and sustain that ideal. Within both the *amour courtois* tradition and the nineteenth-century cult of the little girl, these two impulses are artistically and culturally represented by the concept of “two Venuses,” one who inspires passion and lust, and an other who refines and ennobles his being. Music halls, pornography, and prostitution, to name the most obvious and overt examples, provided sexual stimulation, while each poet-lover fashioned his own ethereal Venus. Within the Cult of the Little Girl, admirers are caught in a continuing struggle between the two, and the problem is never resolved. While the *amour courtois* poets eventually developed narratives that brought the stories to a conclusion, the cult of the little girl community held the opposing tendencies
suspended in a tenuous balance. Within this context, the essence of love was the worship of an ideal, incarnated in or transposed to a little girl.

When Adèle Clotilde Domecq visited the Ruskin home in 1836, John Ruskin had just returned from his first visit to Europe. She was “a creature haloed with a mysterious and an extravagant beauty. In her he saw the consummation of all poetic rhapsody...She had luxuriant hair, naturally red lips, and was now in the last budding of unconscious maidenhood” (Leon 35). Ruskin was looking for any girl who could breathe life into a finely tuned but purely theoretical, courtly-love ideal. This girl, who was all eyes, lips, and hair in Ruskin’s descriptions of her, was transformed into a heroine who could generate poetry through her absence. He remembers the Domecq girls in Praeterita as “the first well-bred and well-dressed girls I have ever seen—or at least spoken to...a most curious galaxy or southern cross of unconceived stars, floating on a sudden into my obscure firmament of London suburb” (Ruskin 400). Adèle combined a convent-bred air of purity with an alluring physical form. Ruskin molded her into an ethereal specter that once again balanced flesh and art. In fact, though Adèle’s sisters called her “Clotilde,” Ruskin liked “Adèle” simply because it rhymed with more words. He was constructing a girl to fit his preconceived artistic ideals. His passion for the girl was both romantic and imaginative. Once he molded Adèle into a poetic subject, Ruskin reveled in his unrequited love. He constructs himself as one “leftest alone/By the green and cold surge of the sea,” and he addresses Adèle as a spurned but ever-devoted admirer: “Though thou has no feeling for me/Who is torn by too many for thee” (Ruskin Works III 243). The courtship, loss, and lamentation for this girl were more valuable
to Ruskin than any relationship with her. He cast Adèle in a role that he had already written. Before she even came onto the scene, his only love poem had been appropriately titled "Want of a Subject." Ruskin played the part of a romantic, rejected hero, but the affair, except for purposes of poetry, did not seem to absorb too much of his attention during his years at Oxford. Then, in March 1840, Adèle was married and though some writers have made much of the impact this had on Ruskin, his own comments ring more true: "...it does not seem as if I had really been so much crushed by that event as I expected to be. There are expressions, however, in the foolish diaries I began to write soon after, of general disdain of life, and all that it could in future bestow on me..." (Letters, 100). Adèle’s intangibility fed Ruskin’s longing for her and enabled him to desire her as a real girl and an artistic construction. Still, he later records the anniversaries of the Adèle saga and continued to pursue the female pattern inaugurated by this episode.

In 1841, four years after Adèle visited Ruskin’s London home, Ruskin met Euphemia Gray (Effie), aged 13. Ruskin was 23. Once again, he played with the amour courtois traditions, courting Effie from a distance. As Joan Abse explains, “writing was his true method of courtship...the pen was his effective instrument of love, and with it he could re-create the object of his affections” (88). He rhetorically created both the girl and the courtship. Yet, he could not completely succeed within a tradition that worshipped earthly ideals without investing any religious significance or reward in such worship -- a concern that increased after Ruskin’s trip to Italy in 1845.

In Italy, he wrote extensively and passionately about the beauty of the Madonnas and female saints. He expressed intense feeling about how they were
portrayed, as he fine-tuned his own ideals of female beauty. Occasionally, his descriptions toy with the fine line between the subjects’ virtue and corruption. In Correggio’s portrait of St. Catherine, Ruskin saw “a lascivious study of white shoulders and golden hair. There would be a pretty stream of golden light through the picture if it were not broken in upon by its violent patches of crude red” (Letters 327). The inflamed and intrusive red color casts an erotic pall over the saint’s otherwise white and gold (read chaste) figure. Since Ruskin believed that the beautiful is a symbol of God, its perception became an essentially religious act that enlightened him about the nature of God. Ruskin later explains this idea in The Queen of the Air (1869): “As all lovely art is rooted in virtue, so it bears fruit of virtue, and is didactic in its own nature... it is didactic chiefly by being beautiful” (394). He returned to England with a new dream: to endow the figure of the English girl, which already embodied his physical and cultural ideals, with religious significance. He felt that “if a British painter cannot make a Madonna of a British girl of the nineteenth century, he cannot paint one at all” (Modern Painters 221). As a painted Madonna, the little girl could embody the ideals of flesh and art. She would be physically beautiful but “rooted in virtue” and didacticism.

Ruskin and Effie were married on 10 April 1848. He remembers that, “On speaking to her on the subject the second night we agreed that it would be better to defer consummation for a little time. For my own part, I married in order to have a companion -- not for passion’s sake” (Whitehouse 14). While Ruskin sustained passionate obsessions with iconographic girls, he was horrified by the domesticated, carnal reality of his wife: “You are like the wrecker on a rocky coast--,” he wrote to
Effie in December 1847, “luring vessels to their fate...a false light lighted on the misty coast of a merciless gulph...You are like a fair mirage in the desert...You are like the bright--soft--swelling-- lovely fields of a high glacier...where men fall, and rise not again” (James 68). Effie’s worldliness promised no heavenly reward; in fact, it characterizes her as a temptress or harpy. She repelled her husband, sending him back to artistic and religious ideals, sequestered behind garden walls, beneath ramparts, and beyond death. According to Effie’s own account of their honeymoon, Ruskin failed to consummate the marriage because sexual intimacy would destroy the ideal female role in which he had cast her:

He alleged various reasons, hatred to children, religious motives, a desire to preserve my beauty, and finally this last year told me his true reason (and this to me is as villainous as all the rest) that he had imagined women were quite different from what he saw I was, and that the reason he did not make me his Wife was because he was disgusted with my person the first evening of 10th April (James 220).

His “desire to preserve [her] beauty”—the model of beauty that he “imagined” and designed her to be—reflects his construction of female beauty as equally erotic and innocent, maternal and immature. Consummating the marriage would dissolve the titillating tension between the two identities—the girl would be overtly sexual and possibly even pregnant. As Quentin Bell points out, “There is here a kind of playing at physical passion, a game of desire and consummation which could be undertaken at a distance but not at close quarters” (101).

Like the Reverend Francis Kilvert (1840-1879), Ruskin found ways to juggle his desire for girls and his desire for Godliness. In his diaries, Kilvert often conflated the earthly and spiritual sensations that he felt when looking at little girls: “It was irresistible. Christ seemed to be looking at me through the beautiful wistful imploring
eyes” (31). Although he claims to experience an epiphany when looking at the child’s eyes—using her eyes as a medium for communion with Christ—he describes them as “irresistible,” which implies temptation or the impulse to “resist” them. Her eyes are “beautiful,” “wistful,” and “imploring”—fetishized objects of desire and longing. They possess the intensity and power of a religious epiphany, but they inspire need instead of fulfillment. For Kilvert, the adoration for girls in his parish often amounted to outright worship, and he consecrated bits of ground or clothing because a child-pet had touched them. He finds a spiritual context for his erotic musings by using his rapture over the girls’ bodies as a medium for religious rapture. Ruskin takes this worship a step further by investing quasi-religious power and physical, spiritual, and aesthetic ideals in the girls’ fetishized features.

In 1845, Ruskin found a model for his *amour courtois* tradition when he read Dante Aligheri’s *Divina Commedia*. Charles Eliot Norton argues that, from this time, for many years, perhaps no book, with the exception of the Bible, was Ruskin’s more constant companion than the *Divine Comedy*, either in the original or in Cary’s translation.⁴ Dante provided a way to combine the earthly worship of *amour courtois* with the Christian worship that Ruskin grew up valuing above all else. In *Sesame and Lilies*, Ruskin describes Dante’s text as follows:

> it is indeed a vision, but a vision only, and that one of the wildest that ever entranced a soul -- a dream in which every grotesque type or phantasy of heathen tradition is renewed, and adorned; and the destinies of the Christian Church, under their most sacred symbols, become literally subordinate to the praise, and are only to be understood by the aid, of one dear Florentine maiden . . . (*Works* XVIII 158).

The “one dear Florentine maiden” is the guide and key to Dante’s epiphanic dream.⁵ Although he was a man “of intellectual war,” who knew the “darkness of
controversy,” Dante had an otherworldly maiden who brought him face to face with God. Ruskin waxes enthusiastic about Dante’s “love-poem to his dead lady” as “a song of praise for her watch over his soul. Stooping only to pity, never to love, [Beatrice] yet saves him from destruction—saves him from hell” (Works XVIII 116).

Because Dante focuses on Beatrice as holy and blessed by God, which he can do fully only when she is dead, Dante can integrate his love with the religious sphere, ensuring her ennobling qualities and her unattainable distance from him. Beatrice becomes the director of her lover’s will, of his love and affections, guiding toward the Good beyond which there is nothing to aspire to. In the vision that Ruskin praises, Dante is privileged to look up to where Beatrice has taken her seat in the Eternal Rose, the light of glory streaming down around her. He comes face to face with grace and the glories of Heaven through the tradition of *amour courtois*.

By 1858, Ruskin found ennobling qualities and unattainable distance in his own ‘Eternal Rose.’ Rose La Touche, who was between nine and ten when he first saw her and who gradually became more and more an obsession in his life. She was a devout member of the Anglican Church of Ireland and the model of middle-class girlhood:

the strong, stainless,—grave heart--the noble conscience--the high courage--the true sympathy with me in all I hope or try to do of good;--the quick rebuke of me in all hopelessness--or ceasing to do--or to strive--her utter freedom from all affectation--her adamant purity of maidenheartedness--and all this with a child’s playfulness--and a noble woman’s trust in my constancy and singleness of love for her (Letters to Mount-Temple 68).

In her correspondences with Ruskin, Rose took on the role of spiritual guide. She inspired longing and praise from him, and her fragile health positioned her somewhere between the temporal and the eternal. And she was more than simply a
Beatrice in petticoats. She captured the religious fervor that was so absent in Ruskin’s previous amours. Her beauty and pietistic faith recalled the images of another blessed girl that he had studied in 1845: St. Ursula. When Ursula’s father would not allow her to marry a heathen prince, she took counsel with the Lord and finally persuaded the King to permit the union. But she imposed upon her suitor a period of three years grace before they wed, so that she could make a pilgrimage to Rome, an odyssey that ended in a martyr’s death for her at the hands of infidels. This story provided an ideal connection between religious zeal and *amour courtois*.

In Ruskin’s memory of his first glimpse of the La Touche sisters, he had idealized them both from the beginning. Emily, then fourteen, struck him as a “delicately chiseled nymph” (*Works X* 187). The entrance of the younger child remained as a picture.

So presently the drawing-room door opened, and Rosie came in, quietly taking stock of me with her blue eyes as she walked across the room; gave me her hand...and then stood a little back. Nine years old, on 3rd January, 1858, thus now rising towards ten; neither short nor tall for her age; a little stiff in her way of standing. The eyes rather deep blue at that time, and fuller and softer than afterwards. Lips perfectly lovely in profile...the hair...more graceful in short curl round the forehead, and softer than one sees often, in the close-bound tresses above the neck (*Praeterita* 416).

Like Adèle and Effie, who were only twelve when Ruskin first met them, Rose Lucy La Touche entered his life at an ambiguous age between childhood and budding womanhood. Within her relationship with Ruskin, Rose LaTouche was rhetorically constructed as a paradox—both child and woman. In 1872, Rose addressed George MacDonald’s wife as “Dearest Mother-bird” and signed herself as “Your still unfledged but loving nestling” (MacDonald 121). Yet, in 1870, she had already tried to divest herself of the child-image by writing to Ruskin that she could not resume her
former position in relation to him: “For however sweet I might be, I am not the little thing I was” (Leon 480-481). As she came of age, Ruskin recognized that legally she could now be dealt with as an adult, yet he continued to refer to her as a child in his private correspondence. In 1874, she was still “an amusing child” or “That child whom you cannot forgive” (Beer 279). At the same time, he described himself as her lover—“Poor Rose is entirely broken—like her lover” (Leon 500)—and her as his mistress. In a 1869 letter to Richard Horn, he writes, “my mistress passed me and would not speak” and in an 1883 letter to Ernest Chesneau, he refers to his “mistress, the girl for whom I wrote Sesame and Lilies” (Leon 478 and Works XXVII 445). The term “mistress,” however voided of sexual connotations, still balanced the child image against that of a woman mature enough to be capable of acting responsibly towards him.

Rose was fair, light haired, blue-eyed, oval-faced--like the other two girls. He saw Rose rarely, since she spent most of her time in Ireland and London. Once again, Ruskin metamorphosed and courted his object of affection through writing. Ruskin constructed sequestered, playful spaces around his child-pets. Soon, Rose became Rosie-posie, her sister Emily was Wisie, Mrs. LaTouche was Lacerta, and Ruskin himself was St. C. or occasionally Archegosaurus. In his 1877 letters to the author of a pamphlet titled The Science of Life, Ruskin affirmed that “there is no conqueror of Lust but Love” and spoke contemptuously of “this beautifully scientific day of the British nation, in which you have no God to love any more, but only an omnipotent coagulation and copulation…the great relation of the sexes is Love, not Lust…to be distinctly restrained to the office of fruitfulness, the brutal passion of Lust: but giving
them the spiritual power of Love” (*Works* XXXIV:527-530). However firmly he
excluded the factor of “lust,” his love for Rose was for her visible, physical form.

Shortly before her death Ruskin wrote:

> The worst of me is that the Desire of my Eyes is so much to me! Ever so
much more than the desire of my mind... So that the dim chance of those fine
things in the next world does me no good, and though I’ve known some really
nice girls, in my time, in this world, who wouldn’t have been so hard on me as
some people, none of them had a thin waist and a straight nose quite to my
fancy (*Letters to Mount-Temple* 358).

The playfulness discovered or implanted in the girl was a prescription for
responsiveness, for fully sympathetic demeanor. The playful child, alert to Ruskin’s
every distress and caprice, invited Ruskin in to her guarded, sequestered, sanctified
space and revived him. On May 20, 1859, Ruskin recorded the following dream:

> Before dinner, just under the ramparts, a little girl of about five years old was
sitting outside her cottage door, munching a slice of very nice white bread and
butter. She had put a little deal stool in front of her, covered with buttercups
and red daisies, and was reading a little book with great earnestness. I asked
her what she was reading. She held up the book. It was a catechism, with a
generally moral tendency apparently, but the part she was at related to the
treatment of thieves, by putting them in prison. She seemed highly interested,
but I could not get her to tell me why. She made a perfect Frère, with her
flowers and book. I asked her where she got the flowers. “From the
ramparts.” “What are you doing with them?” “Je m’amuse” (*Letters* 346).

The little French girl allows no connection between herself and Ruskin. She is
reading a catechism, placing her in the role of a student, but she is referencing
passages about crime and punishment, placing her in the role of moral guide. Ruskin
is the intruder in this dream. He is not privy to what the girl is reading, and the
flowers that seem so inviting are actually from the ramparts, structures used to fortify
or guard an area from outsiders. When he asks about the reason for the flowers, the
girl simply replies that she is amusing herself. Ruskin is the thief in this dream,
stealing a moment with the little girl—an exotic creature, barricaded from the outside, who has access to religious insight and beauty that Ruskin desires.

Also, this dream begins with a tableau that is very typical to stories coming out of the cult of the little girl. At the same time that Ruskin had this vision, Charles Dodgson was writing a different story about a girl, a book, a picnic, and a dream full of questions. Oxford in the 1850’s and 1860’s was brimming with daughters who provided such scenes on a daily basis. Ruskin tutored local little girls in art and drawing, took them on picnics and rowing parties, and acted as their indefatigable benefactor and mentor. He supposedly socialized with Alice Donkin, the girl-pet of Charles Dodgson’s brother Wilfred. And one of Ruskin’s pupils, Alice Liddell, was the daughter of Ruskin’s undergraduate art master, Dean Henry Liddell. Ruskin usually taught her in the privacy of the Deanery. Disraeli quizzed Ruskin about his surreptitious tea parties with the girl, and Ruskin writes about one evening in particular, when his intimaey with the girl was thwarted (Leon 431). After Mr. and Mrs. Liddell had left for a dinner at Blenheim and “the eastern coast of Tom Quad was clear,” Ruskin settled by the fire for tea with Alice. But, alas, blocked roads forced the girls’ parents to turn back, and “there was a sudden sense of some stars having been blown out by the wind” (Praeterita 470). Alice’s tutor was “disconsolate” (470). Alice Liddell was, of course, the favorite child-friend of Ruskin’s colleague Charles Dodgson, and there was no love lost between this girl’s two admirers. Ruskin occasionally dined with Dodgson in order to criticize his artistic talent, and Ruskin estimated Dodgson’s sketching as too trifling to be worth pursuing. Dodgson found in Ruskin a “feebleness of expression, with no
commanding air, or any external sign of deep thought, as one would have expected,”
casting Alice’s “drawling master” as “an old conger-eel” in the Wonderland fantasy
(Dodgson Diaries 235 and Wonderland 32). There was a sense of ownership and
rivalry around little girls that drove men like Ruskin and Dodgson to compete with
fellow artists, tutors, and the girl’s parents, for her affections. Even some of Ruskin’s
disputes with Dean Liddell over academic matters smack of rivalry and resentment.
In one letter, Ruskin angrily protected his influence over Alice Liddell by writing to
her father, “Sending your daughter to draw skeletons in the room, when I had
denounced anatomical study--was the very head and font of the opposing power
which rendered my best efforts useless” (321). As Alice matured, she was spotted
exchanging affectionate glances with Prince Leopold during royal visits, and the
possibility of a royal match compelled the Liddells to enforce some distance between
their daughter and her Oxford admirers. When Ruskin remembered his colleague, he
remembered him with bitterness. In his final years, Ruskin wrote frenzied,
nonsensical, and insulting letters to Dean Liddell, calling his old master “dead Prince
Leopold’s--false witness--a liar” (342). The cult of the little girl was not an artistic
movement or brotherhood; it was a force of culture available to men who competed
with each other, in various ways and by various degrees, for personal, tangible
relationships with little girls.

We must acknowledge his incessant pursuit of girls like middle-class girls at
Oxford to understand the reason and intense emotion behind his passionate
involvement during these years with the pupils at a school for young ladies of “Gentle
Birth” called Winnington Hall, located in Cheshire. Ruskin remembers there being
Figure 2-1:
Margaret Bell and a Winnington Hall pupil
an average of thirty to forty girls aged nine and upwards, and these girls performed a
dynamic and highly influential function in his developing mythology of girl-love.
They were both mirror, reflecting a spiritual and aesthetic archetype, and a window,
providing a way through which he could enter into a dialogue with his ethereal girl
muse. And, as always, the girls were a visual delight. The girls wore white, high-
necked frocks, and the buildings reminded Ruskin of a Venetian painting (figure 2-1).
His maidenly Madonnas and sylvan landscapes walked out of their lifeless frames and
embraced him.

Ruskin began visiting the Winnington School and writing candid letters to its
principal, Miss Margaret Bell, in 1859. The letters fought off “some of the dull
weather in [his] mind” (Winnington 178). He was there frequently for weeks at a
time in the next few years, and his conversations with the girls are captured in The
Ethics of Dust. Miss Bell kept a room for him and allowed him continual contact
with the girls. He provided them with drawing lessons and instruction on various
subjects, he sketched their portraits, and he procured books and artwork for their
library; they exchanged letters with him and let him join in their games, walks, and
dances—including Friday night quadrilles that Ruskin joined, looking “scarcely more
than a black line, as he moved about amongst the white girls in his evening dress”
(Burne-Jones 264). In calmer moments he sat on the lawn or by the fire and the girls
clustered around him in a close circle as he talked to them or acted poems with them:
“We had Columbus & Cromwell--and nearly all the prettiest minor poems: on
successive evenings--the last evening I got a nice blue-eyed girl to be Minerva &
recited the ‘When wise Minerva yet was young.’ You should have heard the
silver laughing” (Winnington 204). He strolled through the gardens as they sang for him through the window, and he later established a May Day Festival for them, at which Ruskin awarded a gold cross to the appointed May Queen.

Throughout his involvement with Winnington and its students, Ruskin was always gazing at the girls’ physical features. As with his other child-pets, appearance was tremendously important: “I want to know what Miss [blank] is like. Please tell me the colour of her eyes, and the shape of her forehead; and how she wears her hair; and give her my kind regards, & thanks for her beautiful drawings” (252). In the park and gardens he watched them running and dancing; in the music rooms, he watched them listen. Ruskin describes the girls with a sensual freedom that could only come to him through a conception of them as inaccessible. He provides elaborate descriptions of the students that carefully frame them in a seductive, yet prototypical, pose: “beautiful to see the...faces...their eyes all wet with feeling, and the little coral mouths fixed into little half-open gapes with utter intensity of astonishment” (297). In these observations, the use of the word “little” distinguishes the objects of his gaze and affection as distinctly girlish, supposedly marking his admiration as aesthetic and moral, as supposed to lascivious and overtly erotic. Twenty years earlier, in his poem to Adèle, Ruskin had described his girl paramour in stunningly similar terms: “the eyes wet, round open, and the little scarlet upper lips, lifted, and drawn slightly together, in passionate glow of utter wonder” (Works III 243). But he was not only looking at them, but also through them to his ideal little girl figure. “You need not think,” he wrote to his father from Winnington, “I’m in love with any of the girls here...Rosie’s my only pet” (287). This was both true and untrue. He was in love
with none of them in particular, but he was in love with the idea of all of them, for they were all images of his ideal.

In the 1880’s Ruskin socialized with the girls at High School for Girls in Cork and Whitelands Training College for Girls as well. Although he did not correspond as regularly with these later girls, he did establish May Day Festivals for them, naming some of the queens “Rose Queens” in honor of Rose La Touche. He also sent the schools copies of his books, collections of minerals, medieval manuscripts, antiquarian books, and many of his own drawings.

Ruskin did hold one Winnington student, Lily Armstrong, in special favor next to Rose. He and Armstrong had kept up an affectionate correspondence, and he often referred to her as his favorite pet at Winnington. In one cryptic letter to Charles Eliot Norton, Ruskin writes, “Oh dear, I wish I were Robinson Crusoe instead of a Professor of fine art and that Lily had been brought ashore by the cannibals to be eaten instead of Friday” (Diaries 401). After she left the school, Ruskin addressed Lily as his “Beautiful Bear” and signed his letters as “Birdie.” She even stayed occasionally at Denmark Hill. Yet, the same concerns and disappointments—physical maturity and the degeneration of an ideal that was constructed as a little girl—plagued Ruskin. He writes to her later:

…it is so tiresome of you children never to stay the same for a month together—(Miss Bell says you’re so tall!—I expect to see not a lotus but an Obelisk) and one never sees the same Lily any more again. By the way, please don’t spell Lily with two Ls—It is so much prettier my way (661)

He continued long after “to think of Bears when one can’t go to the Zoological Gardens, to see them” (667). And he wrote three letters on record in which he asserted that he could no longer write to her since she was married. Yet, he always
ended with a note of nostalgia and renewed interest, constructing her as a child again by using words like “little” and “wee.” In his last recorded letter to Lily, now Mrs. W.T.S. Kevill-Davies, he addresses her as “My darling wee, I mean,—big--Lily” and laments:

I’ve been trying to find some new pets in Italy, but nothing makes up for my dear old Bear. How could it! What a lovely old Bear it was—(and is). Such a mystery of prettiness, one never knew the look that was to come next, and such a *good* little Bear, and such a bright little Bear, and such a beloved little Bear—only I don’t think it ever knew how fond one was of it...Do I ever think of old time--My wee Lily, I scarcely even think—to call thinking--of any others (695).

Here again, the artist and writer was searching for physical manifestations of a dream *girl*, not woman, that he had fashioned in his mind. Even with Rose, the *girl-woman* he imagines as his wife, Ruskin does not want her to grow into a woman:

Rosie couldn’t come to see me, so I had to go & see her--they kept all the afternoon quiet for me: She’s grown an inch--and she’s got a frock in Paris, and a hat with a little witch of a saucy feather, & she’s awful...I shan’t see her again for ever so long--not till winter I fancy--and then she’ll be somebody else--Children are as bad as clouds at sunrise--golden change--but change always--I was horribly sad this morning (225).

The sophistication of the frock and “saucy feather” corrupt an ideal that relies on a childish appearance. Ruskin echoes Charles Dodgson’s anxiety over the girl-pet’s failure to remain ideal.⁸ “I shall not see her,” Ruskin writes to Mrs. Burne-Jones, “till November. Nay, I shall never see *her* again. It’s another Rosie every six months now.” He repeats this concern as he writes of the changes in the girls at Winnington: “How one feels the current of human life in such a place--the child of last year is the woman of this; and the faces seem to change almost from day to day--it is like a dream” (232). Womanhood and, often, marriage was an inevitable and difficult issue in the relationship between these Victorian girls and the men who worshipped them.
Many of the girls he ‘courted’ thought they were the only objects of desire. According to Mrs. Bewick, who donated this letter to the Winnington archives, Sarah Elizabeth White (Lizzy) never married because she “gave her heart” to Ruskin (461).

Ruskin was aware of the thin line he was walking in his relationship with these girls. In 1863, Ruskin lamented that he had “no business to favorites [referring to his child-pets]: I was also scolding myself for flirting with Evelyn, and for always trying to get Lily beside me instead of better girls--(like Lizzy)--and what business have I to be so fond of Jessie just because she has soft eyes?” (234). Then, in 1866 (the year he proposed to Rose), Ruskin wrote to Julia Mary Cooke:

As for Roses and Lilies they are the plague of my life. I dare’nt [sic] come to Winnington now because I know I should get so fond of Lily that I should fret because I couldn’t see as much of her as I like and I have her here and make a real daughter of her and for my own chief pet, her being in London is about as good for me as a sharp attack of fever, or a gunshot wound in the shoulder--I’m just going to take a run to the Alps to recover a little (588). He is aware of the dangers involved in being “so fond” of Lily, and his quest for little girls seems to be taking its toll on his psyche.

Despite his concerns that he might focus too strongly on the allure of tangible girls, Ruskin’s impassioned pursuit of real little girls did not end with Winnington, but only got started there. After he began visiting the school, Ruskin began recording visits to and dreams about London music halls. He always focused on the little girls and the power they seem to hold over him. And in each case, he remained faithful to his preference for simplicity and modesty in girls, both on and off the stage. One description of a group of girls dressed like Winnington students provides a concise summary of Ruskin’s tastes: “Y[esterday] at pantomime again. Beautiful English family in stage upper box: three girls, strong, innocent, powerful in feature, proud in
lip, yet simply and eagerly interested when not indignant. Modestly dressed--white up to throat. What they thought of Pantomime?"

Particularly interesting are the dream and the real-life accounts of music-hall girls that follow, both of which appeared in 1867. Ruskin describes the dream as follows: "I was in a theatre, and a girl of some far-away nation--half like Japanese, but prettier--was dancing, and she had never been used to show her face or neck, and was ashamed; and behind there was a small gallery full of children of the same foreign type, singing" (Letters 337). The exotic girl, reminiscent of the singing "wild child" that he occasionally sees in his dreams, is dancing on stage, but she is "ashamed." She is set apart from the others in her company by her modesty. Like the 10 year-old girl on the Turin beach, this "wild-child" is both innocent and erotic. She invites and discourages Ruskin's desirous gaze.

In *Time and Tide*, Ruskin notices for similar traits when he describes one of his own experiences watching a little girl-actress in a popular London music hall:

I am going to tell you what I was thinking...in Covent Garden Theatre as I was looking, and not laughing, at the pantomime of "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves"...The forty thieves were girls. The forty thieves and their forty companions were in some way mixed up with about four hundred and forty fairies, who were girls. There was an Oxford and Cambridge boat-race, in which the Oxford and Cambridge men were girls. There was a transformation scene, with a forest, in which the flowers were girls, and a chandelier, in which the lamps were girls, and a great rainbow which was all of girls...There was a little actress of whom I have chiefly to speak, who played exquisitely the little part she had to play...The little lady...eight or nine years old dances a *pas-de-deux* with the donkey--she did it beautifully and simply as a child ought to dance...She did nothing more than any child, well taught, but painlessly, might easily do. She caricatured no older person--attempted no curious or fantastic skill...she danced with...sweetness and self-forgetfulness. And through all the vast theatre, full of fathers, mothers, and children, there was not one hand lifted to give her sign or praise but mine (456).
This production catered directly to the cult of the little girl. The girls in the show are, more or less, one harmonious image with slight variations. Yet, Ruskin is not interested in the storyline and only mildly impressed by the dancing skills. Instead he engages in a series of *watching*—instead of laughing with the audience, he *looks*. He revels in the pageantry and sheer number of the girls in front of him. One particular girl, however, does capture his attention because she dances “simply” and “as a child ought to dance.” The girl’s modesty and seeming lack of worldliness sets her apart from her fantastical and somewhat garish companions.

Ruskin’s infatuation with this girl and her music hall scene overshadows the critical discussion that introduced the passage in *Time and Tide*. The picture seems to present the esteemed Oxford professor and critic as a fawning, over-enthusiastic schoolboy. And such puzzlement is not unprecedented. In fact, in his consideration of the *Fairyland* chapter, Quentin Bell writes:

> And when [Ruskin] enters those dubious glades and inglenooks we must refuse to follow him. Did the young men of Oxford feel something of our misgivings when they beheld him, the censor of Poussin, Rembrandt, and Michelangelo, address himself, with only a few kindly and qualified reservations, to the sickly and beribboned moppets of Miss Kate Greenaway...What on earth did the young men make of this? And what are we to make of it? It is easy to smile at his charming nymphets, and to dismiss the whole infatuation for Miss Greenaway as the last, half conscious, senile perturbations of thwarted sensuality (Bell 105).

Quentin Bell and his fellow students witness Ruskin’s attempt to recuperate the English “nymphet” from the mire of Victorian sentimental nostalgia. The charges of “senile perturbations” and “thwarted sensuality” that resulted from his admiration for Greenaway’s girl figures (figure 2-2) indicate the schism between a general recognition of the little girl’s iconographic potential and the more complicated
Figure 2-2:
Greenaway illustration for *The April Baby’s Book of Tunes*
cultural ambiguities that fueled Ruskin’s obsessive pursuits, especially when he requested that Greenaway draw the girls in the nude for him:

As we’ve got so far as taking off hats, I trust we many in time get to take off just a little more—say mittens—and then—perhaps—even shoes! and—(for fairies) even . . . stockings—and then—. . . Will you—(it’s all for your own good—!) makes her (a drawing of a sylph) stand up and draw her for me without a cap—and without her shoes.—(because of the heels) and without her mittens, and without her—frock and frills? And let me see exactly how tall she is—and how—round. It will be so good of and for you—And so to and for me (Engen 93-94).

Ruskin’s request for the illustration of a nude Greenaway girl is written as a sort of narrative strip-tease, slowing removing the child’s clothing, piece by piece. Although he couches the request in popular terminology that stresses the didactic and inspirational qualities of little girls—“it’s all for your own good”—his interest in the drawing is also obviously sensual. This interest set him apart from Victorian who merely appreciated the iconographic power of lovely children.

Certainly his “enthusiasm for perambulators” was popular, and he was not alone in “thanking God for little girls over-enthusiastically,” but his personal interest in them was fuel for comment (106). Dean G.W. Kitchin, father of Xie Kitchin (a popular photographic subject within the cult of the little girl), describes the following encounter in his Oxford memoirs:

One day, walking near Radley, his [Ruskin’s] attention was caught by a group of little girls playing in the road, and he went and talked to them. One of them attracted his special attention. He asked her why she was playing in the dust? Had she no garden at home? Did she love flowers? What her name was? And she replied modestly, with wonder in her eyes. On reaching home, he gave orders to his solicitor to look out for, and buy a cottage with a garden in Radley, and have a deed gift of it made out in the little girl’s name, which was done accordingly; and she, full of wonder, with her astonished parents, entered at once into possession of it. I hope the cottage was well tied up and that it has not already been turned into beer . . . (Kitchin 47-48).
Ruskin's misgivings were different. Many of his dreams present scenarios in which his motives and affections are thwarted in some way. His visions of singing naiads and Rose look-alikes on ponies are balanced by "evil dreams" of girls surrounded by dog-headed serpents and bloody snails. She is both evil temptress and beatific spirit.

In one case, he has "a mocking dream of children playing in clear water": "I could not get my stockings off to join them; when I did, they ran away, and as I followed them (up old Herne Hill on the Norwood side) the water changed to muddy road" (Ruskin Diaries 765). In this case, Ruskin is restrained by supernatural intervention; in another dream, a Mrs. Grundy/witch is the threat to his pursuits. In 1870, he writes of "getting nice girl to flirt with, and of a horrid witch up in a recess among--no one could tell what--but high up, who threatened me like a ghost" (709).

One of the most riveting dreams, which shows both the desire and fear in Ruskin's thinking, is recorded in an 1872 diary entry:

Dreamed that I had charge of a little girl who was eating at the same table with the spirit of Wisdom and Death, and they were both cold, and I was terrified lest she should touch them. They were both beautiful, only, if Death smiled, he showed his teeth; and the little girl noticed that they never smiled and asked them why; then Death smiled, and showed his teeth more than he ought to, but the little girl did not notice--and I woke, for fear she should (197).

The ostensible focus of anxiety is the threat from Death's teeth to the girl's finger. The metaphorical significance of the scene goes far beyond these plot details, however. To start with, the dream perverts the customarily charming girls' table scene into an allegory--an allegory that comments on the fragility of the scene and the threat that Ruskin (and others like him) poses to it. Wisdom and Death, the destroyers of innocence in the Garden of Eden, have invaded the gardens of England.
in Ruskin’s dream. Yet, they are “beautiful” in their perversity—a concept at the center of nineteenth-century art debates about women and sexuality. Even if we ignore any Freudian reading of Death’s teeth, Ruskin’s metaphor is clear. The two symbolic figures of adult anxiety (Wisdom and Death)—the Biblical cause and effect of the loss of innocence and Fall in the Garden of Eden—engage in an activity that was very popular within the cult of the little girl: inviting a girl to tea or a meal. The figures are beautiful, but they are cold to the touch—a condition that would obviously scare the girl away if she discovered it. Not only is the girl unaware of her hosts’ true conditions, she is also unaware of their very large teeth. When Death smiles at her (when he *admires* her), he shows his teeth “more than he ought to.” Ruskin sees this indiscretion and “fears” so much that he cannot watch any further. The “fear” comes from the possibility that the girl will see Death’s indiscretion and (1) learn his true condition and shun him, or (2) she will fall victim to the two iconographic threats to girlhood in the nineteenth-century. In another dream, Ruskin finds “the dead body of a child in a box, a little girl whom I had put living into it and forgotten” (376). Later, Ruskin is “having to take care of two children in a wood walk,” and he is struck “with an uneasy feeling of its being unwholesome for them” (381). So we are left unsure about whether it is the world or Ruskin’s ‘shelter’ from it that poses the danger to the little girl at the table.

In 1866, Ruskin proposed marriage to Rose while she was in a state of morbid religious mania. Of course, her opinion of Ruskin’s personal ‘Religion of Humanity’ as a form of skepticism made her unable to accept his marriage proposal. Yet, Ruskin’s diaries and correspondence reflect anything but despair. In fact, he reveled
in her beatific qualities and willingly accepted the three-year grace period that Rose, like St. Ursula, imposed on her suitor. However, in 1871, Ruskin lamented that “First the time since 1866, I begin work without any golden thing at my breast,” and by 1875, Ruskin described himself as “the Bear--robbed of his whelps, and best silent: unless growling be serviceable.” Girl-pets inevitably grew up and away from him. The only way to preserve his ideal was to follow the examples of high art and literature--revere, even ‘court,’ her posthumously.

On 26 May, 1875, news came to Ruskin at Oxford that Rose La Touche had died. She was young, beautiful, chaste, and devout—and, like Dickens’s Little Nell, she was “caught by death just as that bloom is at its height and preserved like freeze-dried corn” (Kincaid 239). Ruskin deflected the focus from the physiological reality of her condition to the significance it held within a cultural geography of girl-love. He wrote simply, “She has left us” (Letters 253). Rose’s spiritual potency drains off any grief or regret over her death and encourages her admirers to ogle over her without compunction. In fact, only after Rose died could Ruskin finally marry her.

In a vivid dream, he saw his beatific girl resurrected. Tall and calm, dressed in white, she walked up the side of a church, while Ruskin, her bridegroom, waited for her, trembling with excitement, at the altar steps. And there, in the church, were faces that he knew. Then, as the notes of the organ swelled, he suddenly heard the barking of his dog Bruno, ecstatic at his master’s happiness; and the next moment Rose had reached his side and the service had begun. That same day, he wrote to George MacDonald, “Dear George, we’ve got married--after all after all--but such a surprise!--Tell the Brown Mother, and Lily” (Ruskin Unpublished Letter). In this
dream, Ruskin foreshadows Ernest Dowson’s strategy of loving his girl paramours better after death. He is able to balance Rose’s secluded spiritual purity and a metaphysical carnality. After her death, Rose was holy and blessed by God, and Ruskin could integrate his love with the religious sphere. In the letters and criticism after this dream, she is the director of her lover’s will and affections, guiding him toward the highest moral standards. Like Beatrice, Rose becomes the vehicle, the God-given means, by which Ruskin’s will is directed to God. She was now his ideal wife--untouchable, ethereal, and incorruptible. He could not have married her under any other circumstances.

With this new otherworldly advocate, Ruskin’s rhetoric became more and more evangelical, and his discussions of little girls became increasingly eulogistic. He had already melded Rose and St. Ursula together in a dream in 1876:

Now, indeed, St. Ursula had become Rose herself; no longer the lovely dead girl...but the lovely, living, evasive girl who for ten long years he had hoped passionately might become his wife...In a dream that was no dream, he saw the lovely maiden resurrected. Tall, and calm, dressed in white, she was walking up the aisle of a church, while he, her bridegroom, was waiting for her, trembling with excitement, at the altar steps (Leon 509-510).

Later, Rose’s presence in Fors Clavigera persists throughout the legend of St. Ursula and interpretations of it both by Carpaccio and by Ruskin. In an 1872 Fors Clavigera letter, he identified Carpaccio with Dante, St. Ursula with Beatrice, and both groups with himself and Rose. He then describes Carpaccio’s painting of the dream of St. Ursula in another Fors later that year: “So dreams the princess, with blessed eyes, that need no earthly dawn...But the lovely characteristic of all is the evident delight of her continual life. Royal power over herself, and happiness in her flowers, her books, her sleeping, and waking, her prayers, her dreams, her earth, her heaven” (Works
XXVII 344-45). This last sentence almost could be a fantasy of the idealized life that Ruskin envisioned for Rose. Rose’s absorption in the spiritual life, her relationship with her suitor, and her death within a heightened religious atmosphere, blurred the lines between Ruskin’s personal musings, scholarly criticism, and a tradition of beatific female figures.

During the September of 1876 Ruskin went to Venice, where he remained for the following nine months, working for much of the time upon copying Carpaccio’s pictures of St. Ursula, which, by means of his usual charm and generosity of purse, he managed to have placed for him in a private room. In a strange, dreamlike silence, he made careful, laborious studies of the face, the hands of the beautiful young saint, and even of the slippers on the floor. And while his assistants were put to work to make copies of the rest of the series, he reveled in prolonged contemplation of her.

Although Ruskin’s Fors Clavigera description of St. Ursula recalls his own history with Rose, he uses Carpaccio’s subject to make a universal manifesto. He constructs and exalts St. Ursula as the manifestation of his adoration for saintly little girls and his faith in their redeeming powers:

Never was twisted hair like hers—twisted, like that of all Venetian girls, in memory of the time when they first made their hair into ropes for the fugitive ships at Aquileia. You will never see such hair, nor such peace beneath it on the brow—Pax Vobiscum—the peace of heaven, of infancy, and of death. No one knows who she is or where she lived. She is Persephone at rest below the earth; she is Proserpine at play above the ground. She is Ursula, the gentlest and the rudest of little bears; a type in that, perhaps, of the moss rose, or of the rose spinosissima, with it rough little buds. She is in England, in Cologne, in Venice, in Rome, in eternity, living everywhere, dying everywhere, the most intangible yet the most practical of all saints—queen, for one thing, of female education, when once her legend is rightly understood . . . (Works XXX 507).
This girl is located between heaven and hell. She is “Pax Vobiscum—the peace of heaven” as well as Persephone/Proserpine—the mythological queen of the underworld. The ambiguity of “who she is” and “where she lived” universalizes St. Ursula, while her descriptions as a “little bear” and two types of roses identifies her with Ruskin’s two girls. Ruskin had also established the connection between Lily and St. Ursula in a letter: “Won’t it be a nice little new name—‘Bear Lily’—‘Ursa Lillium’?—and when you’re very good—I can say it isn’t Ursa any more, but Ursula—St. Ursula—who—I’ve seen her portrait at Venice) was a charming princess” (Winnington 664). Now, in the description above, St. Ursula is dead, but she is alive; she is intangible but physically close. She can be found in any girl. In the end, she is simply associated with female education in general. And, as a tutor, Ruskin had plenty of opportunity to find her again.

Ruskin continued to socialize with girl-pets throughout his life. In 1876, Ruskin records a “pleasant walk” with a girl named Alice Fletcher. He also had a “little shepherdess” named Jane Anne, who was “ten years old, docile, and intelligent in her own way to an extent” (390). His diaries pour out episode after episode, such as the one in which Ruskin attends a girl’s birthday tea party:

I had my little shepherdess carrying wood for me in the morning, and then Violet, whose birthday it was, asking me in the most flattering way to come to her tea, with birthday cake for me to help her to cut, and then before tea I was wood-cutting again, and gathered her a lovely cluster of nuts, and rhymed a little rhyme of them for her...Then I went and dressed! and put a bouquet of pansies in my buttonhole, Violet dancing all the while outside the door. So when I came out, she partly pulled and partly fascinated me all the way upstairs to the nursery, where all the beauty of Brantwood was at its brightest (Diaries 287).
He also found ways to offer his services as a tutor for various groups and continued to take on students. Peggy Webling, a little girl who, with her sisters, gave public recitations, often stayed at Brantwood in the early 1880’s and took long walks with Ruskin in the woods around his home. During this time, Ruskin also enjoyed cutting and chopping branches in the woods, and Jane Anne, the young daughter of a local farmer, was often his companion. He often visited nearby Coniston School—“it is almost impossible in Coniston to meet a child whom it is not a sorrow to lose sight of,” he once wrote (Abse 307)—and tutored “the parish schoolgirls, and [had] a class of Seven ever Saturday” in 1887 (Ruskin Letters 442). His most significant pupil during these years, Kathleen Olander, was to be the heroine of his final romantic episode. They met in the National Gallery where she was copying Turner’s “Sun Rising in a Mist.” Captivated by this girl who was “altogether of Rose’s kind in temper” and eager to find another St. Ursula, Ruskin asked this profoundly pious girl to become his drawing pupil. As with Effie, Rose, Lily, and scores of other girl-pets, the friendship with Kathleen flourished through correspondence. Through the exercise of Ruskin’s imagination upon the situation and upon the devoted letters that Kathleen sent to him, Ruskin constructed a creature who provided the affections and qualities that he needed so much. She was responsive, adoring, attractive, and well-bred. Soon after he met her, he began addressing her as “My Kathleen,” and his letters acquired a note of the flirtatious, childish intimacy that was so popular in this type of relationship. In these letters, he constantly questions the level of their intimacy, desperately trying to fashion another metaphysical and spiritually rewarding
amour courtois heroine out of this earthbound girl:

my dearest--child--(Do you really like me to call you that--though you won’t “answer for being anything more?”)--you have not told me too often that you love me--nor can you love me much.--if indeed there is the immortal life opening to us both--for you first made me pray for it--and recover the hope of it--nor, even in the life here--can you love me more than I will you--if you choose (Gulf of Years 65).

He writes to her about restless nights spent imagining her in various majestic garments, and pours out pages of adoring and self-abasing sentiment. He also simultaneously provokes and defends against a sense of jealousy that he imagines in Kathleen, just as he imagined it in Rose, and woos her vicariously through other girls: “you’ve never seen me flirting with a Parisian shopgirl--or a Jura shepherdess.--I kissed my hand to one only the other day and made her laugh so prettily that really--she’s been nearly as much in my head as you, ever since!” (69). In the end, Ruskin’s request that she and her sister spend Christmas with him, as well as the uncertainties surrounding his first marriage, caused Olander’s father to forbid the relationship.

In 1882, Ruskin met the Alexanders, an American lady and her daughter Francesca, in Florence. He wrote in his diary, “I never knew such vivid goodness and innocence in any living creatures as in this Mrs. And Miss Alexander” (Diaries 1032). He was so fond of them that he presented them with a small picture of Rose, which Francesca hung over her writing desk. At Oxford, in 1883, he lectured on and exhibited Francesca Alexander’s book, The Story of Ida, which Ruskin had purchased, edited, and obtained permission to print. The heroine, who is illustrated as a modernized St. Ursula (figures 2-3 and 2-4), was a poor, unselfish Florentine girl who died in 1872. The story, which Ruskin considered “most precious,” revolves solely around Ida’s beatific character and peaceful death (Letters to Francesca 49).
Figure 2-3: Ruskin’s painting of St. Ursula

Figure 2-4: Illustration of Ida
(The Story of Ida)
She was “such a shape as the early painters used to imagine for their young saints,” with hair “as fine as silk,” an “oval face,” “soft black eyes,” and “deep red” lips. She loved hymns and religious poetry, and she had a “bellezza della morte, which is seen sometimes in great saints, or in innocent little children, when they are passing away...Certainly it was more like heaven than anything else we ever see in this world” (Alexander 88). Her death scene, the climax of the story, is equally brief and highly theatrical: “without any warning, she suddenly threw her arms wide open, her head dropped to her bosom,—and she was gone” (89). In his preface, Ruskin waxes enthusiastic about the fact that the story is “the purest truth, both in history and picture” (vi). He is enraptured by the concept that Ida really existed. The story of her “too short is life is absolutely and simply true”—a “real passage of human life, seen in the light that Heaven sent for it” (v and vii). In both Ida’s story and his own explicit account of Rose’s fatal illness, Ruskin luxuriates in morbid rapture over the dying girls. The girls became “saints in miniature”—beatific creatures reduced to physical, alluring forms (Abse 299).

Girls like Rose, Ida, Kathleen, and the Winnington “birds” created a paradoxical earthly heaven for Ruskin. While Ruskin recognized and celebrated the girls’ physical charm and/or seductiveness, he constructed the girls as amalgams of degenerative sexuality and pre-lapsarian innocence. He formulated a female ideal that continually recalled both a sequestered Edenic space and the temptations found
within that paradise. In his closing to his autobiography, *Praeterita*, Ruskin reminisces about this ideal:

I draw back to my own home, twenty years ago, permitted to thank Heaven once more for the peace, and hope, and loveliness of it, and the Elysian walks with Joanie, and Paradisiacal with Rosie, under the peach blossom branches by the little glittering stream which I had paved with crystal for them..."Edenland" Rosie calls it sometimes in her letters (525-526).

Rose, the child he worshipped and the young woman he courted, is frozen in a time and space that sustains her as a little girl. She is suspended as a lively (even living\(^\text{11}\)) little girl after her death, and she creates an earthly garden in which innocence and sexuality are always held in tenuous balance.

Notes

1. According to *Butler’s Lives of Saints* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), a legend appeared in the tenth century that claimed that Ursula was the daughter of a Christian king in Britain and was granted a three-year postponement of a marriage she did not wish to a pagan prince. With ten ladies in waiting, each attended by a thousand maidens, she embarked on a voyage across the North Sea, sailed up the Rhine to Basle, Switzerland, and then went to Rome. On their way back, pagan Huns at Cologne massacred them all when Ursula refused to marry their chieftain.

2. Austin comes close when she acknowledges that the “reign” of the little girl “extends beyond Ruskin’s texts,” but she simply mentions the Dickens’s Little Nell and Rossetti’s *Ecce Ancilla Domini* without considering what binds these artists and paradigms together. In “Ruskin and Rose at Play with Words” (*Criticism* 28:4), Linda M. Austin also briefly discusses Ruskin as “a worshipper of the nymphet” (410). According to Austin, Ruskin desired girls who hovered in an ‘intervening stage of development’ between child (larva or grub in the OED) and woman (or imago). Girls were full of promise, whereas women were finished forms—mothers and wives” (410). Ann C. Coley’s “Rooms Without Mirrors: The Childhood Interiors of Ruskin, Pater, and Stevenson,” a chapter in *Nostalgia and Recollection in Victoria Culture*, addresses Ruskin’s nostalgia for his own childhood, and. “Ruskin’s ‘Womanly Mind’” (*Essays in Criticism* 38:4) by Dinah Birch cites Ruskin’s support of Winnington Hall and Kate Greenaway’s career to illustrate Ruskin’s own paradoxical womanliness—a sexual nature that sometimes caused him to “[act] the bully in order to compensate for his own inadequacies” (312). Yet, Birch misses the mark by making no distinction between Ruskin’s interaction with adult women and his relationships with little girls.
3. In John Ruskin (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), Frederick Kirchoff claims that Adèle “remained an idealized figure—and the subject of perfervid verse—through the next four years,” and he insinuates a connection between the girl’s marriage and Ruskin consumption diagnosis two months later (6-7). Jeffrey Spear argues that “Ruskin’s infatuation with an Adèle who was largely the creation of his own longing set the pattern of his disastrous love affairs” (Dreams of an English Eden: Ruskin and His Tradition in Social Criticism. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984, 30), and John Rosenberg, in The Darkening Glass: A Portrait of Ruskin’s Genius (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), claims that Adèle was “the only other girl who had ever aroused [Ruskin’s] passion [other than Rose LaTouche]” (205). Derrick Leon (Ruskin: The Great Victorian. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1969) makes a similar observations when he writes that “Ruskin was desolate” and “melancholy” after Adèle left Herne Hill (37).

4. Norton is referring to English translation of Dante’s Divine Comedy by the Reverend H.F. Cary (1772-1844).

5. Dante first met Beatrice when she was a child of eight years old and he was nine. He recalls catching a glimpse of her and feeling crushed by a power of greater magnitude than himself. It was the beginning of the “Vision of God”—Ecce deus fortior me qui veniens dominabitur michi (Behold the God who is stronger than I and who in his coming will rule over me).

6. The curriculum at Margaret Bell’s school for girls at Winnington was unorthodox: girls practiced athletics and focused on subjects that particularly interested them, distinguished musicians were invited to give concerts, and distinguished men gave lectures at the school. When Ruskin visited the school, he enjoyed folk dancing with the girls, playing hide and seek, writing words for their songs, and giving impromptu talks on the Bible or geology. Bell invited him to stay as long as liked, keeping a room with a view reserved for him at all times. Ruskin stayed there for several weeks writing The Elements of Perspective.

7. Each queen still received a gold cross, but later ones were crafted in the form of a spray of wild roses, designed by Arthur Severn or Edward Burne-Jones.

8. Charles Dodgson makes many similar comments about his girl-pets. In 1870, Dodgson repeatedly complains that Alice is different every time he visits her, and in a letter to Alexandra Kitchin (February 1880), he writes, “I’m afraid it’ll be another 6 weeks or so before I can invite you to bring Dorothy to my studio. She won’t have grown too tall by that time: but I very much fear you will. Please don’t grow any taller, if you can help it, till I’ve had time to photograph you again” (Dodgson Letters 96).

9. According to John D. Rosenberg, Rose “became obsessed with saving [Ruskin’s] soul at the very time his desire for her had itself become a religion which wasted and parched him” (203). Also, at a party in 1866, Rose knelt down and
prayed for an ill friend with such sincerity that the whole company was supposedly compelled to join her.


11. Rose *calls* the garden an Eden-land. Ruskin refers to her as if she is alive.
CHAPTER 3:
"DREAMING AS THE SUMMERS DIE":
LEWIS CARROLL’S FADING GIRLS

“I don’t think I can be of any use to him,” was Alice’s first thought, as she turned to spring over the brook:--"but I’ll just ask him what’s the matter,” she added, checking herself on the very edge, “If I once jump over, everything will change, and then I can’t help him.”

“The Wasp in the Wig”
Alice Through the Looking Glass

The story of Charles Dodgson’s incessant pursuit of intimate friendships with little girls has been well-documented through letters, diaries, memoirs, and numerous biographies; and the don’s focused attention certainly revealed a certain attraction to what Morten Cohen identifies as “the pure, the noble, and the divine” found at the “shrine of child innocence” (107, 111). Yet, as we have seen in his photographs, the girls are also intensely erotic, engaging, and sometimes menacing. Like these photographs, Dodgson’s poems and stories present a construction of the little girl as an amalgam of demoiselle and demimondaine. Furthermore, they emphasize what is only suggested in his photography: the tension between the fading girl and the imminent woman that must surely replace her. And while photographs freeze and hold a duality between these two identities in the girl, Dodgson’s narratives illustrate the fluctuations and eventual demise of the little girl that drove his passionate and frenetic watch over them during his years at Oxford.
In the mid-1800's, Charles Dodgson participated in and wrote endlessly about the popular habit of taking the professors' small daughters on the river, walking with them in the university gardens, and inviting them to tea. These chaperoned walks and river excursions were an especially necessary part of the children's afternoon routine at Christ Church College, where Charles Dodgson worked and lived, since it was a strict rule that children should not run about in the quad or make too much noise in the deanery garden. As a result, Dodgson had his choice of preference from amongst the daughters of his colleagues at the college. In fact, it would be impossible to even review his numerous girl-friendships, excursions, or correspondences; his diaries and letters are dominated by accounts of them. The timid professor of mathematics was capable of immense charm and inventiveness when collecting and entertaining new child-friends. He pressed his friends for introductions to new families and invented all sorts of outings, games, and stories to keep the girls enthralled.

Critics have been correct to argue that Dodgson's timidity and religious upbringing made him appreciative of the girls' honesty, imagination, gentleness, and innocence; yet, he was not alone or even unique in his fascination for these girls, nor was he strictly interested in their spiritual qualities. In fact, Dodgson clearly placed himself within the Cult of the Little Girl, which was especially popular at Oxford University during his years there, through his constant attention to the physical bodies and inevitable degeneration of his girl-friends. Like Reverend Kilvert, Reverend Dodgson created moments with little girls that were both innocuous and highly suggestive, ranging from afternoon tea parties in the garden to late-night trysts in the girls' bedrooms—Winifred Holiday remembers, "When he stayed with us he used to
steal on the sly into my little room after supper, and tell me strange impromptu stories as I sat on his knee in my nightie” (184). Any suspicion of impropriety is excused because he was ‘a lover of all children’ and the innocence they exuded.

In an 1880 letter to Mrs. P.A. Henderson, Dodgson claims that the girls’ “innocent unconsciousness is very beautiful, and gives one the feeling of reverence, as at the presence of something sacred” (Selected Letters 97). This “something sacred” seems to be the purity, nobility, and divinity that Morten Cohen identifies as inherent in the Victorian child. Yet, Dodgson was not solely interested in their spiritual or metaphysical preeminence. In an 1887 letter to one mother, he confesses, “I do not (as is popularly supposed of me) take a fancy to all children, and instantly: I fear I take dislikes to some...” (Letters 1133). If all children possess an inherent, sacred allure, why is he attracted to some of them and not others? In truth, Dodgson was interested in little girls as both embodiments of sacred virtues and bodies displaying earthly ones. In 1891, he defends himself to the mother of one of his child-friends, writing, “It’s such a lottery, the finding of any lovable ones...Please don’t think it’s only [your daughter’s] beauty that has attracted me” (228). He is not “only” attracted by the physical beauty of female children, but the girls whom he befriended and photographed most often fit into a very specific formula or matrix of both physical and non-physical features that signified both carefree child and fallen women, depending on the context: large eyes, free-flowing hair, eager hands, raised and mud-stained hems, parted lips. If the child was too earthly or fleshly, or even too childish (usually a result of lower social status or rowdy behavior), Dodgson was not attracted to her. Likewise, if she was too distant (not “lovable” or ethereal, she was
similarly useless. Dodgson’s girls had to embody the qualities that invoke a duality between maiden and nymphet.

While Dodgson’s photographs celebrate the little girls’ ability to embody simultaneously both sides of this duality, his Alice stories, the only two stories that focus exclusively on a girl figure, anxiously negotiate a space in which the same two identities struggle against each other. As long as the girl is frozen in a photographic image, suspended in time and space, the contending sides are in balance. They work together to create a child who is both radiant and titillating. Yet, once she is set in motion and once she begins to move forward in the narrative, this balance becomes precarious. She is henceforth doomed to ‘fall.’ The girl is no longer able to exist indefinitely in the idealized, suspended fantasy of a single moment. She can only pass through, while Dodgson worries, entreats, questions, and scolds her along the way—a practices throughout his many letters to amie-enfants. As he laments over Alice Liddell, “I fear that you are never the same girl twice…you change from visit to visit” (87). Dodgson expresses the same anxiety in a February 1880 letter to Alexandra Kitchin²: “I’m afraid it’ll be another 6 weeks or so before I can invite you to bring Dorothy to my studio. She won’t have grown too tall by that time: but I very much fear you will. Please don’t grow any taller, if you can help it, till I’ve had time to photograph you again” (96). Alexandra has grown too large for the picture’s frame—the four lines that hold the balance between the girl and the woman in check by freezing the moment. Dodgson even punctuates this scolding with a sketch that accompanied the letter (figure 3-1).
Figure 3-1:
Dodgson’s drawing of Xie Kitchin, February 1880
Then, in February of 1882, he again responded with similar dismay and disgust to a photograph of Florence Balfour as a young woman, harshly reprimanding her for fantastical and exaggerated growth spurts:

As are the feelings of the old lady who, after feeding her canary and going out for a walk, finds the cage entirely filled, on her return, with a live turkey—or of the old gentleman who, after chaining up a small terrier overnight, finds a hippopotamus raging around the kennel in the morning—such are my feelings when, trying to recall the memory of a small child who used to wade in the sea at Sandown, I meet with the astonishing photograph of the same microcosm suddenly expanded into a tall young person, whom I should be too shy to look at, even with a telescope which would no doubt be necessary to get any distinct idea of her smile, or at any rate, to satisfy oneself whether she has eyebrows or not! (117).

Florence becomes monstrous as she matures—she is transformed from a canary into a turkey, from a terrier into a hippopotamus. In each case, she changes from a creature whose sole purpose revolves around aesthetics and entertainment to a cumbersome, clumsy, disproportionate one. The letter is cruel and almost disdainful in its tone, and Dodgson closes by distancing her from a once affectionate relationship, which is now likened to a cage or kennel. Like Alexandra, she has literally outgrown a child’s world, and a frustrated Dodgson mocks and obsesses over her vacillating identity.

Dodgson’s frustration creates in its caricatures and language a commentary on the ambiguous identities of little girls that reaches to the most fundamental conflict within his canon. Alongside the figuration of girlhood as a moral and spiritual haven secure from the storms of the adult world, we can discern another process at work: the erotic, nostalgic, imaginative play and conflict between physical girl-women and ethereal girl-angels. The little girl is a figure of original innocence and original sin. As Dodgson explains in his 1877 acrostic poem to Agnes Hull: the girl is “a childish sprite, Earthborn and yet as angel bright.” As a healthy little girl, Agnes’s identity is
fluid and changeable; she has not yet crossed into adulthood or passed away into eternal childhood. She sustains both identities at once. So, while she is, for now, “angel bright”—Dodgson’s “child of the pure, unclouded brow”—she is not fixed in time or safely housed somewhere in the heavens. In fact, “Agnes told her son that she broke off the friendship with [Dodgson] because she felt that one of his kisses was sexual” (Cohen 228). In his diary, Dodgson remembers Agnes becoming disinterested and putting on “airs” around him. His records of their meetings became more and more curt, until he no longer acknowledged her presence in Eastbourne. He positioned himself as both child-worshipper and scorned lover. Agnes was both angel and sphinx—metamorphosing from “bright” and “unclouded” to cold and mysterious.

Dodgson explicitly illustrates this ability in girls to play the roles of entrapping seductress and liberating angel in his allegorical poem “Stolen Waters” (1862). In the poem, he adopts the role of a young man/knight who encounters a beautiful and bewitching maiden³: “With glowing cheek, with gleaming eye./She met me on the way:/My spirit owned the witchery/Within her smile that lay” (Poems 422). She is both maiden and witch, innocent and ominous, enchanting and forbidden. She and the knight are not in any danger because the two sides of her duality are in balance. But as the knight follows her, the girl “pluck[s] a branch above her head,/With rarest fruitage laden” and encourages him to enjoy the “stolen draught.” He remembers, “I drank the juice; and straightway felt/A fire within my brain: My soul within me seemed to melt/In sweet delirious pain” (422-423). In this blatantly Edenic scene, the innocence of the couple is destroyed by enjoying a forbidden
The fall from innocence to corruption is set in motion. The knight then recalls his response to her question, “What bars us from our pleasure?”: “‘Yea, take we pleasure while we may,’ I heard myself replying. In the red sunset, far away. My happier life was dying: My heart was sad, my voice was gay” (423). The knight’s willingness to “take [his] pleasure,” figured as a red (read sexual and passionate) sunset or impending darkness and a figurative death.

Dodgson describes the figurative consummation using paradoxical images of the maiden/witch: “And unawares, I knew not how, I kissed her dainty finger-tips, I kissed her on the lily brow, I kissed her on the false, false lips—/That burning kiss, I feel it now!” (423). Her “dainty finger-tips” and “lily [virgin] brown” are juxtaposed against her “false, false lips” and “burning kiss.” On the one hand, she is tender and sexually innocent; on the other hand, she is injurious and sexually errant. The girl immediately degenerates into an aged, shriveled crone. Sexual maturity/knowledge results in a symbolic death—a death of childhood, and thus, the child. After this encounter, the knight experiences an intense life-weariness. Then he hears a golden-haired “rosy child, sitting and singing, in a garden fair” (also described as a “sweet pale child” and an “angel child”), praising the purity of childhood and promising salvation through a reverence to this purity: “Be as a child—/So shalt thou sing for very joy of breath—/So shalt thou wait thy dying, /In holy transport lying—/So pass rejoicing through the gate of death, /In garment undefiled.” The “angel-child” brings joy and even salvation—“holy transport” through the “gates of death”—to her worshippers, while the earthly, sexualized girl damns her admirers to burning despair.
It is perhaps useful to remember that Dodgson wrote this first-person poem when his friendship with Alice Liddell—a favorite child-pet and the namesake for the fictional Alice—was at its most intense. Despite the almost daily companionship of his unclouded “dream-child,” he chose to assume the role of a young man “allowing himself to be seduced by a false Eve, of copulating with her, and of having to suffer expulsion from Eden” (Cohen 225). Clearly, Alice is both embodiment of childlike innocence and curiosity and an alluring body that is beginning to suggest her impending womanhood. The poem’s instruction to “Be as a child”—suddenly exposes the future adult within the child--vulnerable, and even doomed, to the fate of the old crone.

Two months after Dodgson wrote “Stolen Waters,” he recited the story that became *Alice’s Adventures Under Ground* and then *Alice in Wonderland* and *Alice Through the Looking Glass*. In the prefatory poem to *Alice in Wonderland*, Dodgson sets up childhood as a single day. Like “Stolen Waters,” in which a loss of innocence is figured as a “red sunset” and the death of “the glory of the West” (sunrise), the preface represents childhood as a charmed condition and a day-long life span in itself that leads inevitably to death. The poem begins “All in a golden afternoon” and follows, “under dreamy weather,” a “dream-child moving through a land/Of wonders wild and new” (21). Dodgson describes the “golden” and “dreamy” heyday of girlhood, before wonder ceases and knowledge kills the maiden. When “the tale is done,” however, the girl and her crew must travel home, “beneath the setting sun.” The end of the story marks the end of her day or child-life--a figurative death that is made explicit in the final stanza. In this stanza, the story or tale becomes a funerary
wreath on Childhood’s grave: “Alice! a childish story take,/And with a gentle
hand/Lay it where Childhood’s dreams are twined/In Memory’s mystic band./Like
pilgrim’s withered wreath of flowers/Plucked in a far-off land.” The now mature
Alice, whom Dodgson addresses in an anxious tone reminiscent of so many of his
letters to child-friends (“Alice!”), must lay a wreath at the resting place of her own
childhood—a dream(ing) world that is now “far-off” and inaccessible. As in “Stolen
Waters,” maturity and knowledge (the end of wonder) proves fatal to the girl. In fact,
by the time we reach the concluding poem to *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, the
girl is an eerie specter of her former self. As predicted in the preface, “Long has
paled that sunny sky;/Echoes fade and memories die;/Autumn frosts have slain July.”
The ‘fall’ has slain/killed the idyllic dominion of the summer afternoon. The girl’s
figurative death is complete: “In a Wonderland they lie,/Dreaming as the days go
g by,/Dreaming as the summers die.” The Wonderland, like the Childhood in the
preface, becomes a grave that holds the girl after the ‘fall.’ Like Dodgson’s “pure
and simple spright” and “sweet Maid” in an untitled poem for Gertrude Chataway—
”bright memories of that sunlit shore/Yet haunt my dreaming gaze!”—the girl changes
from dreamy to disturbingly haunting. The golden child Alice is now an abstract and
awful apparition as well: “Still she haunts me phantomwise,/Alice moving under
skies/Never seen by waking eyes.” So, from the beginning to the end of the *Alice*
stories, girlhood is set up as a transient and angst-ridden state. We cannot celebrate
the girl-child without dreading and looking to the ominous and approaching girl-
woman.
In both *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) and *Alice Through the Looking Glass* (1872), Dodgson creates a world in which the balance between grotesque woman and sacrosanct child is repeatedly negotiated. The only real concentration or recurring motif of the episodes is the mutations and dualities of the little girl. The rest of the material--supporting cast, setting, even some of the dialogue--is gathered directly from Dodgson’s immediate surroundings at Oxford and dispatched as background for the two-volume allegory. By way of Alice’s interaction with this ambient material, the *Alice* stories allow us to revel in the tension between the little girl and the growing woman, between a fallen world and the fantasies through which she passes. In “After Innocence: Alice in the Garden,” Terry Otten supports a view of Alice as between a ‘golden’ innocence and a frosty ‘fall’ by arguing that she is innocent enough to enter the garden, but too fallen to avoid perceiving it in fallen terms. A telling example, according to Otten, is her distress at death threats that, after all, never come to anything in this dream world. Alice’s dualistic nature makes her both threatening and threatened in both stories. If she was absolutely innocent and childlike, according to Otten, she could travel through Wonderland with no fear of impropriety or death. Yet, her uncontrollable growth and curiosity (desire for fatal knowledge), causing her to fluctuate from child to monster and back again, imports self-consciousness, fear of death, and even malice into an Edenic wilderness--a double-take on a Biblical certitude of which the Reverend Dodgson would have been aware. The creatures both under the ground and inside the mirror revel in Alice’s fluctuations and the narrator (and, thus, the reader) watches her with baited breath. The nursery rhymes and games, which would amuse a child, become antagonistic and harassing. Unfitted for
the garden, Alice eventually destroys it and is destroyed by it. In “Alice’s Journey from Alien to Artist,” James Suchan also argues on behalf of the girl’s adult/child duality. He explains that Alice wishes to escape adult boredom and restrictions but finds she cannot accept childish anarchy because she brings adult values with her. Then, in “Falling Alice, Fallen Women, and Victorian Dream Children,” Nina Auerbach uses the visual iconography of Pre-Raphaelitism to identify Alice as an “amalgam of purity and subversive power, of propriety and holy exile” (Auerbach 49). She is both fallen woman and unfallen girl—“pure child” and “predator,” “the blonde” and “the dark model,” “Beauty and the Beast.” Auerbach’s focus on the way the girl is illustrated is especially useful, given Dodgson’s own penchant and preference for visual metaphor and story-telling. As we have seen in his photography, he repeatedly stages the girls in tableaus that set up the angel/odalisque paradox in a struggle for control of the image. Dodgson’s original sketches for *Alice’s Adventures Under Ground* engage the same two-fold imagery by turning to contemporary art for inspiration.

Dodgson knew most of the artists of the Pre-Raphaelite Movement working in Oxford. In 1863, the year he was drawing the illustrations for Alice Liddell’s manuscript copy of *Alice’s Adventures Under Ground*, he received Arthur Hughes’s *Girl with Lilacs*, which had been specially painted for Dodgson’s rooms. As many critics have noted, the image of his own heroine, Alice, in the manuscript version, was clearly influenced by the paintings of both Hughes and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and what emerges is not the innocuous, neatly-coiffed Dean’s daughter of Dodgson’s rendering but an Alice with a soulful Pre-Raphaelite look and unruly hair. Jeffrey
Stern argues convincingly that Rossetti’s Helen of Troy and Miss Miller also particularly influenced Dodgson’s illustrations of Alice. Both paintings used Annie Miller (a socialite who was famous for her affairs with Hunt, Rossetti, and Lord Ranelagh) as a model, which meant that “Dodgson’s innocent heroine” was modeled after “a notorious woman” (Stern 170). Thus, the pinafored middle-class little girl, so painfully careful of her etiquette throughout the story, takes much of her paradoxical power from a woman (or type of woman) whose activities she would not have been allowed to know. As with his photographs, Dodgson infuses the little girl with fetishized and overtly sexual qualities to keep her identity in constant flux. On the final page of Alice’s Adventures Under Ground, Dodgson attempts to sketch the Alice of his “golden afternoon” in a supposedly more lifelike drawing, but he was unable to fully detach her from the ill-fated avatar who animates his original story. In his drawing, her eyes become piercing, and they engage her admirers in a menacing, almost haunting exchange. She is both celestial spirit and earthly seductress. Literally just above her head looms the reminder that her “child-life” is doomed to end, and she stares back at us “phantomwise.” (figure 3-2). After attempting this sketch of Alice, Dodgson falls back on the archival power of her photograph—a photograph taken before the story was ever told and Alice ever “fell”—which he glued over the sketch. The fictional little Alice was now, as Dodgson explained in an 1885 letter, “my dream-child named after a real Alice, but none the less a dream child)” (Letters 65). For Dodgson, Alice was no longer solely a little girl, but she could hold the two sides of the child/woman duality in tension. It took John Tenniel to exhume the paradoxical girl from under ground and illustrate the golden-haired
dream child in Wonderland. Though Tenniel flirts with the reflective odalisque and wild-haired Pre-Raphaelite icon of Dodgson’s photographic and drawn images (as in the illustration for the Mad Tea Party), his clean, blonde, primly pinafored Alice is clearly not the darker creature of the original narrative (figure 3-2).

So, when the first of the two stories, Alice in Wonderland, begins, Alice is already a future woman at the age of seven. She is literally and metaphorically a falling girl:

Down, down, down. Would the fall never come to an end? “I wonder how many miles I’ve fallen by this time?” she said aloud...Down, down, down. There was nothing else to do, so Alice soon began talking again...And here Alice began to get rather sleepy . . . (5).

As she falls, she seems to slip into the place where “Childhood’s dreams are twined”—girlhood’s resting place/grave from the story’s preface. She gets drowsy and dreamy, and she is aware of the possible fatal effects of her “fall”: “she did not like to drop the jar for fear of killing somebody underneath, so she managed to put it into one of the cupboards as she fell past it” (3). Her dubious identity is made clear when she lands in Wonderland: “suddenly, thump! thump! down she came upon a heap of sticks and dry leaves, and the fall was over” (5). Like the ghostly specter-girl, “dreaming as the summers die” in the waning day of Looking-Glass’s concluding poem, Alice finds herself too old for youthful sunny skies and “Autumn frosts have slain July.” From here, her precarious position as little girl is punctuated by ungovernable growth spurts—growths for which she is, using Dodgson’s letters to child-friends as a precedent, characteristically scolded.
Figure 3-2:
Dodgson’s drawing and photograph of Alice Liddell for the final page of *Alice’s Adventures Under Ground*
Figure 3-3:
John Tenniel’s illustration of the “Mad Tea Party”
for *Alice in Wonderland*
Alice’s overgrown size is an immediate problem for her. As soon as she walks away from the dead leaves, she comes across a door that leads to an Edenic garden. It is “the loveliest garden you ever saw. How she longed to get out of that dark hall, and wander about among those beds of bright flowers and those cool fountains, but she could not even get her head through the doorway” (28). Alice desires and longs for entrance into this Eden, but she is too large to enter it. The door leading to this pre-lapsarian golden afternoon, only opened by a golden key (recalling the golden-haired girls who denote Dodgson’s pre-lapsarian ideal), is designed for creatures much smaller than herself. Once Alice is aware of her large size, she is reminded of death again and feels threatened. In fact, the “DRINK ME” bottle touches upon a vulnerability that seems to prey particularly on children:

“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, such as, that a red-hot poker will burn you if you hold it too long; and that if you cut your finger very deeply with a knife it usually bleeds; and she had never forgotten that if you drink from a bottle marked “poison,” it is almost certain to disagree with you sooner or later (29).

The Wonderland entity (presumably Dodgson as narrator) that controls the appearance of bottles, cakes, and keys in this little room is cruel and taunting to the misshapen little girl, justifying her apprehensions. Yet, the fall has not put Alice’s life in danger, only her life as a little girl—her “child-life.” The room-entity punishes and teases her for being so large, and it denigrates her position within the fantasy. She is too large (to be a girl) then too small (to be a woman). She is on the brink between the two. Eventually, this entity castigates and vexes the little girl to her breaking point and she begins to cry. She identifies this behavior as a sign of childish
immaturity and feels that she has (literally) outgrown such a reaction—"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," said Alice, 'a great girl like you' (she might well say this), 'to go crying in this way!" (34). Yet, it is her childish response to the quandary that allows her shrink to a size small enough for the pre-lapsarian garden on the other side of the door. The tears literally make her small again and she swims out of the room, although she never enters the Edenic garden.

In her next encounter with a bottle marked “DRINK ME,” Alice’s position as little girl is more unstable than ever. In this scene, “The Rabbit Sends in a Little Bill,” the White Rabbit thinks Alice is Mary Ann, his housemaid. Working-class girls entered the work force, lowered their dress hems, put up their hair, and aligned themselves with their employers’ households around the age of thirteen, so Alice’s girlhood is preserved and extended by her middle-class status. The rabbit’s misrecognition forces the little girl back onto a ledge between girlhood and adulthood. Unaware of how this blunder will affect her own identity, Alice willingly fetches his gloves from his house. Once she is inside the house, she again spots a bottle marked, “DRINK ME.” This time, however, she does not falter or worry over its contents. Her small (read childlike) size has restored a sense of invulnerability/impenetrability, but her status as working-class female eradicates that security. Alice suffers another bewildering and debasing growth spurt. Once she takes a sip from the bottle, she grows until she is trapped in the little room and in mortal danger once again—“before she drank half the bottle she found her head pressing against the ceiling, and had to stoop to save her neck from being broken” (33). Finally, she stops growing, just as her arm goes through a window and her foot
goes up the chimney. Her domestic activity has trapped her in an adult role—"I’m grown up now," she added in a sorrowful tone: ‘at least there’s no room to grow up any more here” (55). Wonderland is a fantasy—a sequestered space outside ‘real’ time and space—where Alice is suspended between childhood and adulthood/pubescence. There is no room for growth in the construction of a fantasy girl, and she is again subject to reproaches and jeers from those who wish her to be smaller. As a final insult, the creatures begin to stone Alice through the windows of the house, a punishment historically executed on licentious women and witches. Following this exorcism, Alice is able to consume the stones, which turn into little cakes, and repossess her more innocuous middle-class stature/status. Dodgson’s association between Alice’s Wonderland growth spurt and her maturation process as a real little girl is emphasized by the author’s own illustration of the scene. Alice literally outgrows the frame of the picture (figure 3-4), just as Xie Kitchin would outgrow the sheltered space or frame of a photograph. Dodgson’s illustration of Alice in the Rabbit’s house formulates a visual representation of awkward growth spurts in little girls—a representation that he would continually use to express his anger at the inevitable maturation process. The physical growth of the real little girls makes them ill suited for fantasy—“there’s no room to grow up any more here.”

Fortunately, Alice finds a way to adjust her size and location, placing her firmly in the gap between girl and young woman. In the chapter, “Advice from a Caterpillar,” she meets a creature that is also destined to metamorphose into something completely different. He is in-between two identities—caterpillar and the
Figure 3-4:
Dodgson’s illustration an overgrown Alice
for *Alice’s Adventures Under Ground*
imminent butterfly. When Alice and the creature meet, their conversation immediately focuses on the nature of shape-shifting, ambiguous identities:

The Caterpillar and Alice looked at each other for some time in silence: at last the Caterpillar took the hookah out of its mouth, and addressed her in a languid, sleepy voice. “Who are you?” said the Caterpillar. This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, “I—I hardly know, sir, just at present—at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then” (65-66).

As Dodgson sets up in his prefatory poem, Alice’s girlhood deteriorates in one metaphorical day, between a “golden afternoon” and the “setting sun.” Now, since morning, she is neither girl nor woman; she is in-between. So, she cannot say who or what she is at any moment: “I don’t keep the same size for ten minutes together!” (67).

The caterpillar then asks her to recite the poem “You are old, Father William,” which she changes into a boy’s inquiries about an aging father’s ability to remain youthful. Finally, Alice decides that she would like to be a little larger, and the caterpillar gives her yet another Wonderland substance to ingest. Yet, unlike the forbidden fruit in “Stolen Waters,” this substance does not simply accelerate her growth; one side of the mushroom will make her larger and the other side will make her smaller. Small and large, caterpillar and butterfly, child and adult co-mingle on the same mushroom, and by taking pieces of it with her, Alice is able to embody some sense of balance and duality. However, she first becomes too large—a mistake with predictable consequences.

With her first bite of the mushroom, Alice begins to shrink too rapidly. Hoping to restore herself to a more normal size, she takes a bite from the other piece
of mushroom. Alice grows uncontrollably until her neck becomes serpentine and distorted—“all she could see, when she looked down, was an immense length of neck, which seemed to rise like a stalk out of a sea of green leaves that lay far below her…[she] was delighted to find that her neck would bend about easily in any direction, like a serpent” (49-50). Invariably, the discomfort and humiliation of Alice’s growth spurt is exaggerated by hostile reprimands. This time, a pigeon mistakes the little girl for a serpent, marking Alice’s second symbolic “fall”:

“Ugh, Serpent!”
“But I’m not a serpent, I tell you!” said Alice. “I’m a—I’m a—”
“Well! What are you?” said the Pigeon. “I can see you’re trying to invent something!”
“I—I’m a little girl,” said Alice, rather doubtfully, as she remembered the number of changes she had gone through that day (75).

Again, Alice reminds us that all these changes are occurring in one metaphorical day. She is doubtful about her identity; she is no longer just a little girl, but she is not yet a woman either. The pigeon echoes Dodgson’s own distaste for growing girls and fear of the women that they will become. Her horrifying growth spurts have made her monstrous, and she degenerates into a fall Eve, a serpent. She is both doomed and dooming, and her fate seems hopeless as she encounters the grotesque adult woman in the next scene.

Once Alice is figuratively sexualized as a fallen Eve/serpent, she encounters a grotesque mother figure in the Duchess character of “Pig and Pepper” (a scene that is not present in the original Alice’s Adventures Under Ground). In this chapter, Dodgson comments on the fact that the fall that Alice experiences through her entrance into Wonderland inevitably leads to one of two options for real little girls: death or womanhood. A little girl’s sexuality revolved around what she would
become with time. Her latent sexuality necessitated (by definition) a manifest sexuality. In other words, the obsession with a pre-sexual body anticipated and watched for the sexual one. If the girl survived childhood, she was likely to become a wife and mother, both of which degenerated the pre-sexual ideal the girl supposedly embodied. Little girls cannot remain little girls forever; middle-class girls at the center of the Cult of the Little Girl were destined to marry and to pursue a “career of sociability”—a lifestyle evident in the Duchess’s concern over royal invitations and social connections (Langland 39). The sacred allure of the girl disappears and the more carnal, voracious side is left.

Dodgson’s degenerative image of the maternal socialite reflects the loss and malevolence that he associates with girls who grow up. When Alice enters the Duchess’s house, the Duchess is yelling violently at a baby and throwing pots and dishes around the kitchen. She sings a perverted lullaby that highlights her hostile nature: “Speak roughly to your little boy,/And beat him when he sneezes:/He only does it to annoy,/Because he know it teases” (84). The Duchess then pressures Alice into an unnatural, quasi-maternal role, and the little girl comes dangerously close to taking on the Duchess’s guise. As James Kincaid explains, “though it at first appears that Alice might be endangered by this violent and tyrannical adult, the Duchess becomes something of a foil to the girl” (“Alice’s Invasion” 94). More concerned with her invitation to play croquet with the queen than with the well-being of her
child, the abusive Duchess forces Alice into an adult role and Alice’s degeneration from little girl to woman is temporarily achieved:

While the Duchess sang the second verse of the song, she kept tossing the baby violently up and down, and the poor little thing howled so, that Alice could hardly hear the words...“Here! you may nurse it a bit, if you like!” the Duchess said to Alice, flinging the baby at her as she spoke (84-85).

The shape-shifting girl is ordered to nurse the Duchess’s howling, grotesque infant. Alice has grown up and down, out and in, throughout the story, but now experiences a growth spurt that makes her sexually mature and able to nurse the child. It is a violent, distorted growth that gives way to an equally distorted and grotesque maternity; just as Alice takes on the role of the Duchess, the baby quickly degenerates into a pig:

The baby grunted again, and Alice looked very anxiously into its face to see what was the matter with it. There could be no doubt that it had a very turned-up nose, much more like a snout than a real nose; also its eyes were getting extremely small for a baby: altogether Alice did not like the look of the thing at all (85).

This transformation highlights the deformity and humiliation associated with Alice’s impending physical maturity and womanhood. Alice’s maternal role degenerates the paradoxical ideal that she embodies throughout the story. It erases the innocent child and leaves only a sexualized young woman: both the girl-child and the child she nurses are bestialized and degraded by the process. Alice’s rapid pubescence and shift from child to mother is a perversion of her girlish identity.

By the end of the story, Alice’s eventually growth expels her from Wonderland. Just as his letters to Alexandra Kitchin, Florence Balfour, and countless other girls exaggerated and condemned their height and pubescent features. Dodgson
once again exaggerates Alice’s size, arguing that the girl’s growth is unnatural, awkward, and eventually destructive to the fantasy created around her:

“Here!” cried Alice, quite forgetting in the flurry of the moment how large she had grown in the last few minutes, and she jumped up in such a hurry that she tipped over the jury-box with the edge of her skirt... At this moment, the King, who had been for some time busily writing in his note-book, called out, “Silence!” and read out from his book, “Rule Forty-Two. All persons more than a mile high to leave the court.” Everybody looked at Alice.

“I’m not a mile high,” said Alice.

“You are,” said the King.

“Nearly two miles high,” added the Queen.

“Well, I shan’t go, at any rate,” said Alice: “besides that’s not a regular rule: you invented it just now.”

“It’s the oldest rule in the book,” said the King.

Alice is simultaneously Wonderland’s slave and its queen, its victim and its destroyer. She is ostracized from the fantasy in a flurry of cards. Having survived the repeated death threats from the powerful, burlesque women, she is lost/rejected because of her own growth. When she comes back to Oxford, her sister is brushing dead leaves from her face: “[Alice] found herself lying on the bank, with her head in the lap of her sister, who was gently brushing away some dead leaves that had fluttered down from the trees upon her face” (158). Dodgson puns an autumnal scene to indicate a third and final Fall/“fall” for Alice. Her uncontrollable growth and symbolic shape-shifting, her close encounter with motherhood, and her final expulsion leave readers looking toward the woman she is fated to become. Alice, who has just outgrown her Wonderland, is imagined, in the final lines of the story, as a “grown woman” who “would keep, through all her riper years, the simple and loving heart of her childhood” (159). The metaphorical day is over, and it is this pubescence of sorts that
begins *Alice Through the Looking-Glass* (1872), a book that is intensely fixated on decay, the transience of youth, and loss of maidenhood.

Like *Alice in Wonderland*, the sequel has an introductory poem that sets the tone for the story that follows it. Once again, Alice is not asexual but apprehensively pre-sexual. And even though the book’s illustrations present an unaging heroine, Alice Liddell, to whom the introduction is devoted, was now 15 years old. She was on the brink of full-fledged womanhood. So, the poem begins by reviving a connection between the adolescent and her more childlike fictional counterpart:

“Child of pure unclouded brow/And dreaming eyes of wonder!/Though time be fleet, and I and thou/Are half a life asunder”(184). The child of this poem is still characterized by her youth. Her “unclouded” brow hides any notion of adult seriousness or concern and instead reflects the “golden afternoon” of eight years earlier. But then, in the second stanza, we are reminded that this sunny, unclouded girlhood was fated to die at the end of the first *Alice* story: “I have not seen thy sunny face,/Nor heard thy silver laughter;/No thought of me shall find a place/In thy young life’s hereafter” (184). All attention turns to a time after the girl is gone and only the woman is left to see that “echoes live in memory yet,/Though envious years would say ‘forget’”(184). By remembering this “tale begun on other days,” the young woman may rescue and resurrect her own child-life, which is threatened in a single stanza by sexual knowledge and death: “Come, hearken then, ere voice of dread,/With bitter tidings laden,/Shall summon to unwelcome bed/A melancholy maiden!/We are but older children, dear,/Who fret to find our bedtime near” (185).
In the opening scenes of *Through the Looking-Glass*, Dodgson continues to turn up connections between the child and the impending woman. The heavily symbolic looking-glass, which creates two figures out of one, immediately signifies Alice’s duality. In bringing Alice face-to-face with her looking-glass double, Dodgson emphasizes an analogy between the actions of this little girl and the familiar poses of vanity or physical arousal given to adult women by nineteenth-century artists. As Bram Dijkstra notes, this image, celebrated in works like Susanne Daynes-Grassot’s *Child Before a Mirror* (figure 3-5), William Sergeant Kendall’s *Reflection* (figure 3-6), and Carll Larsson’s *The Little Girl’s Room* (figure 3-7), was “sought after by cognoscenti” and “widely reproduced in popular magazines” around the turn of the century. As an artistic trope, this child-and-mirror image immediately positions Alice on the ledge between girl and woman as she embarks on a new series of episodes in Looking-Glass Land.

When they are read in the context of the Cult of the Little Girl, the *Looking-Glass* episodes that follow this preface reveal a struggle for the terms in which the duality of the girl figures is to be negotiated. Like Wonderland, Looking-Glass Land inspires longing but never satisfies it. At the beginning of the story, Alice is trying to reach yet another beautiful and Edenic (read pre-lapsarian) garden, but in the Looking-
Figure 3-5: Child Before a Mirror
Susanne Daynes-Grassot

Figure 3-6: Reflection
William Sergeant Kendall

Figure 3-7: The Little Girl's Room
Carl Larsson
Glass garden, the faster one runs toward the garden, the further one gets away from it:

...wandering up and down, and trying turn after turn, but always coming back to the house, do what she would. Indeed once, when she turned a corner rather more quickly than usual, she ran against it before she could stop herself... “I’m not going in again yet. I know I should have to get through the Looking-Glass again—back into the old room—and there’d be an end of all my adventures!”... For a few minutes all went on well, and she was just saying, “I really shall do it this time—” when the path gave a sudden twist and shook itself (as she described it afterwards), and the next moment she found herself actually walking in the door. “Oh, it’s too bad!” she cried. “I never saw such a house for getting in the way! Never!” (205-206).

She can see the garden, but she cannot reach it. The dilemma refers back to the opening scene of *Alice in Wonderland*, in which Alice cannot reach another Edenic garden. In Wonderland, Alice’s size kept her from reaching the garden. Now, in Looking-Glass Land, it seems to be desire itself that works against her—the house is consciously thwarting any effort to break through to the garden.

Once Alice reaches the garden, she is immediately regarded as a “fading” girl—she is aging and moving closer to womanhood. Her maturity is then figured as a corruption of an ideal:

“[The Queen’s] petals are done up close, almost like a dahlia,” the Tiger-Lily interrupted: “not tumbled about anyhow, like yours.” “But that’s not your fault,” the Rose added kindly: “you’re beginning to fade, you know—and then one can’t help one’s petals getting a little untidy” (210).

At this point in the story, the Red Queen appears and Alice announces that she would like to be a Queen as well. The Red Queen ushers the girl into her role as queen (womanhood), just as a governess would help a daughter become a potential wife and mother. As Morten Cohen points out, “the Red Queen lecturing Alice echoes either Mrs. Liddell’s or Miss Prickett’s [Alice’s governess] injunctions to the girls: ‘Look
up, speak nicely, and don’t twiddle your fingers all the time’…turn out your toes when you walk—and remember who you are!’” (136). In fact, in a theatrical review of *Alice in Wonderland*, Dodgson outlined his characterization of the three queens in the *Alice* stories, explaining that the Red Queen embodied “the essence of all governesses”:

Each, of course, had to preserve, through all of her eccentricities, a certain queenly dignity. *That* was essential. And for distinguishing traits, I pictured to myself the Queen of Hearts as a sort of embodiment of ungovernable passion—a blind and aimless Fury. The Red Queen I pictured as a Fury, but of another type; her passion must be cold and calm; she must be formal and strict, yet not unkindly; pedantic to the tenth degree, the concentrated essence of all governesses! Lastly, the White Queen seemed to my dreaming fancy, gentle, stupid, fat and pale; helpless as an infant (“Alice on Stage” 75).

As a future queen herself, Alice exists somewhere between the extremes of the red queens (sexualized Furies) and the white queen (helpless as an infant). Alice is constructed as a paradoxical girl, both fantasy and real/child and future woman. In fact, by the time she reaches Tweedledee and Tweedledum in Chapter IV, we get the first suggestion that Alice is not real at all. Alice and the twins discover the Red King sleeping nearby:

“He’s dreaming now,” said Tweedledee: “and what do you think he’s dreaming about?”
Alice said, “Nobody can guess that.”
“Why about you!” Tweedledee exclaimed, clapping his hands triumphantly.
“And if he left off dreaming about you, where do you suppose you’d be?”
“Where I am now of course,” said Alice.
“Not you!” Tweedledee retorted contemptuously. “You’d be nowhere. Why you’re only a sort of thing in his dream!”
“If that there King was to wake,” added Tweedledum, “you’d go out—bang!—just like a candle!” (244).

She may be only a figment of the man’s imagination in this scenario, blurring the line between real girl and fantasy girl. Later, when Alice returns home, her existence is
still called into question. She ponders, “Now, Kitty, let’s consider who it was that dreamed at all…it must have been either me or the Red King. He was part of my dream, of course—but I was part of his dream, too!” (346).

As the Sheep in the next chapter, “Wool and Water,” points out, Alice may be only a “dream rush” (264). As Alice and the Sheep drift down a stream, breaking off scented rushes, the girl notices that the most perfect rushes are just out of reach: “‘Oh, what a lovely one! Only I couldn’t quite reach it.’…though she managed to pick plenty of beautiful rushes as the boat glided by, there was always a more lovely one that she couldn’t reach. ‘The prettiest are always further!’ she said at last” (264). Continuing Dodgson’s theme of intangible paradoxical girl-women, the rushes only remain alluring while they are just out of reach. These rushes, collected and pursued like most men collected child-friends within the Cult of the Little Girl, lose their charm and seductiveness once they are tangible. Within this context, both little girls and “fading” rushes wither and die once they are plucked: “What mattered it to her just then that the rushes had begun to fade, and to lose all their scent and beauty, from the very moment that she picked them? Even real scented rushes, you know, last only a very little while—and these, being dream rushes, melted away almost like snow, as they lay in heaps at her feet” (264).

When she travels further and encounters Humpty Dumpty, Alice’s girlhood is again regarded as the summit of her existence, pristine, and fragile. And again, the fantasy characters praise her while it endures and criticize and/or reject her when it fades. And she knows that although Humpty Dumpty seems secure in his position on the wall, he is destined to fall. His security on that ledge is illusory, just as Alice’s
own position between girlhood and womanhood is. She is performing as a little girl.

Even her age is negotiable. When Humpty Dumpty asks Alice how old she is, the following conversation takes place:

"Seven years and six months..."
"Seven years and six months!" Humpty Dumpty repeated thoughtfully.
"An uncomfortable sort of age. Now if you asked my advice, I'd have said, 'Leave off after seven—but it's too late now.'"
"I never ask advice about growing," Alice said indignantly.
"Too proud?" the other enquired.

Alice felt even more indignant at this suggestion, "I mean," she said, "that one can't help growing older.
"One can't, perhaps," said Humpty Dumpty, "but two can. With proper assistance, you might have left off at seven."

Once again, Alice's construction as a little girl seems negotiable, and the confusion between fantasy and reality generates a tension that keeps the girl's identity in a state of flux. As a real girl, Alice "can't help growing older," but "with proper assistance," she can stop at age seven. She can stop fading. This proper assistance comes from a formulation of the girl that sequesters her within a space that allows her admirers to long for without fear of reaching. They can celebrate her physical and spiritual perfection without the danger of consummation or corruption. Carroll recognizes the power of the little girl as long as she can juggle her physical and non-physical ideals. As James Kincaid explains, Dodgson creates a dynamic that maintains this tension: "an urgent need for the child, the elusive child-forever, is played off against all the sensible, Freudian-ironic, and undesirable powers that would erase distance, make the child manageable, attainable, and thus just another grown-up-soon-to-be" (278). In Looking-Glass Land, Alice is always part fantasy and part real "fading" girl.

In the climactic episodes of Through the Looking-Glass—"The Wasp in the Wig" and "It's My Own Invention"—Alice desperately wants to become a queen, but
she crosses the last border and receives her golden crown only after she acts out her destined role as worshipped little girl at the center of a cultish following. She encounters two aging male characters in episodes that critics agree appeared together in the original version of the story: the Wasp in the Wig and the White Knight. In both episodes, Alice interacts with men with whom she is "half a life asunder," to echo Dodgson’s description of his own relationship with Alice Liddell. She treats both characters with unusual patience, tenderness and courtesy. Alice’s youth is contrasted with the old age of the two figures, and she responds sympathetically to both. Both the wasp and the knight are reflections of Charles Dodgson himself and they are the only two characters who approach Alice with kindness rather than animosity or ridicule.4

In “The Wasp in the Wig,” Alice is very anxious to become a queen. She could easily leap over the brook to become one, but she pauses when she hears a sigh of distress behind her:

Something like a very old man (only that his face was more like a wasp) was sitting on the ground, leaning against a tree, all huddled up together, and shivering as if he were very cold. “I don’t think I can be of any use to him,” was Alice’s first thought, as she turned to spring over the brook—“but I’ll just ask him what’s the matter,” she added, checking herself on the very edge. “If I once jump over, everything will change, and then I can’t help him.” So she went back to the Wasp—rather unwillingly, for she was very anxious to be a Queen (Dodgson Wasp 13).

The transformation to Queen marks Alice’s entrance into adolescence/young womanhood, and the episode’s preoccupation with age foreshadows Alice’s own maturity/fall. The Wasp recites a poem that begins “When I was young, my ringlets waved/And curled and crinkled on my head:/And then they said ‘You should be shaved,/And wear a yellow wig instead’”(18). As Martin Gardner mentions in his
notes for the chapter, the Wasp’s references to his fading golden ringlets parodies Milton’s descriptions of Eve’s hair: “Dodgson may have been aware that the phrase ‘ringlets waved’ occurs in John Milton’s beautiful description of the naked Eve (Paradise Lost, Book 4): She, as a veil down to the slender waist,/Her unadorned golden tresses wore/Disheveled, but in wanton ringlets waved” (18). The addition of the word “wanton” in this description of the ringlets calls attention to the sexual fall that Alice must inevitably experience as she matures—a fall that will dissolve the tension between the sexual/non-sexual duality in the girl. Yet, in the scene (prior to her final leap to become an adolescent/Queen), she remains “out of reach” when the Wasp reaches for her.

Before making her final move on the chessboard, Alice encounters the White Knight, another aging man and play-suitor who battles the Red Knight for the girl. The chapter is often recognized as Dodgson’s farewell to his child-friend, ushering her into her role as Queen. The Knight sings a song in which he remembers an “old man that [he] used to know”(316). The description of the old man in the song is clearly reminiscent of Charles Dodgson himself, with his characteristic stutter and nervous posture:

Whose look was mild, whose speech was slow,/Whose hair was whiter than the snow,/Whose face was very like a crow,/With eyes, like cinders, all aglow,
Who seemed distracted with his woe,/Who rocked his body to and fro,/And muttered mumblingly and low,/As if his mouth were full of dough,
Who snorted like a buffalo—/That summer evening long ago (316).

Once the Knight sings this farewell or swan song, he ushers the girl over the line between child and adult/fantasy and real girl—a line that Alice has struggled to negotiate throughout both stories. Morten Cohen even claims that Dodgson, as the
White Knight, enables Alice to “master the maze of childhood and emerge a tried and tested teenager” (139). This move and transformation from girl to Queen signal the end of girlhood for the real Alice, perhaps, but the fictional Alice is able to exist in flux, forever backwards and forwards in Looking-Glass Land. In fact, only after her encounter with the two men can the fictional Alice assume her cultural and aesthetic role as Queen Alice. By embodying both the earthbound and sexual qualities of a real little girl and the other-worldly and angelic qualities of the iconographic girl, Queen Alice is able to embody the paradoxical qualities of the Queen of Hearts (ungovernable passion), the Red Queen (formal, strict passion), and the White Queen (intangible frigidity).

For Dodgson, the ideal girl—the *queenly* girl—is paradoxical. She is both child and future woman. The tortuous fluctuations between these two extremes and the eventual demise of the little girl drove his passionate and frenetic pursuit of new girl-pets throughout his life. In his stories, letters, and diaries, he struggles to contain the little girl within a “golden afternoon” of girlhood. Yet, he continually loses them to “young life’s hereafter,” leaving him to reconstruct his ideal in an ever-growing collection of child-friends.

Notes

1. Dodgson first came to Christ Church as an undergraduate in 1851. A successful degree in mathematics led to his appointment as mathematical tutor, and later Senior Mathematical Lecturer, a post he retained until he took early retirement in 1881. He remained a resident member of Christ Church until his death in 1898.

2. Alexandra (Xie) Kitchin was the daughter of the Dean of Durham, who served as Censor of the unattached members of the University of Oxford for fifteen years.
3. According to Morten Cohen, this poem was Dodgson’s “Charles here dons the cape of a fictitious figure, a youth [on] his journey into . . . it was his first public confrontation with sex, seduction . . . ‘Stolen Waters’ is the closest Charles comes to revealing his inner self, his biting fears” (224).

5. In his biography of the author, Morten Cohen catalogues the various Wonderland/Looking-Glass Land roles in which Charles Dodgson cast himself: “He is, first, the Red Knight, his armor crimson...galloping down upon Alice, brandishing a great club...Then Charles tries again to come close to his heroine, this time with the gentler manner of the White Knight” (215).
CHAPTER 4:
VISUALIZING PARADOX: DODGSON, CAMERON, AND THE CULTURE OF GIRL-PHOTOGRAPHY

They say that we Photographers are a blind race at best; that we learn to look at even the prettiest faces as so much light and shade; that we seldom admire, and never love. This is a delusion I long to break through--if I could only find a young lady to photograph, realizing my ideal of beauty

— Charles Dodgson, “A Photographer’s Day Out”

I longed to arrest all beauty that came before me, and at length the longing has been satisfied. Its difficulty enhanced the value of the pursuit... Sweet, sunny-haired little Annie! No later prize has effaced the memory of this joy, and now that this same Annie is eighteen, how much I long to meet her and try my master hand upon her.

—Julia Margaret Cameron, Annals of My Glass House

After its emergence in 1839, photography exploded as a way to stage narratives of paradoxical little girls, and visual images of female and feminine children flourished in the last half of the nineteenth century. From Edgar Degas’s photographs of children’s tea parties to popular funerary portraits, the images range from the whimsical to the morbid. In nineteenth-century paintings like John Everett Millais’s For the Squire, John Singer Sargent’s Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose, and Kate Greenaway’s illustrations of rosy-cheeked moppets, the little girl was an emblem of purity, beauty, and angelic virtue: the uncorrupted ideal. Photography held the same
promise to fix a fleeting image “for ever,” sustaining a fragile idealized reality indefinitely. Yet, while photographs of little girls could seemingly freeze their subjects in a single moment and theoretically prevent those subjects from being corrupted, the girls were often photographed in poses, settings, and costumes that also highlight their erotic qualities. These popular photographic studies of girls not only articulated contradictory impulses in individual photographers’ personalities, but also the dualistic nature of Victorian feminine sexuality itself. Whereas the doe-eyed innocents of didactic paintings invoked moral lessons, a vast proportion of photographs featuring little girls give no such reassurance of transcendental and absolute distinctions between virtue and vice, purity and corruption, blessing and scandal. In fact, they function as especially effective emblems of a view of the child that was locked in paradox.

Photographs by artists like O.G. Rejlander, Charles Dodgson, and Julia Margaret Cameron—artists at the forefront of amateur photography in nineteenth-century England—rely on a tension created by the irreconcilable schism between the ideal and the mundane—a schism created and sustained by girls who exist within a space that constantly negotiates two equally-important ends of a spectrum. At one end of the spectrum, the girls figured as corruptible (and corrupting) agents of transgression and sexual vice. At the other, they possessed an invulnerable chastity that aligned them with domesticity and a sense of moral duty. In short, the ideal photographic subject was a girl who embodied both sides of some fundamental duality (youth/age, innocence/corruption, ethereality/earthliness, England/Orient) and was able to keep the duality in tension, so that the emblems of purity and the figures
of carnality and vice found in popular female images became contending sides of the same girl figure. Neither side could complete the formula without the other, because if they are isolated, the girl as emblem becomes lifeless and cold and the girl as pornography becomes fallen, aesthetically flawed, and utterly forgettable.

This fragile visual paradox was achieved through two dominant styles of photographs: fantasies about little girls and fantasies of little girls. In the first, photographers focused on the girl as erotic, fixing her as an inaccessible object of desire just out of reach. The second focused on the girl as virginal, embodying a condition or space characterized by invulnerability and lack of sexuality. The girls from Charles Dodgson’s and O.G. Rejlander’s photographs showcase a precocious sensuality that teases and titillates the viewers by eroticizing the forbidden and budding sexuality of the girls. On the other hand, Julia Margaret Cameron situates her little girls within a virginal, other-worldly, sanctified space, where the children are not pre-sexual but asexual. Cameron’s girls and feminine boys are infused with the supernatural authenticity of talismans or religious icons; girlhood as state-of-being is a tangible link to a pseudo-religious experience. Thus, each case, the photographs actually freeze a moment in which the little girls teeter on a fine line between two opposing sexual, geographical, social, allegorical, or gender poles—absolutely both and neither simultaneously

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As part of this paradoxical appetite for and fascination with female children, public consumption of little girl figures, in one form or another, was highly profitable and heatedly debated throughout the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. At one
Figure 4-1:
*Fading Away*
Henry Peach Robinson
end of the spectrum, Henry Peach Robinson's 1858 photograph *Fading Away* (figure 4-1) casts the girl as a Little Nell character, using her death scene to suggest the other-worldliness and sanctity of the child. Like the subjects of popular funerary portraits, the girl is frozen in time and space, somewhere between heaven and earth, between a frozen moment and a glimpse of eternity. As Philippe Ariès explains, the heavenly home becomes "the earthly home saved from the menace of time" (471). So it is that images of dying—and sleeping—children situate their subjects ambiguously between peaceful sleep and a 'sleep of eternal peace.' Like the immensely popular paintings *An Anxious Hour* (1865) by Alexander Farmer and *The Doctor* (1891) by Luke Fildes, Robinson’s photograph stresses the transience of the child. The darkness of the room and attire of the worrying adults is contrasted by the illuminated sickbed of the girl, and, by inference, of the girl herself. The adults wear dark, heavy clothing and live in dark, heavy worlds, but the children are radiant in their emblematic innocence, physically inferior but spiritually superior to the people around them, both here and not here.

At the other end of the spectrum, pornographic *cartes-de-visite*, inexpensive mass-produced 4-by-2½-inch mounted photographs, staged their subjects as flirtatious, tangible, and disposable. Even photographic *cartes* of beggar girls—Robert Crawshay's *Beggar Girl* (1877) or Dr. Barnardo’s charity *cartes*, for example—present these girls as commodities to be purchased and discarded. Robert Crawshay’s photographs, especially, suggest a visual link between the posies being sold and the young girls selling them—the flower girl and the girl as flower. In the 1877 photograph (figure 4-2), a much older man stands over a dwarfed little girl with
Figure 4-2:
*Beggar Girl*
Robert Crawshay
his hand rested authoritatively on his hips. The girl's eyes look downward and lead our gaze to the flowers that she holds, creating a visual line from the man's gaze and dominating figure to the girl and then to the flowers. Similarly, Barnardo's cartes and pamphlets provided meticulously fashioned "replicas" of street children that could be collected in groups of 20. If the clientele for feigned photographs of beggar children did not dare purchase a street girl for themselves, they could purchase and take home the visual representation of one under the auspices of moral concern. Sold in mass, both types of photographs are emblematic of the Victorian girl's image as a figure to be pitied and consumed.

In the erotic portraits of nude girls found in an 1847 album assembled by photographer J.T. Withe, little girls are again presented as bodies to be admired and consumed (visually and, by implication, sexually). Yet, the photographer still complicates the images by washing the girls in a white light that stands out against the black surroundings. The whiteness of the girls' bodies draws attention to their skin and almost Classical, statuesque sensuality, but the models have not lost a seemingly inherent ethereal radiance. Compared to most nineteenth-century pornographic images of adult women (and even in Crawshay's and Barnardo's staged tableaux), these girls appear dislocated and removed. They exist as both physical and phantasmic. Their bodies are presented for consumption, but only as they emerge from shadow and blurred, hazy light. The girls themselves are inviting and seemingly obtainable but distanced, available but just out of reach. The most startling image in Withe's collection, for example, is a 1871 photograph of an anonymous child prostitute (figure 4-3) with the following inscription on the reverse: "Mary Simpson,
a common prostitute age 10 or 11 year. She has been known as Mrs. Berry for at
least two years. She is four months with child." In the picture, the girl stands against
a dark background with a dark cloak around her shoulders, accentuating and
illuminating the whiteness of her body. She is the “child-mother”—Deborah
Gorham’s “permanently childlike” ideal wife and mother from The Victorian Girl
and the Feminine Ideal, but only as a perversion of that ideal (7). Gorham identifies
the feminine ideal as a child because of the inevitable active sexuality associated with
wives and mothers, which makes Mary Simpson an embodiment of both the ideal and
the reality that this ideal hides. She is a titillating oxymoron. The focus of the
picture, framed by a dark background and black draping, is the juxtaposition between
her pubescent, girlish breasts and her pregnant womb. Mary is both perversely
sexual[ized] street girl and virginal mother (with all of the religious significance that
comes with that role)—both scandalous and blessed.

In another example, Oscar Gutave (O.G.) Rejlander photographed close-up
studies of girls performing as both women (specifically coded as sexual) and children
simultaneously.⁴ Rejlander took a series of photographs of Charlotte Baker that rely
on paradox and an equal balance between prurient carnality and precocious
sentimentality. In the 1862 photograph Mother's Clothes (figure 4-4), women's
clothing is treated fetishistically to mark the otherwise modest model as specifically
and overtly sexual. Sitting in the midst of a tossed pile of women's clothing and
dressed in a woman's stocking, Charlotte is placed at the center of a photographic
strip-tease. By dressing Charlotte Baker in her “mother’s” stockings, Rejlander maps
Figure 4-3:
Photograph of Mary Simpson, child prostitute
from the collection of J.T. Withe
Figure 4-4:
Mother's Clothes
O.G. Rejlander
the girl’s pre-sexual body as specifically sexual and erotic. Her body (posed modestly to hide her breast and pubis) is girlish, but she is inscribed as a woman, making Charlotte an amalgam of coquette and courtesan, daughter and mother. The mother’s stockings further frame Charlotte as a play-adult, and the otherwise innocuous nudity of the girl is made erotic by the emphasis on her developing body hidden beneath these adult garments. The pars pro toto connection between the girl’s legs and her entire body as sexual object invests the stockings (and, by association, Charlotte) with erotic significance.

* * * * * *

Charles Dodgson

Charles Dodgson (a.k.a. Lewis Carroll) first photographed a little girl in 1856, when Alice Murdoch sat for him during one of his trips to Putney. In the next 42 years, Dodgson went on to become not only a sought-after and accomplished portrait photographer, but also one of the earliest art photographers. In fact, according to Helmut Gernsheim, he was "the most outstanding photographer of children in the nineteenth century" (28). His photographs are more than documentary; they reflect his obsessive desire to collect little girls. While he was studying at Oxford University, he took instruction in drawing and tried to sketch little girls, especially the ones he watched on the beaches, but photography proved to be his most successful medium for capturing his visions.

In 1859, Charles Dodgson took a photograph of his favorite child pet in costume. Alice Liddell, the daughter of the Dean of Christ Church College, Oxford,
was the model of middle-class girlish beauty: fair-skinned, bright-eyed, and well-fed. Yet, these qualities are not overt or highlighted in the photograph. Instead, the image, titled *The Beggar Child* (figure 4-5), stages a sultry barefoot beggar-girl—dark-eyed and dark-haired, in a ragged dress that slips off one shoulder. Alice clearly resembles the girls in most beggar *cartes*, but her sidelong glance is not humble or demure. She is not supplicating or woeful; while most beggar children are observed objects, she makes direct eye contact with her audience and creates an interaction with them. Alice is more street-girl than beggar; in fact, she is a wild, angry creature who does not provide any relief from the unspoken challenge in her gaze. She is the type of gritty, vulnerable, disenfranchised child that Dodgson would have noticed during his frequent trips to the city, and she seems to be demanding payment for services or information given to the man standing in front of her, not begging for food or change. Yet, beneath this façade, the body of a don’s daughter peeks through.

Dodgson always exhibited a somewhat bifurcated mentality reflective of the dual status of little girls—during the week he would idolize Oxford daughters, who lived sequestered behind the college’s high walls, while on the weekend he observed working-class girls of the same age in London music halls and streets during his frequent trips to the city’s West End. The details of these trips provide evidence that Dodgson was aware of the prurient undertones in his photographs of little girls, making the portrait/tableau of Alice Liddell one of the clearest examples of how the paradoxical balance between illusion (a degenerate and menacing street-girl) and reality (a carefully-guarded and revered middle-class girl) worked.
Figure 4-5:
The Beggar Child (Alice Liddell)
Charles Dodgson
From 1868, Dodgson stayed regularly near the hub of an area thriving with sexual vice in London—Charing Cross, Haymarket, and the Strand. Specifically, he stayed at the United Hotel in Charles Street—-the same street where W.T. Stead purchased a thirteen-year-old Eliza Armstrong for £5 in 1885. He frequented the Princess's Theatre, the Lyceum, and the Drury Lane Circus, placing him in neighborhoods famous for child prostitution and pornography. And he was a regular visitor to the farces at the Olympic Theatre in Wych Street, a street off the Strand. Three shops in Wych Street and six more in Holywell Street were regarded as the main sources of mid-Victorian trade in pornography. The prints and photographs displayed in the shop windows (where passers-by could see them) were a constant cause for complaint in the 1860's, despite the Obscene Publications Act of 1857. With the relatively inexpensive production of erotic postcard photography, very young girls had become a photographic stock-in-trade of men like William Dugdale in the local shops just off the Strand. A correspondent in Photographic News, in 1863, complained, "A man who takes a walk with his wife and daughters dare not venture to look at the windows of our photographic publishers." We can only assume that an avid photographer like Charles Dodgson would have run across the same images. But even if he did not, amidst these shops, child prostitutes also worked the theatre districts. Exiled in London, Fyodor Dostoevsky recalled his own
horror at the area's scene, writing in *Vremya* in 1863:

In the Haymarket I saw mothers who had brought their young daughters, girls who were still in their teens, to be sold to men. Little girls of about twelve seize your hand and ask you to go with them. Once I remember seeing among the crowd of people in the street a little girl who could not have been more than six years old. Her clothes were in tatters. She was dirty, barefoot and beaten black and blue. Her body, which could be seen through the holes in her clothes, was all bruised...Such hopeless despair was written all over her face that to see that little creature already experiencing so much damnation and despair was to the highest degree unnatural and terribly painful (Dostoevsky xiii).

Such spectacles were fairly common in the Charing Cross area between Haymarket and the Strand, and they took place just down the street from Dodgson's lodgings. He would have to pass them to reach the theatres and museums and return through them in the evenings. By placing Dodgson at the center of such vice during his frequent trips to the city, we can be certain that he was at least aware of the prurient uses and lifestyles of some lower-class little girls, as well as the role that photography was playing in their exploitation. And Dodgson was surely aware of the suggestions that he was bringing to his photographs.

Yet, city girls were merely inspiration and raw material for staging a duality that Dodgson was already exploring in his poetry and Alice books. The working-class girls themselves held no interest for him, and he showed none of his trademark 'affection for all children' towards street waifs, child actresses and prostitutes. Unlike Dr. Barnardo or William Gladstone, who collected portraits of street girls and prostitutes as part of their "rescue work," Dodgson was not interested in saving anyone. In fact, in his reaction to William Stead’s series of inflammatory exposés of the traffic in little girls, he advocated complete non-intervention and separation
between the classes. After reading the July 6, 1885 Pall Mall Gazette, Dodgson immediately responded to the article by writing to Lord Salisbury on 7 July:

I would ask you to look at the Pall Mall Gazette of last night, and see if it seems to you that the publication, in a daily paper sure to be seen by thousands of boys and young men, of the most loathsome details of prostitution, is or is not conducive to public morality. If not, the sooner legal steps are taken, the better. He responded again on 22 July, by writing a letter to the St. James's Gazette titled "Whoso Shall Offend One of These Little Ones." A reader would assume from the title that "these little ones" is a reference to the virgins being sold to brothels on the Continents, or at least other girls who were at risk. However, Dodgson again fears [for] the middle-class readers who see the reports of such vices:

I plead for our young men and boys, whose imaginations are being excited by highly-coloured pictures of vice, and whose natural thirst for knowledge is being used for unholy purposes by the seducing whisper, "read this, and your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil!"

Dodgson, making an allusion to the Biblical fall from innocence in Genesis ("ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil"), does plead for "pure maidens" in the article, but only in reference to the middle-class girls reading the stories: “I plead for our pure maidens, whose souls are being saddened, if not defiled, by the nauseous literature that is thus thrust upon them.” Dodgson seems to grant power to the newspaper articles that figuratively sexualize the girls. The girls are violently defiled—"thrust upon"—by the knowledge of this vice.

So it is that the little girl in Beggar Child is inseparable from fantasies of childhood formulated in relation to Victorian concepts of propriety and the age of consent. Dodgson was certainly aware (and sometimes directly involved in) contemporary debates about the definition and rights of little girls. By staging a scene
in which Alice Liddell is 'freed' from social and/or familial strictures and propriety, Dodgson could allow her to masquerade as one of the disenfranchised girls so popular in London's pornography and prostitution industries. In fact, much of Dodgson's pursuit and photography of little girls constitutes a means of accounting for a compulsion to visually capture/collect little girls within these loaded contemporary, social, and legal surrounding little girls.

Dodgson's short story "A Photographer's Day Out" explores the psychology behind some of these obsessive pursuits and the compulsions behind the reverend's enigmatic photographs. The story begins with a photographer's complaint—"I am shaken, and sore, and stiff, and bruised"—and it follows the photographer (Mr. Tubbs) as he remembers his pursuit of "an Amelia" to photograph. Recalling Dodgson's own practice of collecting and cataloguing the first names of his girl sitters, Tubbs obsesses over the ideal first name of his ideal model:

They say that we Photographers are a blind race at best; that we learn to look at even the prettiest faces as so much light and shade; that we seldom admire, and never love. This is a delusion I long to break through—if I could only find a young lady to photograph, realizing my ideal of beauty—above all, if her name should be—(why is it, I wonder, that I dote on the name Amelia more than any other word in the English language?)—I feel sure that I could shake off this cold, philosophic lethargy (1089).

The girl's name possesses the power to rid the man of his life-weariness. The girl is only secondary to the name, just as she will be secondary to the photograph taken of her. She is fetishized, objectified, and commodified in hopes of being consumed like an elixir. So, perhaps appropriately, Tubbs is propositioned and led to her from Haymarket (the area most famous for its trade in little girls). While walking through this area, Tubbs is approached by a friend who invites him to a family Villa. At first,
Tubbs is reluctant, but he quickly accepts when the friend mentions a cousin Amelia: “Don't say another word!' I cried enthusiastically, 'I'll go!'...So it is settled. and tomorrow I am to see an Amelia, and--oh, Destiny, what hast thou in store for me?” (1090). Throughout the story, the speaker sets up his efforts to photograph the girl as a courtship, referring to her as “my Amelia” and exclaiming that he will photograph her or “perish in the attempt” (1091). Interestingly, he matches his affection for the daughter with loathing for the older women in the party, especially Amelia's mother, noting her “spasmodic energy” and “face of such blank indifference” (1091). He is not interested in the mature women, and his distaste for their follies echo Dodgson's own diary entries.

Directly after he takes the mother's portrait, Tubbs immediately counters his disgust for the women with a fantasy about the young girls in the party. In his plan for their photograph, he narrates a scene that is wrought with sado-masochistic undertones, recording the following thoughts:

Picture 4:—The three younger girls, as they would have appeared, if by any possibility a black dose could have been administered to each of them at the same moment, and the three tied together by the hair before the expression produced by the medicine had subsided from any of their faces. Of course, I kept this view of the subject to myself, and merely said that 'it reminded me of a picture of the three Graces,' but the sentence ended in an involuntary groan, which I had the greatest difficulty in converting to a cough (1092).

The allusion to the three Graces is obviously a quick cover-up for the photographer's more salacious intentions or impulses, and the photographer's “involuntary groan” further suggests lewd and/or (at the least) carnal desires.

Almost immediately after this fantasy about the three girls passes in “A Photographer's Day Out,” Tubbs attempts to arrange a rendezvous with Amelia, in
hopes of getting his sought-after photograph of her. Yet, when she instructs him to meet her at a nearby cottage, her other male admirer makes an insinuating comment: "Faix! an’ I hope she’ll give you a decoisive one!” broke in that awkward Captain Flanagan, ‘won’t you, Mely Darlint?’ . . . I interposed with great dignity; but all politeness is wasted on that animal; he broke into a great ‘haw! haw!’” (1094). The referent for “a decoisive one” is unclear, and efforts to take the girl's photograph and to take the girl are conflated, making the girl and her photographic image almost interchangeable. In fact, when Tubbs finally gets his picture, he cries, “Amelia, thou art mine!” (1095).

In his own “collection” of middle-class girls—the countless photographs taken between 1856 and 1898—Dodgson continues to negotiate his subjects’ identities as little girls and future women. In The Elopement (figure 4-6), which even Helmut Gernsheim refers to as “a rather surprising choice of subject for a clergyman,” Alice Jane Donkin is perched upon a window ledge, about to descend a ladder, which places Dodgson himself (as photographer and thus viewer/audience below) in the role of suitor (22).⁹ The model is both a floating spectre and object d'amour—both ethereal and earthly. As photographer Gyula Brassai notes, “Dans sa robe blanche recouverte d''une cape foncée, le capuchon rabattu sur les cheveux, Alice-Jane a l'air de flotter en l'air comme un somnambule ou un fantôme [In her white dress covered with a dark cape, the hood folded back on the hair, Alice-Jane seems to float in the air like a sleepwalker or a phantom]” (109).¹⁰ The implied desire for Alice (the impending elopement) reduces a woman's role into that of a little girl and vice versa. The tiny model ensures a negation of a real sexual union, while at the
Figure 4-6:
*The Elopement*
Charles Dodgson
same time staging its possibility. In the context of the photograph, Alice is sexualized by the title's claim that she is going to elope with her waiting suitor, but she is suspended above him at the moment before they are united.

Interestingly, the photograph is usually read as a scenario in which Alice is posing as or pretending to be a young woman, legally old enough to marry. Alice Jane Donkin's status as 'girl,' instead of 'woman,' is evident in her calf-length hemline. The obvious reason for her short skirt would be a lack of adult costumes in Dodgson's collection. However, girls wear long skirts in other photographs by Dodgson. In his portrait of Evelyn Dubourg and Kate O'Reilly dressed as servants, for example, the models wear skirts that come down to their ankles. When a girl became part of a domestic staff, she adopted the manner and dress of a mature young woman, even if she was a “girl” in the eyes of the law. For a middle-class girl, the hemline dropped to full-length when she came out to society and became eligible for marriage. In fact, most nineteenth-century portrait photographers received a notable number of clients who wished to document that very rite of passage. If Dodgson was conscious of costume hemline in some photographs, his decision to put Alice Donkin in a short dress for *The Elopement* seems to be a conscious one. It is also a significant one, since the short hemline indicates that the model could not legally marry. Yet, a suitor presumably waits at the end of her rope ladder, where Dodgson stood as he shot the picture. In reality, Dodgson's brother Wilfred had already announced his intention to marry the young model when the photograph was taken. They were wed six years later, when Alice was 18. Even so, Charles Dodgson does not present us with the image of a consensual woman marrying her suitor after she has reached the legal age.
Figure 4-7:
Reverend C. Barker and his daughter, May
Charles Dodgson
of womanhood. His photograph presents us with a girl stealing away from (or being stolen from) her family, a scenario that instantly recalls the scandals from W.T. Stead's expose in the *Pall Mall Gazette*.

In the photograph of the Reverend C. Barker and his daughter, May (figure 4-7), Dodgson creates a similarly suggestive tableau. Without the caption below the picture, a viewer would have no way of knowing that the portrait presents a father and his child. The focus of the photograph is clearly the little girl, who stands haughtily over the slumped and seemingly tormented figure of an adult man. We are drawn immediately to the girl's eyes, which gaze knowingly and almost salaciously at the camera. May is positioned at eye-level, but her head points downward to intensify the smirk on her face. Her hand rests on the reverend's shoulder, and her legs appear to straddle his back. Her Parisian-style attire, with its heavy crinoline, pushes out the lines of her hip and buttock areas provocatively. The tailoring of her shirt even creates the illusion of a corset and breasts. When we compare the image to Dodgson's other parent-child photographs, the paradoxical balance between "the Victorian ideal" (the virtuous daughter) and the child seductress is clear.11

In one of the most heatedly-debated images in Dodgson's collection, Evelyn Hatch seems to be posed in an overtly seductive pose (figure 4-8). She has fairly traditional, innocuous features, except for her eyes and complexion. The body of the girl is aestheticized in recognizable ways. Not only does the pose itself recall familiar depictions from Orientalist painting, but also Dodgson painted her eyes to appear tiger-like and darkened her complexion, so that they feign an Other-ness in the child/woman. As a result, the girl's gaze—a gaze intensified by the piercing eyes,
reclining pose, and artificially-darkened complexion—directly engages the spectator rather than reflecting back into itself. Compared with Dodgson's other nude studies of children, which stage popular mythological and fairy tale scenarios, Evelyn's photograph is notable in its explicit focus on the girl's body. As a "modern little Venus of Oxford," Evelyn is posed with her arm seductively behind her head, open to gaze and desire (Mavor 11). The girls' eyes, hair, and bodies are arranged so that they seem to confess an unconscious and unreserved openness and (especially due to the hand-painted tiger eyes) a piercing cruelty and seductiveness. They also imply a sexual maturity that directly challenges middle-class propriety. Also, Evelyn’s horizontal positioning erases any secure pretense of purity. The image of the volupté is created by the inversion of her body along the horizontal plane, which organizes the photograph around her pelvis. She is both English Self and Oriental Other, chaste little girl and erotic odalisque, photographic image “from life” and painted image from fantasy.

Moving from the merely suggestive to the metaphorically explicit, Open Your Mouth and Close Your Eyes stages the three Liddell girls (the "Cherry Group," as Morten Cohen appropriately nicknames the virgin models) in a scenario that invokes both innocent playfulness and erotic performance (figure 4-9). In the photograph, Edith and Lorinna Liddell hold a cherry out for Alice to reach with her lips. Recalling the sexual suggestion in both Millais's Cherry Ripe, and the poem that inspired it, this photograph suggests that the girls themselves are ready to be "plucked": “Her eyes like angels watch them still;/Her brows like bended bows do stand,/Threat’ning with piercing frowns to kill/All that attempt with eye or
Figure 4-8:
Evelyn Hatch
Charles Dodgson
Figure 4-9:
Open Your Mouth and Close Your Eyes ("The Cherry Group")
Charles Dodgson
hand/Those sacred cherries to come nigh/,Till ‘Cherry-ripe’ themselves do cry” (Oxford English Verse 168). In a dress with a bustle that gives her an exaggerated and, thus, playful mature silhouette, Alice leans her sensually-opened mouth towards the cherries. However, the fruit is held symbolically just out of reach. Dodgson freezes his subject in a moment of longing and desire for the cherry, providing a clear metaphor for the dynamic between himself as photographer-collector and the elusive virgins he so obsessively pursued.

Julia Margaret Cameron

In his July 1885 article for the St. James’s Gazette, Charles Dodgson recommends a model of conduct that suppresses images of temptation and desire:

[A]s far as possible shun the image; do not let the coloured lights fall into a shape or outline, nor suffer, if you can help it, your vision to centre them in a focus; if they are dimmed, leave them so, and do not restore the view; repress even the slightest image, lest it should strengthen and invigorate evil desire; you are too weak to bear it (Cohen 350).

Julia Margaret Cameron echoes Dodgson's recommendation in her photographs of little girls—"shunning the image," "avoiding clear shape or outline," and "dimming the view" of fleshy but ethereal feminine children. By blurring the lines and focusing on light, Cameron used a photographic medium to play with the girls' ability to evoke both earthly and unearthly moods and concepts. As a result, the innocence of her subjects is compounded by both their visual inaccessibility and the seemingly naïve and unconscious use of the photographic medium.
Cameron took up photography later in life, presented at age forty-eight with a camera by her daughter. Her introduction and inspiration towards photography was Sir John Frederick William Herschel, a scientist and innovator of photographic processes. Cameron first met Herschel as a girl in South Africa. They began a close friendship; indeed, it was strikingly similar to the passionate-but-chaste friendships between men and girls that were so popular within the cult of the little girl. After her marriage in 1838 to Charles Hay Cameron, a scholar twenty years older than herself, Herschel and Cameron corresponded regularly about her artistic progress.

The Pre-Raphaelite painters also inspired Cameron, and her photographs are frequently allegorical, representing religious, antique, and literary themes. She recruited friends, family, servants, and even passers-by to pose for her. From Dimbola Lodge on the Isle of Wight, Cameron welcomed and photographed the Victorian social and artistic elite. Tennyson, Darwin, Watts, and Thackeray lived locally, and guests often included Charles Dodgson, Robert Browning, Holman Hunt, Edward Lear, and Ellen Terry. Although her albums are filled with formal portraits of these personalities, Cameron is most famous for her ghostly images of little girls and feminine-looking boys. She considered herself an artist who made photographs rather than a mere photographer, writing in a letter to Lady Tennyson, "It is a sacred blessing which has attended my photography" (letter to Lady Tennyson). Focused on capturing an essence in her subjects rather than mastering perfect camera techniques, her pictures were innovative for their expressive use of soft focus and close-up perspectives.
In an undated, fragmentary letter to Herschel, Cameron explained her efforts to infuse a tension between reality and fantasy into her portraits of children. She wrote that she wanted to "get the real child & to combine power with softness in life sized heads has been my earnest endeavor" (Cameron *Cameron Collection* 174). Like Henry Peach Robinson's *Fading Away*, her photographs would situate the girl half way between heaven and earth. Yet, in Cameron's photographs, we can see the real girls, "in the flesh," who have been transfigured into ideals. They seem almost tangible, but there is no chance for interaction with them. The lighting, costume, setting, and poses of the girls create a tableau that stages the tension between the physical bodies of girls and the immaterial moral and aesthetic ideals that the girls represent.

The power behind Cameron's photographs comes from this staged fleeting glimpse of the spectral models. The children are positioned close to the picture plane, and we are brought very close to their faces and bodies. Still, ironically, we feel more distanced than when we view Dodgson's full-view portraits of girls, since the fantasy world seems to belong to the children, not the adult taking or viewing the photograph. Any connection between viewing subject and photographed object is contained within the abstract and *metaphysical*. The faces and figures of Cameron's models fill the picture frame, which seem to give the models power over their photographic spaces. In contrast, Dodgson’s subjects are middle-class girls, and certainly virgins, but they are staged as sexual—somewhere between Oxford and Haymarket. Cameron creates tension in her photographs by staging girls somewhere between heaven and earth. In comparing Dodgson’s photographs to those of Julia Margaret Cameron, we see the
difference in nineteenth-century discourse between the *virgin* and the *virginal* -- the
difference that exists between Oscar Wilde's Salomé and Charles Dickens's Little
Nell, between naked little girls and nude children.

By blurring the lines and distancing the girls in her pictures, Cameron
constructs a girlish sensuality (not sexuality) that wards off dangerous desires. The
children are not tangible or vulnerable. They are protected and sequestered away in a
“lily-time” that arrests the girls somewhere between the earthbound and the eternal. The
models seem to be slipping through their clothes, simultaneously drawing
attention to their fleshiness and their transcendence. The resulting images are highly
articulated and aestheticized expressions of idealized Victorian girlhood. The setting,
costume, and blurred lines of the photograph are emblems of a girlhood purged of
earthly carnality, and even physicality in general. The girlish children are
simultaneously alluring bodies and figures of another, more rarefied world. Their
sanctified position secures their allure against degeneration and thus sustains their
paradoxical identity as earthbound and angel-bright indefinitely.

Of course, the most obvious examples of the girls' dualistic supernaturalism
are Cameron's winged-child photographs, such as *Love in Idleness* (1867), *Cupid
Considering* (1872), *The Rising of the New Year*, and *Thy Will Be Done* (1872). By
blending Biblical allusions ("Thy will be done") and images of Cupid, Cameron
situates the winged girls between humanly passions and lust (as inspired by Cupid)
and heavenly innocence. The distanced and tenuous communion between the other-
worldly children and their audience speaks to a cultural desire for a figure who is
cautions, nostalgically productive, and titillating to her audience. Any real
communion in Cameron’s photographs, however, only exists between the subjects themselves, to the deliberate exclusion of their admirers. Further blurring the lines of her subjects' identities, Cameron arranges the portrait so that little girls model the images of Cupid (a male child). In Cupid Considering, (figure 4-10), for example, the nude model is transformed instantly into an other-worldly, genderless visage. Distinctions between place (heaven/earth), context (Christian angel/pagan god), and sexuality (chaste spectre/nude body), and gender (male subject/female model) are blurred. As Claudia Nelson explains in Boys Will Be Girls, “the Victorian stereotype of childhood had much in common with the feminine ideal. Because in the traditional great chain children possessed less worldly power even than women, the preadolescent of either sex took on many of the qualities of the Angel, for whom separation from public concerns meant strength” (2). Cameron’s angel-children embody these qualities and the domestic bliss that they reflect, but they also play on the feminine in their physical appearance and appeal. They are simultaneously redemptive and tempting. Exposed limbs and torsos, side glances, and physical contact with each other add a sensuality to the photographs that does not exist in many popular images of child-angels. The sense of sacrifice that fascinated readers in the Stead exposé continues into these angel narratives. The feminized bodies of the children show through their thin garments--invulnerable to corruption or decay, but forever alluring. They exist within an ambiguous life-in-death.

Cameron also blurs gender lines in her 1872 portrait of Florence Fisher (figure 4-11), in which the girl poses as a young John the Baptist. The Biblical figure is a Classical androgyn with a cloth held loosely over her partially nude body and her
Figure 4-10:
_Cupid Reposing_
Julia Margaret Cameron
Figure 4-11:
Florence Fisher as John the Baptist
Julia Margaret Cameron
head tilted languidly to the side, capturing the tension generated by her youthful innocence and sensuality. In these photographs, Cameron elevates all children and all angelic apparitions to the status of little girl. Her subject matter is primarily religious, but she is not merely illustrating Biblical texts. She uses the texts to build fantasies of, not about, little girls. As mentioned earlier, Cameron often included disjunctions in age, gender, and/or setting between Biblical subject matter and her own photographic depiction of it. The true subject matter of the photographs is the earthly model in an unearthly context. Cameron sought to evoke rather than illustrate the biblical narratives. As a result, her photographs reveal a tension between the physicality and sensuality of her models and the other-worldliness of their referents.

Cameron brings her sitters together intimately and focuses on touch and sensuality. The physicality of the models is always featured in exposed skin and tactile contact. Yet, this sensuality is not an open invitation to viewers. Most of Cameron's little girls are nestled in the company of maternal women, usually Madonnas and saints. The adult woman enclose the girls in a protected, quasi-familial space that discourages any sense of disenfranchisement that would make the partially nude children seem vulnerable or accessible. Most importantly, the women stare back at the audience, making us accountable for our gaze.

*Mary Hillier with two children* (1865), for example, features two cherubic, half-covered little girls who are part angel and part urchin (figure 4-12). Yet, Cameron (a mother to twelve children, including one street orphan) places a maternal figure in the photograph.13 This Marian figure (a visual pun, since the model for the Virgin Mother is Mary Hillier, a maid for the Cameron household) stares back at us
Figure 4-12:
Mary Hillier with two children
Julia Margaret Cameron
as we look at the children, making us both viewers and subjects of gaze ourselves. Our desire is incorporated into the dynamic of the photograph and figuratively observed by the maternal figure. So, these children do not appear disenfranchised or vulnerable, despite their waif-like appearance. The children also look up at their viewers. Their tilted heads and jutted hips hint at precocious eroticism, but the mother protects the child and contextualizes the child's nudity within a domestic space by leaning over it. There is no room for the audience's affection, because the exchange is complete between the adult and child in the photograph.

Cameron also dislocates the juvenile sexuality and romance of her models (sexuality and romance made explicit by other popular photographers) by staging scenes in which the girls are coupled with other children. For instance, *The Infant Bridal* (1864) features two partially nude children, one male and one female (figure 4-13). The girl child leans on the male, and the male child stands in for the protective mother figure by returning the audience's gaze. They are celebrations of the children's bodies, but not their potential carnality. Again, they are sensual but not sexual, and the coupling of the children discourages any direct investment from the audience. Instead, it provides a glimpse into 'another world'—a world where physicality and spirituality mingle in the bodies of cherubic children. In the 1864 photograph *Paul and Virginia* (figure 4-14), the falling rag-dress of the child on the left is almost identical to Alice Liddell's costume in *The Beggar-Child*. Yet, the child in Cameron’s photograph is standing straight, while Alice's hip juts out. Also, the androgyny of Cameron's children makes it difficult to determine who is male and who is female, but the boy (on the right) stands slightly in front of the girl, giving us a
Figure 4-13:
*The Infant Bridal*
Julia Margaret Cameron
Figure 4-14: 
Paul and Virginia
Julia Margaret Cameron
rough, suspicious glare. Cameron makes the viewer accountable. If we gaze at the exposed child on the left, we become the subject of gaze for the child on the right.

In many ways, Cameron sets out to create “high art” in these Renaissance-style portraits. Several of her Madonna pictures resemble Italian Renaissance paintings, especially works by Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Raphael. The composition, costume, and chiaroscuro lighting also hearken back to countless hagiographic and allegorical paintings, locating the image within a remote time and transforming desire for the figures into nostalgic desire for the past that they personify.

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Orientalism in Girl Photographs by Dodgson and Cameron

Many photographers, including both Charles Dodgson and Julia Margaret Cameron, used exotic and/or foreign attire to create paradoxical images of English little girls. These images visualize a place without time or social mores to stage an erotic and nostalgic desire, as well as to set up an Other onto which they could project their spiritual/political/sexual anxieties. Travel in the realm of the cultural and/or temporal Other is intended to hallow an imaginative or theoretical space that English writers and readers could inhabit. If industrial England had come to be defined by the realistic photograph, the images here provided a space that generated romance, utopia, and most importantly, ambiguous play. The imagination and reflection at work in the tableaus provide a connection and productive distance between the English and the “remote.” The bodies of the girls in these photographs embody ahistorical and empty Otherness as well as a visual symbol of worldly and other-
worldly duality. They simultaneously embody an engaging familiarity and a peek into the foreign, the exotic, and the taboo. In doing so, they provide a visual testament to the various dualities that generated and fueled the cult of the little girl itself.

The overwhelming popularity of photographs of little girls in foreign attire, in fantastical tableaus, and even in death were thus logical progressions of 'ways of seeing,' holding, and fixing these already metaphorically distanced and ambiguous children. The bodies of the girls were displayed and studied so that they embodied the matrix of desire and distance that was so eagerly associated with the bodies of colonial Others. Though mutually exclusive, modes of Othered representations were born together in the nineteenth century and displayed on a regular basis in advertisements, music hall productions, commercial photographic *cartes*, scientific and social studies, popular art and literature. Girls' hands, mouths, eyes, limbs, and hair were similarly fetishized into symbols of mystery and ambiguity. In doing so, the enormity of a vast and remote geographical/cultural/temporal Otherness came home to England in the tiny bodies of 'captured' girls.

In nineteenth-century girl photographs, Orientalized bodies contribute to a complex scene of visual confusion and iconographic contradiction that belies a solely angelic or ethereal understanding of the child as English cultural emblem. In *Paul and Virginia* (figure 4-14) by Julia Margaret Cameron or the portrait of Irene MacDonald (figure 4-15) by Charles Dodgson, the duality of the girls (and feminine boys) is visible (or visualized) on the girls' bodies and props. The ivory complexions, half-smiling lips, and rosy cheeks reflect a traditionally Western aesthetic and concept
of purity that is in tension with the taboo and sensuality of the costume and setting.

The remaining spaces of the photographs are also crammed with recognizable
Oriental accessories depicting the East's supposed exoticism, romance, and intangible remoteness. The innocence of the girls is deceptive: playing on the Orient's ability to
defamiliarize and dislocate its subjects, Cameron and Dodgson fetishize Oriental
scenes toblue the nature and identity of the 'ideal girl.'

Cameron's The Infant Bridal and Dodgson's various photographs of little girls
in a spectacular ethnic sartorial mix (figure 4-16)—Chinese, Indian, Greek, Turk,
'native' New Zealander, Dane, and gypsy, together with nationally displaced or
indeterminate veils, rags, and primitive costume—provide the clearest example of this
dynamic. The images focus on the exotic, Oriental and Middle Eastern costumes,
props (umbrellas, specifically), and languid poses. Repeatedly, both artists rehearse
in their photographs fantasies of racial, cultural, and sexual difference through the
visual intricacies of costume dramas and child masquerade—intricacies that are in
turn underwritten by contemporary issues of children's rights and age-of-consent
legislation as negotiated in various cultural spaces. The identities of the specific little
girls are erased, and the models become tableaus on which Cameron and Dodgson are
able to stage both odalisques (desire) and English children (negation of desire), street
girls (desire) and angels (negation of desire).

In the 1863 photograph Irene MacDonald, Autographed (figure 4-15), we see another
very sensual and corporeal image that presents us with another dual image of a
Victorian girl's body—the kind of images that led Carol Mavor to describe the picture
Figure 4-15:
Irene MacDonald, Autographed
Charles Dodgson
Figure 4-16:
Alice Liddell and Xie Kitchin in Oriental costume
Charles Dodgson
as a "portmanteau of odalisque and Victorian girl" (42). The girl is transformed into an object of fantasy on the one hand—as Oriental, exotic object of sexual desire—while reciprocally the signifiers of her youth/pre-sexuality undermine this status: middle-class English schoolgirl shoes and white socks, short starched cotton dress. The miniaturization of the Orientale becomes in Dodgson's photograph doubly representative of the impossibility of reciprocity with a minor, for the child in Oriental masquerade serves as one who is distanced both temporally and spatially but culturally understood as alluring and erotic. Her recumbent adult pose is offered alongside the child-writing of the autograph, and the two are juxtaposed in both the image and the title (Mavor 43). This photograph, again filled with ambiguous Oriental details, illustrates the dual girl by presenting two opposing images in one body.

Irene immediately engages the viewer with her drowsy stare, lounging on an Oriental-style carpet and tiger pelts, but the real narrative of the picture is presented in her costume and pose. If we draw a line down the middle of the photograph, we have a clear and distinct representation of the two sides of the dual girl figure that was so feverishly sought through these exoticized images. The photograph's composition focuses on a visual contrast between the luminescent white skin of the girl—her bare arms, shoulder and lower legs above her socks, together with her brightly-lit face—and the clothed areas in between: the nightdress hitched up to reveal crossed legs, ankle-strap shoes are placed against an Oriental rug, pillow, and pelts. At one end, her feet are crossed politely and her body is covered modestly. At the other, she is apparently nude beneath the rug and she reclines in a traditional odalisque pose.
the left side, we see the iconographic emblems of the “angel-bright,” domestic Victorian little girl in discreet dress and position. On the right side, we see the bare shoulders, rich textures, and dreamy child-woman gaze of the erotic Eastern ideal.

Dodgson repeats this paradoxical composition in the photograph of Alice Constance Westmacott (figure 4-17), the girl's sidelong glance and direct eye contact indicate sexual invitation, as Pamela Tarkin Reis argues in her analysis of Millais's *Cherry Ripe*. The pattern and fringe of the blanket mimic a gypsy's or Orientale's dress, also signifying sexual availability. Yet, again, the fringe plays against the neat white socks and Mary Jane shoes at the other end of Alice's extended legs. The rough texture, dark colors, and broken lines of the blanket break up the radiant whiteness of the girl’s skin and clothing, creating a line down the middle of the figure once again.

The Orientalized body of the little girl figure illustrates the battle between photographic representations of the little girl as very sexual and earthbound and the little girl as ethereal and “angel bright.” Tableaux and genre photographs featuring pre-sexual girls appear to suspend the degenerative aging/maturing process by displacing the girls in time and space. They exist in sequestered and unfamiliar spaces, distanced from the decaying forces of the mundane world, and there is no chance for any physical or especially intimate relationship between the fantasy girls and their admirers. Yet, their corporeality prevents the ideal girls from seeming indifferent and lifeless. In fact, the physical features of the Victorian girl are as alluring as the ethereal features: higher and thinner dresses, looser hair, soft eyes, relaxed mouths and hands, unencumbered bodies, open affections, freedom to reveal
Figure 4-17:
Alice Constance Westmacott
Charles Dodgson
more of their bodies. These qualities are repeatedly mentioned in artists' descriptions of real little girls, and they speak to a desire for tangibility and accessibility that contradicts a strictly non-sensual/unearthly admiration for an ideal. The girls are not only embodiments of beauty and purity of heart; they are seductive and alluring bodies. Fantasies of little girls in wondrous and exotic locales blur into fantasies about girls in exotic and far off settings, away from the watchful eyes of mothers, governesses, and colleagues. The desire to hold the girls at a photographed distance indicates a psychology that goes beyond mere escapism.

The bodies of the girls as Others go beyond issues of absence and 'darkness' (both as indicator of race and void space), beyond terra incognito; they possess a seductive inexplicableness. The English little girl depicted in Orientalized poses, attire, and/or settings were part of a larger cultural matrix of desire for paradoxical and enigmatic female child figure. It would be very easy to simply state that the power relationships employed and firmly established through British imperialism shaped these nineteenth-century Western images. Yet, the most titillating texts and figures produced during the century keep this aspect of power at least marginalized. They focus on divisions between black and white, English and non-English, Self and Other, child and adult, here and there, but they do not allow any of these oppositions to lead to a division between satiated and depleted. The binaries are not static enough to allow such closure: "[the child figures] engage in a shifting dynamic, seeming to allow both seeing and being seen, a move from subject to object and back, but no chance to hold the child or desire" (Kincaid, *Child-Loving* 276). The oppositions are
never reduced to a formula that can be deciphered, manipulated, controlled-and so the distance is never fully closed.

These illustrations and formulations certainly do not resolve the conflict between real and ideal girls, for it proved to be unresolvable. In fact, the conflict is productive, because the gap can never be closed. The images, however, allow artists and their audiences to feel like they are getting a peek at a world off-limits to them. They are not closing the gap, but traveling back and forth within it. The distances that are visualized in the images suggest that the girls are safely sequestered away from the corruption and decay of the world but accessible to select viewers (viewers that seem picked out of a crowd when they meet the subject's focused gaze).

The links between the sartorial fantasies and Oriental role-playing in Cameron’s and Dodgson’s photographs have crucial connotations for larger constructions of the realms of fantasy and reality in visual culture—that bipolarity upon which so much of nineteenth-century photographic work hinges. The photographs forge a stylistic equivalent between the unadorned nude, the child in a nightgown, and the elaborately clothed and posed subject who is enacting a fantasy of cultural and/or ethnic difference. The type for Orientalized girl figures—the languid pose, the side glances, the draped and partial clothing, the rich textures and lighting—is virtually identical to the one used in popular paintings and photographs coming into England from the colonies and Continent. Yet, the substitution of girls in traditionally women's roles reveals the irreconcilable duality of the Victorian little girl.
Notes

1. Although Nicéphore Niépce took the first photograph in 1826—a crude impression, which took eight hours to make, of a view from a window—Louis Daguerre offered a perfected process to the public in 1839. It was an immediate sensation worldwide.

2. By limiting this discussion to amateur photographers, I am intentionally excluding the commercial and mass-mediated photography that was generated by and catered to the upwardly mobile and the parvenu. These images were most often “realistic” markers of the sitter’s wealth, status, and family identity (even though the industry quickly learned to manipulate its apparent verisimilitude).

3. In 1876, Reverend George Reynolds wrote an article titled "Dr. Barnardo's Homes: Startling Revelations," which revealed that, "Barnardo is not satisfied with taking [the children] as they really are, but he tears their clothes, so as to make them appear worse than they really are" (56).

4. Oscar Rejlander moved to England from Sweden in the 1840s and began taking photographs around 1855. His most famous photograph is an allegory titled The two ways of life. It depicts a sage guiding two young men towards manhood, and it provoked considerable controversy because of its portrayal of nakedness. In the picture, one man looks towards wine, prostitution, and idling, while the other looks (with somewhat less enthusiasm) towards figures representing religion, family, and good works. The dilemma expressed by the young men provides an interesting allegory for the double “way of seeing” the girls in Rejlander’s photographs. Charles Dodgson greatly admired his work and techniques, and he sat for a portrait by Rejlander in 1879.

5. According to Donald Thomas, in his 1996 Lewis Carroll: A Biography with Background (New York: John Murray Publishers, Ltd.), “Behind the Regent Street or in the Haymarket were the well-known rendezvous, the dance-floor, gallery and alcoves of the Argyll Room or Kate Hamilton’s Night House, Barron’s Supper Rooms and the cafés of the Haymarket . . . Nearby, at the United Hotel in Charles Street, Dodgson made his London headquarters for most of his life” (179).

6. Both Deborah Gorham (City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London) and Donald Thomas (Lewis Carroll: A Biography with Background) discuss the pornographic book and photograph trade in and around the Strand.


9. Helmut Gernsheim (1913-1995) was a German-born British photographer, collector, and photographic historian who wrote *The History of Photography from the Earliest Use of the Camera Obscura in the Eleventh Century up to 1914* (1955), which was revised twice. After the World War II, Gernsheim devoted much of his time to researching and collecting the work of early photographers, which many had previously deemed unworthy of serious study. His collection, which eventually exceeded 33,000 images in addition to hundreds of books and pieces of antique photographic equipment, was purchased by the University of Texas at Austin in 1964. Some of Gernsheim's books include *Lewis Carroll: Photographer, Julia Margaret Cameron and A Concise History of Photography.*

10. Gyula Halász Brassai (1899-1984) is regarded as the photographer whose pictures form the basis upon which many non-Parisians’ ideas about Paris are formed. He is best known for his 1933 book of night pictures entitled *Paris de Nuit,* which met with critical acclaim. Brassai’s wanderings around the cafes and bars of Paris brought him into contact with many of the artists and writers living in the city during that period. He established lifelong ties with Picasso, Giacometti, Sartre, Henry Miller, and many others. Brassai’s reputation as a photographer had reached the United States by the mid-thirties, and some of his work was included in an exhibition entitled *Photography: 1839-1937* at the Museum of Modern Art.

11. See Deborah Gorham’s *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* for a complete discussion of how the daughter/sister served as the Victorian ideal of virtuous femininity where the necessarily sexual wife/mother could not do so.

12. “Lily-time” refers to the popular lines from Ernest Dowson’s poem “Growth”: “I watched the glory of her childhood change,/Half-sorrowful to find the child I knew,/ (Loved long ago in lily-time)/ Become a maid/mysterious and strange,/ With fair, pure eyes—dear eyes, but not the eyes I knew/ Of old, in the olden time!”

13. For Cameron, the image became an amalgam of sitter and referent. Almost all of Cameron's Madonna pictures were made between 1864 and 1865 - they hold large babies and full-bloomed white lilies. The images, which are often literally blurred, move metaphorically between categories, smearing the lines between sexual
and not-sexual, earthly and heavenly. For example, the photograph of Mary Hillier (a maid in the Cameron household), veiled and posed as a Madonna with two children, has a halo painted onto the negative emulsion, and Cameron's signature and the phrase "From Life" painted on the negative. This tension between life and art, like the tension between earth and heaven, holds the image without allowing the figures to settle into a specific or 'knowable' identity/setting. She is Mary Hillier, "Mary" (the nickname for domestic maids) and a representation of the Virgin Mary—working woman and holy mother.

14. The first daguerreotypes were praised because of the amount of detail recorded by them: looking at one with a magnifying glass, it was said, was like looking at nature with a telescope. For the first forty years or so, an attention to realism dominated the evaluation of photography's cultural value and role in the arts. The most popular photographic subjects were originally industrialized or urban cityscapes.

15. "Orientalist images" here refers to the Western harem fantasies that commonly featured partially-nude and veil-draped Odalisques, black eunuch servants, and Eastern architecture and ornament. The most famous Orientalist painter was Frenchman Jean-Leon Gerome (1824-1904). Many of his paintings, such as The Snake Charmer (which illustrates the cover of Edward Said's definitive study, Orientalism) and Drunken Bacchus and Cupid, also feature nude or scantily-clad children. Interestingly, Gerome used a camera to supplement his preliminary sketches later in life.

In Britain, there was not the same level of enthusiasm for the Middle East as in France, but nevertheless a fairly strong contingent of Orientalist painters existed. David Roberts produced popular collections of prints from his travels in the 1830s. Alma Tadema painted lavish Egyptian scenes before turning almost exclusively to Greece and Rome for his subjects. Holman Hunt went to Israel and Egypt to paint customs of the Holy Land, and J.F. Lewis painted harem scenes while living the life of a Turkish nobleman.

16. The term “angel bright” refers to Charles Dodgson’s 1877 acrostic poem to Agnes Hull, in which his girl subject is “a childish sprite./Earthborn and yet as angel bright.”
CHAPTER 5:
“HER DOUBLE PERVERSITY”: ERNEST DOWSON AND
THE DUALITY OF LATE-VICTORIAN GIRLHOOD

Quel dommage that the world isn’t composed entirely of little girls from 6 – 12!

—Letter to Arthur Moore, 27 August 1890

Last night, ah, yesternight, betwixt her lips and mine
There fell thy shadow, Cynara! thy breath was shed
Upon my soul between the kisses and the wine.

—“Non Sum Qualis Eram Bonæ Sub Regno Cynarae”
(ll. 1 – 3)

Ernest Dowson is infamous for the number of texts in his corpus that address or celebrate a little girl. Throughout his career, he insisted on conflating presumably antithetical categories—innocent/corrupt, fictional/real, sacred/profane—and he used these paradoxes to glorify and help shape the now-classic image of the alluring Victorian “little girl.” Indeed, his personal relationship with the real little girl Adelaide Foltinowicz fueled sensational legends that have overshadowed key nuances in his work for more than one hundred years, even though Dowson had fashioned his archetypal girl figure long before he met Adelaide, and his fictional dream-girls were, in fact, incompatible with his real-life girlfriend. The girls of his poems and stories are most often rural, spectral, and sheltered, while Adelaide was an urban, worldly,
and tangible working girl. Yet, this incongruity does not undermine the validity or sincerity of his aesthetic; it provides, instead, the clearest illustration of exactly how that aesthetic operated. Dowson worshipped Adelaide as a “double perversity of enfant gâtée and jeune fille coquette,” and his poems and stories rely on a tension created by the irreconcilable schism between the ideal and the mundane—a schism created and sustained by girls who exist within a space that constantly negotiates two equally important ends of a spectrum (Letters 275). At one end of the spectrum, the girl figures as a corruptible (and corrupting) agent of transgression and sexual vice. At the other, she possesses an invulnerable chastity that aligns her with domesticity and a sense of moral duty. In short, the ideal Dowson girl embodies some fundamental duality (innocent/corrupt, virginal/carnal, sacred/profane) and is able to keep that duality in tension, so that the “dainty eyes” and the “bought red mouth” in his poems become contending sides of the same girl figure. Neither side can complete the formula without the other, because if they are isolated, the ideal girl becomes distant and cold, and the “real” or mundane girl becomes fallen, aesthetically flawed, and utterly forgettable.

The poem “Yvonne of Brittany” provides the clearest example of this unstable balance between two paradoxical extremes. The speaker in the poem is captivated by the girl Yvonne while she is between girlhood and womanhood—sequestered within the walls of her mother’s garden but also in “the first faint flush of love” (l. 24). She is innocent, but she is on the verge of knowing. As the poem begins, she is pictured in a coronet of “starry blossoms,” white flowers that mark the pristine first bloom of the apple orchard and, in this case, of the girl herself. Yet, these unsullied youthful
blooms are immediately threatened by an impending press and harvest as Yvonne’s admirer speaks “of the apple harvest,/When the cider press is set” (ll. 13-14). The poem moves quickly from spring to mid-summer, and the girl, adorned with white blossoms at the beginning of the poem, is figuratively deflowered: “In the fulness of midsummer,/When the apple-bloom was shed,/Oh, brave was your surrender,/Though shy the words you said./I was so glad, so glad, Yvonne!/To have led you home at last” (ll. 25-30). As soon as the girl “sheds” her apple blossoms and “surrenders,” she becomes tangible and sexualized, destroying the tension between innocence and corruption that had previously sustained the orchard scene. Predictably, after this symbolic consummation/conquest, Yvonne is suddenly dead in the next stanza and the speaker ceases to think of her: “There is dew on your grave grass, Yvonne!/But your feet it shall not wet:/No, you never remember, Yvonne!/And I shall soon forget” (ll. 38-39). Once the tenuous balance between innocence and corruption is destroyed, Yvonne becomes literally and figuratively lifeless to the speaker. She no longer holds any fascination for him; indeed, she is forgettable, for Dowsonian girls like Yvonne embody, or are made to embody a paradox that gives equal consideration to the girls’ transcendence and their potential ruin.

In fact, the most common mistake in Dowson criticism to date has been the seemingly unquestioned claim that the little girls of his poems are somehow sequestered within a world of youth, innocence, timelessness, or art. If these girls were securely located in a sphere of “lily-time,” the poet would have little to do besides admire them or long for them from a distance. The resulting poetry would surely overflow, as Dowson’s does, with pathos and even intoxicating life-weariness,
but it would not contain the tension and anxiety that characterizes Dowson’s work. In poem after poem, and with almost excruciating languor, Dowson portrays little girls not as safely untouchable and sequestered, but as fragile and vulnerable. The speaker in “Ad Domnulam Suam,” for example, loves a “fairy land” girl “too well” and must part “ere this love grow stronger” (ll. 5, 14, 20). Far from being invulnerable, the fairy girl relies on the mercy of the speaker and comes dangerously close to sharing the fate of Yvonne in “Yvonne of Brittany.” In “Cease smiling, Dear!” Dowson explains that “Sweet are thine eyes, but how can I be glad,/Knowing they change so soon?” (ll. 3-4), emphasizing his subject’s inevitable degeneration. In both his poetry and fiction, he revels in the girls’ vulnerability and watches them with fearful apprehension. Far from being safely or successfully contained anywhere outside of death or at anytime, the longed-for fillettes walk an extremely precarious tightrope that Dowson anxiously shakes at crucial moments. Sometimes the girls fall and sometimes they merely wobble, but they are certainly never safe. They always exist between two polar and contradictory positions.

Dowson’s bifurcated view of girls is entirely unsurprising when considered in connection with class-based constructions of the nineteenth-century girl as chaste/innocent in some cases and sexual/worldly in others. He embraced this titillating duality, and his own contradictory attitude to young girls is clear in his personal responses to and treatment of London working-class girls. In 1889, Dowson attributed his decision against having carnal relations with a 15-year-old tobacconist’s daughter named Bertha Van Raalte not to any presupposed innocence in this working-class girl, but to the Criminal Law Amendment Act, which in 1885 set the age of
consent at 16 years old: he reports that after sitting “for some two hours & a half on
the sofa with [his] arm round the waist of the demoiselle,” he and his friend (who also
had a girl with him) “agreed that in view of the new act le jeu ne valait [the game was
not worth it]” (Letters 118). Yet, in 1891, Dowson reacted very differently to a law
court account in The Star that described the proceedings against journalist Edward
Newton for abducting and having sex with fifteen-year-old Lucy Pearman (the
daughter of a Strand tobacconist). Dowson feared that the story would cast an overtly
sexual pall over his relationship with his child-pet Adelaide Foltinowicz, who was
only slightly younger than Pearman, thus destroying Adelaide’s ability to appear as
both ethereal enfant and Soho coquette. Despite his repeated descriptions of Adelaide
as an immaculate “Beata Beatrix,” Dowson panicked over what he thought would be
the inevitable assumption that his relationship with the girl was prurient.
Immediately recognizing that Victorians implicitly linked social class and sexual
status, he rhetorically constructed Adelaide as a victim of social deviance and
debauchery: “This beastly thing has left a sort of slimy trail over my holy places…I
am simply stupid with disgust and anger at everything and everybody in this very
gross world; and sick to death at the notion of things changing, and my one
consolation being done away with” (213). Because Adelaide’s working-class status
immediately called her sexual status and availability into question, Dowson firmly
established her position as a vulnerable “holy” innocent in a “gross world.” He
undermines the girls’ recognized sexuality by focusing on the “disgusting” man at the
center of the “scandal,” making Newton and men like him into consumers and
working-class girls into the consumed.
The phenomenal popularity of London scandals like the Stead and Newton cases encouraged Victorians to regard little girls as paradoxical figures of virtue and sin; and, though these tabloids fueled a cultish obsession with little girls, they were not the only institutions to do so. Part of Dowson’s fascination with little girls can be explained by the popularity of *amie-enfants* at Oxford during his years of enrollment: October 1886 to March 1888. The Oxford cult of the little girl always exhibited a somewhat bifurcated mentality reflective of the dual status of the girls; during the week students and professors would idolize the dons’ daughters, while on the weekend they observed working-class girls in London music halls and restaurants during frequent trips to the city’s West End. Often, as in the case of Dodgson, Ruskin, and Dowson, the Oxford child-pets were *physically* incorporated into a liminal duality by accompanying their admirers to music halls. At the halls, the men could watch as middle-class daughters watched working-class girls (in middle-class costume) make sexual innuendo to an adoring audience. It required only the most modest voyeuristic transposition to have the middle-class girl create an effect equivalent to the one produced by streetwise music hall girls dressed as nursery children. The girl herself—whether a professor’s daughter or a music hall child actress—existed somewhere between two paradoxical definitions of her; these stagings of streetwise actresses in starched pinafores, as well as the popular images of middle-class girls dressed as beggar maids, transformed each girl into a pastiche of innocence and corruption.

It was on one such trip that Dowson, who identified himself as “a worshipper and devout follower of the most excellent cult of la Fillette,” stopped at the
Foltinowicz’s Polish restaurant and made a child-pet of Adelaide, who was twelve or thirteen at the time (164). It is highly questionable that Dowson originally considered Adelaide (often referred to as “Missie”) as a potential wife; instead, she embodied a preconceived ideal for Dowson—a model for a paradoxical sexuality that was artistically, philosophically, and erotically productive. Onto Adelaide Dowson projected an ideal of girlhood that was rooted equally in the pristine gardens of middle-class Oxford daughters and the urban haunts of London music hall girls.

There is some confusion about when Dowson first met Adelaide. Mark Longaker claims that the poet found her “sometime in 1891, when his habit of dining in Soho was already fixed” (74). Yet, in October of 1890, Dowson records a visit to a panoramic show of Niagara Falls with his “little Lady of Poland,” and two months later, he rejoices in escorting Adelaide, “Missie,” on her first visit to Madame Tussaud’s Wax Museum (Letters 174, 183). The paradoxical little girl from his sonnets “which had been a more or less abstract inspiration took on a concrete, living form” (Longaker 75). He had found a girl onto whom he could project his ideals and desire, and who possessed the unconstrained flair for artifice that he praised in “The Cult of the Child.” As Edgar Jepson remembers, Dowson’s “love-affair was, it struck me from the first, a matter of imagination, or of common form” (Jepson 50). He began taking her to his beloved music halls and London entertainments, and he wrote enthusiastically about their evenings spent at the local amusements. Because Adelaide was innocuously attractive—neither too beautiful nor too plain—and she had no trace of cockney in her speech, Dowson could imagine her as a middle-class girl playing the role of a working girl, and vice versa: “as his attachment to the girl
grew and some of his friends tried to discourage him in pursuing it, he intimated that the Foltinowiczes had seen better times, and that their present condition was only a makeshift until the lines of life fell unto them in more pleasant places” (Longaker 77). Mark Longaker is correct to stress that Adelaide was not a force “giving direction to [Dowson’s] art and life”; she was the product of his desire to unite art and life (77). She was constructed to fit a prefabricated mold.

By 1892, Dowson referred to his visits to the Soho restaurant by writing, “I go to the Cult of Adelka [Adelaide]” (Letters 185). He rhetorically fashions the Soho restaurant as a quasi-religious space—a “cult.” However, other patrons described it as far more secular and even seedy. Conan O’Riordan claimed that “the odor of the place nauseated him, that the restaurant was not only uninteresting but ill kept,” and another friend “found a single visit to Poland enough to keep him out of Soho for years” (Longaker 75). Yet, this restaurant—part shrine and part dive—was ideal for Dowson’s worship of the paradoxical girl figure in that it balanced art and reality.

Both the girl and her surroundings were celebrated places where the opposites came together—the sacred and the profane, art and life. In February of 1891, Dowson took Adelaide to Hengler’s Grand Cirque he documents his excitement over having her photographed at the Deutsch Exposition a week following the date of the letter (Letters 183). He is especially anxious to prove to Arthur Moore, to whom the letter is written, “how curiously like she is to at least two photographs of Minnie [Terry]” (196). As is evident in these letters, Dowson reveled in the artistry and construction of his paradoxical child-pet. He delighted in how much Adelaide looked like the popular girl icons of the London stage, particularly child phenomenon Minnie Terry.
Figure 5-1:
Photograph of Minnie Terry
(figure 5-1), playing coquettish roles that masked a more sophisticated reality. In his correspondence, Dowson celebrates girls as objets d’art and he compares them as such. After a production of *Nixie* at the Globe Theatre, he writes:

...the last matinée of *Nixie* and I duly repaired there in company with notre petite Polonaise. She seemed to like the play which bien entendu is a werry poor one. “Nixie” is a clever child enough but not as pretty either as Mignon or my little Missy herself (148).

Even more precise is a letter to Arthur Moore in which Dowson admits, “I am glad you mistook Minnie Terry so: I always thought there was a strong likeness, & that is an excellent corroboration: but Adelaide must be taller” (206).

In another letter (7 February 1890), he writes about taking Adelaide to the Egyptian Hall (Maskelyne’s magic show) and then to meet Arthur Cecil Hillier, a friend from Oxford who had been at Worcester College. Such evenings illustrate her duality in Dowson’s eyes. She could balance the titillating qualities in both music halls and Oxford cloisters. He writes in an 1890 letter to Arthur Moore, “My dinners there [at Poland] now remind me more than anything else of certain hospitable ‘nursery teas’ at which some years ago I was a frequent visitor before my cousins who partook of them had grown up into formidable young ladies” (135). Dowson positions Adelaide and himself between the two extremes of a middle-class “nursery tea” and dinner at the Soho nightspot. He imagines his dinners at Poland, at which Adelaide served him, as a tea party for little girls who would grow into “formidable young ladies.” By remembering the scene in this way, Dowson holds both ends of spectrum in tension, using his fantasy of Adelaide to enjoy both simultaneously.

He played on the artifice that he celebrated in little girls—“the glorious imagination” for an “infinity of rôles”—to cast Adelaide as a “petite Polonaise” and
“little lady of Poland.” So, when Dowson dedicates his first book of poems to Adelaide, writing “To You Who Are My Verses,” the Soho waitress is figuratively transfigured into the verses about ideal little girls in distant, sequestered locales. Also, in his letters, Dowson notes that Adelaide could “play the fiddle very prettily.” In one 1890 letter to Arthur Moore, he even mentions seeing “Missy & a small French boy play duets very charmingly on two violins” (169). Later, in “Souvenirs of an Egoist,” he disembodies his creation and textualizes her completely. The “mysterious, sad Slavonic beauty,” the confidante and musical partner of a small French boy named Anton, is described as a girl who plays violin and has an immigrant father who owns a restaurant in Soho. Adelaide was figuratively transformed into a work of art. Like the speaker in “Villanelle of His Lady’s Treasures,” Dowson transforms his ordinary girl into an objet d’art: “I took her dainty eyes, as well/As silken tendrils of her hair...I took her voice, a silver bell...I took her whiteness virginal/And from her cheek two roses rare...I stole her laugh, most musical:/I wrought it in with artful care;/I took her dainty eyes as well;/And so I made a Villanelle” (Poems 33). The streetwise and almost certainly tangible girl of London and the spiritual, taintless girl of verse/fiction work together (not only for Dowson, but for readers of his verse/fiction, the majority of which were familiar with girls like Adelaide) to create an arousing, eternally-conflicted dual figure.

Yet, Adelaide could not remain a child and the romance “ended by being a torture” after Dowson deliberated endlessly over his desire to marry her (Jepson 50). In May of 1897, when Adelaide was almost eighteen, Dowson returned to London from Pont Aven. He immediately inquired about his girl-ideal and learned that she
was engaged to Auguste, the waiter at her parents’ restaurant. He was distraught by the news, as he explains in a letter to Sam Smith, a fellow student and friend from his undergraduate years: “I know you must think me a fool, but I am suffering the torture of the damned. I ought to have drowned myself at Pont-Aven, or having come back to London, I ought to have had the strength of mind to have kept away. Now, if I change my rooms or go to the Arctic Pole it is only an increased intolerable Hell” (Longaker 230). Dowson suffered through his demoiselle’s unalterable progress from childhood to womanhood, watching from the sidelines as she became sex conscious and sophisticated. She was no longer alluring. “The Princess of Dreams,” presumably inspired by Dowson’s relationship with Adelaide, provides a useful allegory. The story’s hero dreams of a princess and sets out to find her in a Tennysonian “enchanted tower of ivory” (Decorations 85). She seems completely isolated and aestheticized. Moreover, like Sebastian Murch in “A Case of Conscience,” the knightly dreamer intends to find a sequestered angel living outside his own life-weary world. Instead, we learn that he finds a common girl who is sheltered only by a vicious porter. The speaker of the story informs us that “there are some who say that she had no wish to be freed, and that those flowers de luce, her eyes, are a stagnant, dark pool, that her glorious golden hair was only long enough to reach her postern gate. Some say, moreover, that her tower is not of ivory and that she is not even virtuous or a princess” (87). The idealized princess is only perceived as a dream; in reality, she may be common and corrupted. The tension between the girl’s pristine, sequestered guise and the truth that she may not be “virtuous or a princess” balances her between two extremes. Adelaide ceased to maintain this
balance when she married; her role as wife made her common and accessible, no longer to play the role of unsullied little girl.

Dowson began building a model for his ideal girl in his “Sonnets—To a Little Girl,” published one month after his arrival at Oxford. In these sonnets, Dowson lays out the framework for his later poetic themes and constructions of the ideal little girl—a framework that juxtaposes the girl’s ethereality with a distinct corporeality. The eight sonnets (including an Epilogue) set up “le thème de la femme enfant/femme fatale…elle allégorise la beauté et le mal, la cruauté et la souffrance, la pureté et la perversité” [“the theme of the woman-child/femme fatale” who “allegorizes beauty and evil, cruelty and suffering, purity and perversity”] (Chardin 146). They present a paradox that balances the little girl’s physicality (stressed in descriptions of her fetishized physical features) and the mystical and quasi-religious power located in her features, as well as the fatal consequences of actually consummating any love with her. Throughout the sonnets, Dowson maintains a tension between the girl’s sensual allure and her intangibility by blending the romantic tradition of the love sonnet with a reverential tone (most clearly noted in his use of “thy” and “thou” as forms of address) that belies any intimacy or union with the girl subject.

Sonnets I and II set up the little girl as the sanctifying feminine ideal who restores the speaker when “friends are false and woman’s troth proves frail” (I: l. 4).? The child’s love is “one sweet thing,/One fresh oasis in the wilderness/Of this sad world whereunto thou shalt cling/As to salvation” (II. 6-9). Just when the speaker thought “that ideal” was unattainable in a dark world, the child “passed the dark’ning
road along/And lit it with her childhood” (II: ll. 9-10). As the second sonnet ends, the girl is celestial (likened to the sun), divine, and beatific. She strengthens the speaker’s soul and causes his life to “burst flowerlike” into “praise and song”;
however, while her physicality makes her invulnerable, it also makes her one-dimensional.

In Sonnet III, Dowson uses the girl’s undisclosed name to construct a more complicated and contradictory female ideal—one that is both flesh and dream. As in his dedication to Adelaide in the preface to Verses—“les delices de la chair et de l’ame etaient contenues pour moi dans votre nom que je me repetais en tachant de le baiser sur mes levres [the delicateness of the flesh and the heart were contained for me in your name, which I repeat to myself by staining kisses on my lips]”—Dowson uses the girl’s name as a mediator between carnality (“the flesh”) and ethereality (“the heart”). First, he describes his treatment of her name as sensual and erotic: “thou wouldst not believe/How thy dear treasured name will oft relieve/my sinking heart, how sweetly soft and low/My lips will frame it loath to let it go,/And kiss it quietly till I cease to grieve” (ll. 4-8). His interaction with the girl’s name is physical; he wraps his lips around it and kisses it until he finds solace from his life-weariness. Like a fetishized piece of clothing associated with the girl, her name replaces the body of the girl herself. Dowson describes a very tangible, physical longing for the girl, but the girl herself is never touched. In fact, the next line of the sonnet abruptly removes her to a spectral, spiritual space. Her name, which was at first a sexualized medium between the poet and the girl, is now a religious relic: “It is mine amulet, wrought rich and rare/With lovely fantasies, it is a charm/That whispered gently
guardeth me from harm” (ll. 9-11). The girl’s name—both an “amulet” and a
“charm”—unlocks mysterious fantasies for the poet because of its association with
the child. Metonymically, the girl becomes both fantasy and phantasm. As the poem
closes, Dowson blurs the lines between religion and mythology, paganism and piety,
as he further distances the once tangible link (the girl’s name) with the unnamed girl:
“It is my ritual, my mystic prayer./And in the hush of night thro’ lattice bars/I see it
written in the lonely stars” (ll. 12-14). The use of words like “ritual” and “mystic
prayer” suggest both Marian devotion and pagan rite, chastity and fertility, as the girl
becomes an amalgam of angel and constellation.

Sonnets IV, V, and VI continue to present a fetishized construction of the
adored/desired little girl. The speaker now imagines the girl as a “dear saint” who
releases him from a life-weariness that tosses and torments him. Yet, the girl does
not do anything. He is saved from his despair by the power that he finds inherent in
her physical form. Dowson continues the metonymical relationship that he began
between the girl’s name and the girl herself, but the ritual now moves from language
to the “ebb and flow” of the girl’s body: “with reverent awe I hold/Thy tender hand,
and in those pure grey eyes,/That sweet child face, those tumbled curls of gold,/And
in thy smiles and loving, soft replies/I find the whole of love—hear full and low/Its
mystic ocean’s tremulous ebb and flow” (ll. 9-14). The girl’s hands, eyes, face, hair,
and mouth are meticulously revisited throughout the sonnets. In these descriptions
the tenderness, purity, sweetness, and mysticism that make the child ethereal are
revealed explicitly and ironically in her very corporeality.
In the final two sonnets, the speaker asks for the girl’s forgiveness for an unspecified blasphemy and imagines that only death can preserve the tension that sustains his ever-endangered child-love. First, the speaker laments, “O child, my child, forgive me. I am vain,/Unworthy of thy love” (VII: l. 9-10). Here the girl changes from savior to victim and judge, forcing the reader to ask how the speaker has betrayed the child. The speaker’s unworthiness becomes life-weariness and desolation in the Epilogue, in which he regrets that he and the little girl “have reaped the crops the gods have sown.” (VIII: l. 3). The sexual, pagan images are no longer ambiguous; the intangible, ethereal child-love is consummated and thus transformed into something “perverse and aimless”—the day is “overworn” and “Despair and death; deep darkness o’er the land/Broods like an owl” (ll. 4-5). Instead of finding “the whole of love” in the girl’s smile, as he did in earlier sonnets, the speaker now wishes to escape love altogether. He longs for a space “where’s rest for the old,/Freedom to all from love and fear and lust./Twine our torn hands! O pray the earth enfold/Our life-sick hearts and turn them into dust” (ll. 11-4). The girl is no longer able to rescue the poet; only her “torn hands” and “life-sick heart” remain visible. The angelic, spectral creature of the earlier sonnets in the sequence is literally grounded as both the speaker and the ethereal girl turn into dust in the poem’s final line. In order for the paradoxical girl figure to maintain her allure, Dowson constructs her as physically alluring and affectionate but also just out of reach. She embodies a balance between sexuality and sensuality, pagan goddess and pious angel. If one end of this duality were compromised in the poems, the effect would be lost.
So it is in Dowson’s world young girls come to evoke, or are made to embody, a kind of in-between state, revealing to their enchanted admirers the potential for both innocence and corruption. In many of Dowson’s poems and stories, white petals (usually apple blossoms) like the ones in “Yvonne of Brittany” are symbolic of innocence, youth, and an Eden prior to the full fruit of temptation. The girl in “Villanelle of Marguerites,” for example, appears to be unearthly and virginal, judging from the symbolic “snowy petals” that she casts into the air (l. 2). At first, she seems distant and, thus, safe from the speakers desires: “She would not answer us if we should call/Across the years: her visions are too fair . . . She knows us not, nor recks if she enthrall/With voice and eyes and fashion of her hair,/A little, passionately, not at all!” (ll. 7-12). But then in the next stanza we get a much more problematic description: “Knee-deep she goes in meadow grasses tall,/Kissed by the daisies that her fingers tear:/And what care we how many petals fall!” (ll. 13-15). The “snowy petals” of the poem’s beginning become wild flowers (daisies) that kiss the girl as she seems to resist and “tear” at them. The scene’s similarity to the girl’s sexual surrender in “Yvonne of Brittany”—“The dear trees lavishing/Rain of their starry blossoms . . . your mother came out chiding,/For the grass was green with dew” (ll. 4-5, 19-20) and in “My Lady April”—“Dew on her robe and on her tangled hair . . . behold her pass/With dainty step brushing the young, green grass”—add an ambiguously sexual overtone to the idyllic landscape (ll. 1-3). Her symbolic intimacy with this landscape creates an erotic scene that retains an innocent quality in the absence of a human lover. Even more clear is the symbolism of “Amor Umbratilis”: “I lay/My lips upon your trodden, daisied grass” (ll. 15). Clearly, the “daisied
[implying wildness] grass”—or her “green grassy bed,” as it is called in “Chanson Sans Paroles” (1.14), signify a carnality in the girl. Still, the tension remains in balance as long as the sexual intimacy is only symbolic.

In these gardens and meadows, Dowson’s girl figure is both airy visions, evoking sensations of a rarefied world, and at the same time, spectacles of sexualized bodies to be desired and surrendered. In “Flos Lunae” Dowson focuses on a girl who originally seems inaccessible, removed, and almost heartless, but some of the same anxieties and ambiguities—adoration and desire, sanctity and sacrifice, chastity and carnality—emerge as the poem continues. The speaker opens the poem by saying, “I would not alter thy cold eyes, nor trouble the calm fount of speech/With aught of passion or surprise./The heart of thee I cannot reach” (ll. 1-4). His tone is both deferential and desperate, as he admits that he desires this cold figure. This girl seems impervious to the surrenders and falls experienced by warm, affectionate girls in “Yvonne of Brittany,” “My Lady April,” and “Amor Umbratilis.” Yet, as soon as sexual desire enters the scene, the line blurs between the poem’s religious intimations and its sensual insinuations—a polarity that recurs in most of Dowson’s constructions of little girls. The speaker professes, “I would not change thee if I might,/To whom my prayers for incense rise,/Daughter of dreams! my moon of night!” (ll. 12-14). On the surface, he seems to be addressing the Virgin Mary. Yet, “daughter of dreams” implies a little girl of fantasy, while the moon symbolizes both witchcraft, as in Dowson’s “The Three Witches”—“We, the children of Astarte,/Dear abortions of the moon” (ll. 13-14)—and a distant objet d’amour, as in the play Pierrot of the
Minute. She resembles simultaneously a Marian icon and an antique Venus, a flower-strewn altar that is both chaste and erotic.

As one might expect from someone who converted to Catholicism around 1891 and was spotted kneeling before the image of a martyred virgin in an Arques cathedral, for Dowson, Catholicism provided historical and cultural female models for paradoxical combinations of virginity, sensuality, physicality, and ethereality. "Nuns of Perpetual Adoration" offers one of the clearest illustrations of the Church's role in the construction of Dowson's chaste female ideals—both erotically sensual and blessed. In fact, the poem relies on paradox. The nuns live within a "wild and passionate" world, but they are "behind high convent walls." They also enter into chaste wedlock with a crucified "living Christ." Indeed, the Carmelites, about whom the poem is written, claimed to be "Mary's Order"—an order devoted to a figure who is both virgin and mother simultaneously. In the poem, they live within a "wild and passionate" world, but they are "behind high convent walls," and they enter into chaste wedlock with a crucified "living Christ." These paradoxes—between chastity and sexuality, life and death, sanctity and sin—provide a clear articulation of the tensions that are usually embodied in Dowson's little girls.

For Dowson, the Church was not a place in which to hide from desire, but instead a suitable stage on which to perform it. Roman Catholicism, with its attention to ritual, especially the sensual use of sacred oils, acquired a certain exoticism within Victorian culture. Like Dowson's enthusiasm for paradoxical girl figures, Catholicism was respectable and subversive simultaneously. In fact, his penchant for using both to stage a passion for girlishness and a passion for Godliness is evident in
a January 3, 1889 letter to Arthur Moore, in which he raved over “Le Rêve” by Emile Zola, Dowson’s favorite writer while he was at Oxford:

I will mention only now the chapter in which Monsignore brings the extreme unction to the girl who is supposed to be dying. It is Zola at his best. . . . The purifying of the separate orifices of sensation with the consecrated oils strikes me as an excessively fine notion. I think if I have a death-bed (wh. I don’t desire) I must be reconciled to Rome for the sake of that piece of ritual (Letters 21-22).

The dying girl is other-worldly and palely saintly, but she is also very physical; her dramatic surroundings are both shrine and boudoir. Simultaneously drawing our attention to the hallowed deathbed and the girl’s “separate orifices of sensation,” the ritual brings earthly space and sacred space together in a fit of theatrical pageantry and sensuality. The Church becomes an elaborate paradox filled with gem-encrusted objects of fetishistic wonder and mystery, which produces a sensual literature, in which, according to Arthur Symbols, “the visible world is no longer a reality and the unseen world is no longer a dream” (quoted in Platt 98).

That this tension between vice and virtue should be fetishized is hardly surprising, since Dowson’s aesthetic and resulting iconography were so heavily and decisively influenced by his readings in Continental literature, such as Emile Zola. In addition to “Le Rêve,” Zola’s novel The Sin of Father Mouret presents in its portrayal of its characters’ sensual religious devotion an image of the tension between sin and sanctity (embodied in fetishized children’s features) that correlates directly with Dowson’s erotic spirituality. For example, in a prayer to the Virgin Mary, Father Mouret exclaims, “Only blond heads should surround you, only a race of children who love you, their hands pure, their lips healthy, their limbs tender, without dirt, as if they were slipping out of a bath of milk” (Zola 98). In this passage, the celebration
of children’s features fuses with the religious celebration, giving the prayer an almost carnal and pagan quality. The children’s bodies are erotic and titillating, but they are associated with the Virgin Mary’s chastity and sanctity. This quality again creates a dualistic Virgin Mary and a quasi-mythical child, both holy and secular, innocent and erotic.

Applying this high church fetishism to his poetry, Dowson simultaneously dislocates and focuses on sensuality in “Extreme Unction”: “Upon the eyes, the lips, the feet./On all the passages of sense,/The atoning oil is spread with sweet/Renewal of lost innocence” (ll. 1-4). Like Zola’s description of the dying girl’s extreme unction in “Le Rêve”—“the purifying of the separate orifices of sensation with the consecrated oils”—Dowson’s poetry plays with the duality that is so crucial in his little girl figures, creating a scene in which a sensual, physical act (fetishistically dislocated onto her eyes and mouth) actually purifies the girl’s orifices and restores innocence to its subject.

Similarly, Dowson’s various characterizations of the Virgin Mary, a prototype for Dowson’s ideal girl figure, slip between benevolent nurturer and femme fatale. In “Carthusians,” the Virgin Mary is a “sweet star” that is “never outcast.” As we “fling up flowers and laugh . . . across the wine,” she leads the monks to the “sweeter service of the most dolorous Cross” (ll. 29,24). Likewise, in “Nuns of Perpetual Adoration,” “Mary’s sweet star” provides sanctuary and rest for the nuns, as the outside world’s “roses fade.” In both cases, Mary is a shielding and spectral savior. Yet, when the protagonist in “Impenitentia Ultima” speaks of his life amidst “the world’s sad roses,” he does not pray for a peace gained from the Carmelite veiled
heads or the lonely hearts of the Carthusians; instead, he prays to “cast aside the veil of dolorous years” for a chance to see “[h]er pure and pitiful eyes shine out, and bathe her feet with tears” (ll. 10, 12):

Her pitiful hands should calm, and her hair stream down and blind me, Out of the sight of night, and out of the reach of fear, And her eyes should be my light whilst the sun went out behind me, And the viols of her voice be the last sound in mine ear (ll. 13-16).

The general beatific vision, blocking the adoring sinner from darkness, is strikingly similar to descriptions of the Virgin Mary in other poems. However, the fetishized eyes, hands, feet, and lips of this girl are ultimately damning: the speaker entreats, “I will praise Thee, Lord in Hell, while my limbs are racked asunder,/For the last sad sight of her face and the little grace of an hour” (ll. 19-20). She offers “grace,” but this grace condemns the speaker to hell.

In several letters (between October 1890 and February 1891) to Arthur Moore, Dowson finds this same pastiche of angel and temptress in his various descriptions of Adelaide in a parade of “charming and demure & white veiled” communicants. Here again he uses Catholic ritual to stage his passion for a seemingly consecrated girl: “I have just returned from Notre Dame de France; a function of sorts, very excellently done. I could espy my ‘Beata Beatrix’ amongst the veiled Enfants de Marie” (Letters 195). In another description, he further idealizes her, recalling scenes from more than one of his poems and stories:

I just managed to discern my special Enfant in spite of her veil, carrying a very big banner. . . . It was a wonderful & beautiful situation: the church—rather dark the smell of incense—the long line of graceful little girls all with their white veils over their heads—banners—; a few sad faced nuns—and last of all the priests carrying the Host, vested in white (172).
Unlike Ruskin, Dowson does not find the parade of innocents enticing in itself, but only as a backdrop for a Soho girl dressed to look like an angel. Dowson represented Adelaide as both saintly and sensual, and we cannot forget that this duality is the cornerstone of his fascination with her. In fact, he focuses on this duality in his description of the scene:

It was a wonderful & beautiful situation: the church—rather dark the smell of incense—the long line of graceful little girls all with their white veils over their heads—banners--: a few sad faced nuns—and last of all the priest carrying the Host, vested in white—censed by an acolyte who walked backwards—tossing his censer up “like a great gilt flower”: and to come outside afterwards—London again—the sullen streets and the sordid people of Leicester Square! Really a most pictorial evening (172).

The paradox created by the vision of the communicants' and celebrants’ celestial appearance against such an infamous and sordid urban setting affirmed the shifting, unsecured identity of the girl, which Dowson let drift between the sturdy fixities of femme bonnête and fille publique.

Dowson continues to use traditionally religious rituals to stage the balance between sanctity and sin in “Diary of a Successful Man,” which interestingly features two churches of opposite symbolic valences: the Church of Notre Dame (the Church of Our Lady) and the Church of the Dames Rouge (the Church of the Red Ladies).

At the Dames Rouge mass, the story’s hero, Lorimer, is described in a way that spotlights the ambiguity and sensuality of the religious devotion/earthly desire matrix:

His lips moved from time to time spasmodically, in prayer or ejaculation: then as the jubilant organ burst out, and the officiating priest in his dalmatic cloth of gold passed from the sacristy and genuflected at the altar, he seemed to be listening in a very passion of attention. But as the incense began to fill the air, and the Litany of Loreto smote on my ear to some sorrowful, undulating Gregorian, I lost thought of the wretched man beside me. . . (22).
The spasmodic movement of Lorimer’s lips, the ejaculatory prayers, the bursting organ, and the undulating Gregorian chant provide an inarguable illustration of the association that Dowson made between religious and erotic rapture. The sensuality of religious ritual brings the character to figurative orgasm, yet the entire scene remains shrouded under the pretext of devout piety. The color play between the Church of Notre Dame (suggesting purity, virginity, lily-whiteness) and the Church of the Dames Rouge is also significant. The balance between the two colors, white and red respectively, highlights a more fundamental balance between an attentive, chaste devotion (Notre Dame) and a rapturous “passion of attention” (Dames Rouge).

Relying on similar color imagery, “To a Lady Asking Foolish Questions” opens with a Pierrot-like speaker who laments that Chloe, the speaker’s objet d’amour is intangible, but her “lips are red and thy breasts upbraid the snow” (1. 7). Her red lips and snowy white breasts sexualize the moon-girl and problematize her chaste image. Yet, again, the red/white opposition balances the duality that is so desired in Dowson girls—a duality that celebrates the girls’ sexuality without destroying the tension between innocence and eroticism. Later in the poem, when the girl’s lips “grow pale” and her breasts wither (becoming dull brown/gray, according to the poem), it is still the same two colors that characterize her in-between state: “There is neither white nor red in the pleasance where I go./Because thy lips grow pale and thy breasts grow dun and fall?/I go where the wind blows, Chloe, and am not sorry at all” (ll. 8-10). Now the lack of innocence and sexuality makes the girl equally paradoxical. Likewise, in Dowson’s most famous poem, “Non Sum Qualis Eram Bonae Sub Regno Cynaræ,” the speaker fetishizes a prostitute as “lips of my
desire” and a “bought red mouth” (ll. 23, 9). Her disembodied red mouth, directly offsetting “pale” lilies and a gray dawn, is inextricably linked with wine, riotous living, and despair, as in the way the overtly sexual Manon in “Rondeau” possesses “rich red beauty” and “wine-stained lips,” which are contrasted with “white roses of virginity” (ll. 3, 11, 14). Again, a paradox is constructed on the body of the little girl, continually situating her between two equally necessary extremes.

In each case, it is important to note that Dowson does not fetishize these little girls in order to illustrate the tensions of “youth versus age,” “innocence versus corruption,” and “sexuality versus chastity.” Instead, the eyes, hair, hands, and mouths of girls’ bodies represent the tensions of “youth and age,” “innocence and corruption,” “sexuality and chastity.” These representations of Victorian girls’ bodies reflect the conflicting cultural message of the time that depicted the female child’s body as simultaneously pure and chaste as well as overtly sexual, powerful, and erotic. In “The Garden of the Shadow,” the speaker cries, “O bright, bright hair! O mouth like ripe fruit! Can famine be so nigh to harvesting?” (ll. 5-6). The female figure’s bright hair is synonymous with famine (symbolic of chastity or a lack of desire) and her ripe mouth implies harvesting (symbolic of sexual satiation). And both extremes are embodied in one figure. Both sides of the duality are equally important; if the girl possessed one identity to the exclusion of the other, she would be either too worldly or too distant. Together, both chaste and erotic features create a paradox that for Dowson sustains the girl’s allure.

The eyes, mouths, hands, feet, and hair of budding female bodies, literally halfway between child and woman, hold mystical power, whether religious or pagan, for
the speakers in Dowson’s texts. The girls in the poems are fetishized as “languid lashes” in “My Lady April” (l. 8), “fair, pure eyes” in “Growth” (l. 5), and “kind, calm eyes” in “Vain Hope” (l. 18). They are the “red pomegranate of thy perfect mouth” and “live lips” in “Cease Smiling, Dear!” (ll. 17, 21). In “Epigram,” the speaker dreams of a girl’s “swan’s neck and her dark, abundant hair” (l. 4), and the “Villanelle of His Lady’s Treasures,” is composed from such treasures as a girl’s voice, cheek, and “silken tendrils of her hair” (l. 2). Like religious amulets or relics, these fetishized body parts represent a tangible connection between heaven and earth, physicality and spirituality—and, by extension, tangibility and intangibility, eroticism and innocence. They provide substitutes for more prurient parts of the girls’ bodies and present a medium for simultaneously sustaining two opposing extremes.

In this way, hands are especially illustrative in Dowson’s poetry: white hands, mutinous hands, and exposed hands stand in for the girls themselves. Girls’ hands, which are kissed, undressed, and embraced in the poems, allow Dowson to imagine some sense of physical intimacy with the girls without shattering the tension between innocence and corruption. “Ad Manus Puellae” provides a clear example—“I was always a lover of ladies’ hands . . . For the sake of your carved white hands’ commands;/The tapering fingers, the dainty wrist;/The hands of a girl were what I kissed” (ll. 1-5). The girl’s hands dislocate the speaker’s desire and physical intimacy with her, maintaining the girl’s virginal persona. Yet, we soon learn that this fetishizing is just a mask for the more sexual content of the poem. The speaker remembers, a “hand like a fleur-de-lys/When it slid from its silken sheath, her glove;/With its odours passing ambergris:/And that was the empty husk of love” (ll.
The fingers are "pale with the pallor of ivories," but they "blush to the tips like a curled sea-shell" (ll. 11, 12). The sensual movement, coloring, and scents imply a certain carnality that was missing from the first stanza. In the end, Dowson connects the fingers with the girl's lips, a feature that Dowson often uses as a synecdoche for physical love: "I know not the way from your finger-tips,/Nor how I shall gain the higher lands,/The citadel of your sacred lips:/I am captive still of my pleasant bands,/The hands of a girl, and most of your hands" (ll. 16-20). Hands dislocate sexual intimacy in "Terre Promise" as well; in fact, they become symbolic of the girl's duality by acting as a line dividing desire and its satiation. The "fragrant darkness of her hair" brushes the speaker's cheek and "once, in passing by,/Her hand upon my hand lay tranquilly:/What things unspoken trembled in the air!" (ll. 1-4). The sexuality results from the titillating balance between the fetishized body of the girl and the mystic power the body parts seem to possess. The unspoken "things," the sexual threat to the girl, exist along and batter against the line that is simultaneously drawn and negotiated by the couple's hands: "Always I know, how little severs me/From mine heart's country, that is yet so far:/And must lean and long across a bar,/That half a word would shatter utterly?" (ll. 5-8). Finally, we learn that the hand is singular in its ability to maintain the tension between sin and sanctity, permission and prohibition, innocence and corruption: "Ah might it be, that just by touch of hand,/Or speaking silence, shall the barrier fall:/And she shall pass, with no vain words at all,/But droop into mine arms, and understand!" (ll. 9-12).

In his stories, too, Dowson's characterizes his little girls by their fetishized features and paradoxical positions between innocence and corruption.9 Ninette in
"Souvenirs of an Egoist" is a highly idealized and sentimentalized "tender little girl" with a "bright face and wonderful gray eyes," who maintains her duality through her vulnerability to a perilous urban environment and "something maternal about her affections" (103, 99, 100). Likewise, in "Statute of Limitations," a girl, "little more than a child, with great eyes, that one guessed, one knew not why, to be the colour of violets, looking out with singular wistfulness from a waving cloud of dark hair," is situated between maidenhood and marriage" (126-27).

The entire story of "A Case of Conscience" takes place during the uncertain, ambiguous period of time before a marriage decision is made. Although Marie-Yvonne's dialogue is timorous and childlike, her physical description focuses on "large" eyes, "rebellious brown hair," and a "mutinous hand" (29-30). These features, as well as her impending marriage and move to London, exaggerate her potential sensuality and seductiveness. The "rebellious" hair, in particular, seems reminiscent of the "tangled hair" in "My Lady April"—tangled hair that acts as a synecdoche for a girl who is both physically sexual and spiritually chaste, as it does in so many Pre-Raphaelite images. Marie-Yvonne is half way between "black and weary" London and her own Arcadian countryside. Her first lines illustrate her struggle between other-worldly sacredness and earthly intimacy. She says to Murch, "I love you, my God, how I love you! but I want to go away from you and pray in the little quiet church, where I made my first Communion," to which he later replies, "You have lived overmuch in that little church with its worm-eaten benches, and its mildewed odour of dead people, and dead ideas" (31, 32). She is at home in a sheltered sanctum, like the one described as a "sacred silence only, as of death" in
“Carthusians” (l. 6). Yet, in “A Case of Conscience” she is not behind an impenetrable gate; she is walking a line between the sanctuary of a Brittany church and the certain faded roses and weary laughter of the world outside, specifically identified as Paris and London by her suitor. The church becomes likened to the two churches in “The Diary of a Successful Man”—a place to worship both a sacred Notre Dame and the more earthly Dames Rouges, but never one to the exclusion of the other. The story ends in flux; we see “the long stooping figure of Sebastian Murch, who advanced to meet her,” but we do not know whether or not he intends to take her to London. The young girl still remains potentially both innocent and fallen.

Little girls at the center of Dowson’s aesthetic formula—a formula replicated throughout much of the Victorian period—is the figure who can embody both sides of the angel/whore duality and keep them in tension. They are both innocent and corrupt, celestial and earthly, sacred and profane. Certainly, formulating the little girl along such paradoxical lines did not resolve the conflict between the two constructions of the girl—between the safely domestic child and the portentous femme fatale—for that conflict proved to be unresolvable. In fact, the conflict was likely titillating and sustainable, both nostalgically and artistically, because the gap could never be closed. However, such Dowsonian images and stories allowed writers, artists, and their audiences to feel as if they were getting a peek at an exotic world otherwise off-limits to them. The psychic distances visualized in those images and stories suggested that the girls are safely sequestered from the world’s corruption and decay yet still accessible to viewers who are in need of their virtues or affections. While viewers could not close the gap between otherworldly purity and earthly
carnality, they could fetishistically travel back and forth within it. In Dowson’s poems, the spectral, disassociated eyes and hands of a virgin and the “bought red mouth” of an odalisque are two contending sides of the same girl figure. The girl seemingly sequestered within a sanctuary of “lily-time” intermingles constantly with the concubine from a world of wine, women, and song. Cynara, the passion-evoking virginal ideal, remains locked in tension, ever suspended somewhere between man’s desire and its consummation.

Notes

1. Dowson met Adelaide Foltinowicz at her parents’ Soho restaurant in 1891; he was 24 years old, and she was twelve or thirteen. None of Dowson’s friends considered Adelaide to be a suitable emblem for dreamlike innocence. Edgar Jepson thought the girl possessed “la beauté du diable” with “warm colouring” and “dark eyes and hair”; according to his Memories of a Victorian (London: Gollancz, 1933), 219. Victor Plarr considered the subject of Dowson’s affections for Adelaide to be “taboo” (75). Conal O’Riordan commented that the restaurant’s odour nauseated him and that the Foltinowiczes, including the daughter, represented nothing above the usual immigrant type (Ernest Dowson. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944), 75. John Gray noted that Adelaide was “an attractive child of gipsy type,” (Jad Adams, Madder Music, Stronger Wine: The Life of Ernest Dowson, Poet and Decadent. London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2000), 60.


3. In Ernest Dowson et la crise fin de siècle anglaise (Paris: Editions Messene, 1995), Jean-Jacques Chardin repeatedly refers to the little girl’s “monde de l’innocence [world of innocence],” and Thomas Burnett Swann (Ernest Dowson. New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1965) claims that Dowson worships little girls as “ideal[s] of inhuman perfection in a world of imperfections...By various means he contrives to keep her apart from him...Sometimes geography separates or threatens to part them, and sometimes, when lesser means seem inadequate, he imagines her dead while he mourns at her grave and half rejoices at her final inaccessibility” (35). Chris
Snodgrass’s “Ernest Dowson’s Aesthetics of Contamination,” *English Literature in Transition* 25:3 (1983): 162-174, makes the case that “Dowson’s idealized little girls and sequestered, aestheticized refuges are poetic representations of the pure Platonic ideal which ‘renounces’ the Schopenhauerean Will” (163). Snodgrass’s “Aesthetic Memory’s Cul-de-Sac: The Art of Ernest Dowson,” *English Literature in Transition* 35:1 (1992): 26-52, explains that Dowson’s “innocents” are protected in “sequestered gardens” and “behind convent walls,” or they are “sanctified through a kind of ‘aesthetic memory’” (35); the “young girls come to evoke, or are made to embody, a kind of timeless ‘aesthetic moment,’ revealing to their aestheticizing admirers…the potential for overcoming vulgarity and redeeming fallen life” (31).

4. In a letter of November 11, 1889 to Arthur Moore, Dowson refers to Bertha Van Raalte as a “tart,” and his interest in her is clearly carnal: “By the by I have une petite affaire on hand which promises some amusement at any rate. The tart is aged 15 ¾ & belongeth to a tobacconist of Piccadilly who apparently views his paternal responsibilities lightly . . . She hath the torso of seventeen, at least, and wonderfully fine eyes—she has vouchsafed me a rendezvous for Sunday . . .” (116).

5. She was “dark haired and blue eyed, with a nose which observers other than Dowson found a little crooked” (Longaker 74). She was not polished or seductive, but Edgar Jepson noted that “Poets have sung of poorer loves” (Jepson 80). Dowson himself rarely wrote about her physical beauty; instead, he focused on her ability to appear as something she was not—London actresses, the Virgin Mary, middle-class girl.

6. Minnie Terry is the English actress Marion Terry (1852-1930)—the younger sister of acting legends Ellen and Kate Terry. Charles Dodgson wrote a poem to her after seeing her in W.S. Gilbert’s *Pygmalion and Galatea* at the Haymarket (1877). In the poem, he uses Terry to explore his recurring themes of fading youth: “Young hearts beat high in ecstasy./And banners wave, and bells are ringing:/But silence falls with fading day,/And there’s an end to mirth and play” (Dodgson *Rhyme* 76).


8. The original title of the poem, as published in the 1891 *Book of the Rhymers’ Club* was “Carmelite Nuns of Perpetual Adoration.”

CHAPTER 6:
BABES IN BOYLAND:
J.M. BARRIE AND THE EDWARDIAN GIRL

“I courted the fair Alice W—n; and, as much as children could understand, I explained to them what coyness, and difficulty, and denial meant in maidens—when suddenly, turning to Alice, the soul of the first Alice looked out at her eyes with such a reality of re-presentation, that I became in doubt which of them stood there before me”

—Charles Lamb, “Dream Children”

“As you look at Wendy you may see her hair becoming white, and her figure little again, for all this happened long ago. Jane [Wendy’s daughter] is now a common grown-up, with a daughter called Margaret . . . When Margaret grows up she will have a daughter, who is to be Peter’s mother in turn; and thus it will go on, so long as children are gay and innocent and heartless.”

—J.M. Barrie, Peter Pan

In “Dream Children,” part of Charles Lamb’s 1822 collection Essays of Elia, James Elia confronts the children of his fantasy marriage to Alice W—n, the girl he loved and lost, in a dream. Recalling the end of the dream, he describes the above scene, in which Alice (the dream mother and wife) seems to look at him through the eyes of her daughter (one of the dream children), who is also named Alice. The dream mother and the dream child exist simultaneously in the body of a fantastical little girl figure. As evidenced in the works of Ruskin, Dodgson, and Dowson, the nostalgia and thrill surrounding a double image such as this one reached a feverish
pitch in works produced within the nineteenth-century cult of the little girl; each
writer and artist negotiated a fragile balance in his “Alice” and worked to hold two
simultaneous images—child and woman, middle-class and working-class, dream and
reality—in constant tandem. While admirers were always able to see a former child in
every woman, they were also haunted and thrilled by the ever-lurking image of a
woman behind the eyes of little girls.

Yet, at the turn of the twentieth century, this subtle hint of impending
womanhood in every little girl—the very ambiguity that the cult of the little girl
found so titillating—was the source of intense anxiety, even loathing, in works by
men who valued unsullied youthful vigor and innocence above all else. So they
looked to children in whom no such spectre appeared, resulting what Peter Coveney
marks as a shift from Dodgson’s sexually morbid obsession with little girls to the
“cult of J.M. Barrie” (249). The little boy, so long excluded from nineteenth-century
images of childhood in England, was made to embody the desires of a new age:

Between Alice and Peter Pan, something like a revolution in the perception of
children occurred. The idealization of childhood remains in these years
central to English culture, but a shift is marked around 1880, from an
emphasis on the child as moral icon, emblem of purity, to a craze for the child
as fun-loving playboy hero (Wullschlager 109).

The Edwardian empire craved little boys (“youths”) who would never grow old:
Kipling’s Kim, Housman’s spectral Shropshire lad, Baden-Powell’s boy-men, and the
many doomed youths of World War I who were “trained” on public school rugby
fields—characters who would never outgrow the fantasy of youth and adventure that
was constructed around them.
Without exception, scholars discuss this cultural and artistic shift from girl-worship to boy-worship as if it was an abrupt change with no overlap of any kind between the two phenomena. Yet, the transition was not sudden and complete. To argue that the shift was immediate, complete, and tidy is both unrealistic and inaccurate. Of course, if girl-worship was merely a symptom of particular aberrant personalities—Ruskin’s or Dodgson’s supposed aversion to adult women, for example—the obsession with female children would die with the personalities who celebrated them. Charles Dodgson died 1898; both Ruskin and Dowson died in 1900. And many critics claim that any serious consideration of little girls died with them. However, the cult of the little girl was not merely the product of a few individual obsessions; it was a force of culture in nineteenth-century England, and the fervor surrounding little boys is intricately connected to it. In fact, the author most often cited to mark the shift towards boy-worship is J.M. Barrie—a man whose corpus of work actually reflects a consistent obsession with the little girl figure. His most popular play, also a hallmark of Edwardian boy-worship, is of course Peter Pan—a play that begins and ends as the story of a little girl who is tormented by the loss of her “youth and innocence.” In this play, as well as in many of his other texts, Barrie continues the practice of embodying two opposing images or roles in a single female character (invariably the role of mother and daughter, mirroring the split-image of Charles Lamb’s Alices in “Dream Children”), but only as a sort of female diptych. The two identities are incompatible, so they emerge in turns—a duality that most often punishes girls for becoming women by forcing them into painful masquerade and self-deception.
James Barrie moved to London in 1884—the epicenter and heyday of little girls’ cultish popularity in Victorian England—and many of his plays reflect and negotiate constructions of the paradoxical girl figure at the center of this force of culture. In truth, he writes more about little girls than he does about little boys. The Little Minister (1891), the book that made Barrie a rich man, focuses on gypsy girl named Babbie. In Quality Street (1903), a pretty girl named Phoebe agrees to be faithful to her sweetheart, Dr. Valentine Brown, when he marches off to war. He returns several years later to discover that Phoebe, who is almost thirty years old, has been transformed into a prudish "old maid." To win back Dr. Brown's love, Phoebe pretends to be her own teen-aged niece. Similarly, Rosalind (1912) features an actress who is tired of always pretending to be twenty-nine (already fairly mature for Barrie’s female characters). She occasionally takes a holiday that allows her to be comfortably middle-aged by posing as her own mother. During one of these trips, one of her ardent young lovers pursues her and she is forced to cruelly disillusion him. Finally, The Little Minister and Dear Brutus (1917) recall the spectral, redemptive little girls of so many cult-of-the-little-girl narratives in their inclusion of “dream children”—daughters, of course—who approach life-weary men in enchanted woods.

In fact, Barrie often borrowed prototypical characters and dilemmas from texts associated with the cult of the little girl. Alice Sit-by-the-Fire (1905), for example, features an Alice who is driven by nostalgia for her lost girlhood. Alice is a middle-aged mother who imagines she is a young girl; her daughter, Amy, is a teen-aged girl who deludes herself into believing she is an experienced woman of the world. In the play, girlhood is idealized as a uniquely pristine condition. It opens as
the narrator considers looking at Amy’s diary but warns that “we cannot be sure our hands are clean enough to turn the pages of a young girl’s thoughts” (2). Any physical contact and potential physical corruption of the little girl are dislocated onto a surrogated, metonymical object associated with her. Recalling Dodgson’s preface to *Alice in Wonderland*, in which a child’s story is symbolic of the child herself, and Dowson’s sonnets, in which the speaker caresses a girl’s name with his lips, any defilement or invasion of Amy’s thoughts or Amy’s story is synonymous with defilement or invasion of the girl herself.

As the play progresses, the narrator explains that Alice (the mother) has been living as a Colonel’s wife in India. Her children were sent home to be raised in England, which allowed her to continue playing (masquerading in) the role of innocent sweetheart to the young British soldiers. Upon returning to England, Alice mistakenly assumes that Amy (her daughter) is having an affair with a young soldier from the Punjab. Amy entertains similar suspicions about her mother. In a series of confusing scenes, mother and daughter play opposing and contending sides—youth/age, innocent/knowing—of a single sweetheart. Alice enjoys the game, but she must finally acknowledge her proper role in the drama: the heroine’s mother. Any illusions of herself as a young sweetheart are dissolved. Alice recognizes her own past in her daughter’s present, and she states that she can now see the world only through Amy’s eyes. Alice and her daughter are never completely independent of each other; instead, together, they constitute two halves of a single image: “It’s summer done, autumn begun. Farewell, summer, we don’t know you any more. My
girl and I are like the little figures in the weather-house; when Amy comes out, Alice
goes in. Alice Sit-by-the-Fire henceforth” (138).

The familiar paradoxical diptych of ideal femininity—the “summer” of
virginal girlhood and the “autumn” of mature womanhood—holds the opposing roles
in balance, side by side in the weatherhouse. Both woman and child are still
embodied together, but the daughter is always replacing the mother: “when Amy
comes out, Alice goes in.”

In Barrie’s most famous story, Peter Pan, mothers and daughters again
negotiate the loss associated with adulthood. In fact, the play is primarily a lament
for little girls’ inevitable maturation and degeneration from daughters into mothers,
and daughters again continually replace mothers throughout the story: Mrs. Darling is
replaced by Wendy in the first scene; Wendy is then replaced by her daughter, Jane;
and, finally, Jane is replaced by Wendy’s granddaughter. The girl figure is always
part woman and part child, which, for Barrie, means that she is never completely a
child. For this reason, a character’s role, not age, dictates who is a child and who is an
adult in Neverland.

In Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens, for example, Peter Pan meets a little
girl who quickly outgrows Peter’s world in a way that directly recalls the stories and
letters of John Ruskin and Lewis Carroll. Peter lives on an island in a pond in
Kensington Gardens and sleeps in a nest made out of a five-pound note lost by the
poet Shelley. One evening he comes upon a little girl named Maimie. Maimie is
affectionate towards Peter, but she is unable to stay with him; she must return home
to her mother where, Barrie suggests, she, as a girl, belongs. Boldly, Maimie decides
one day to remain in Kensington Gardens after lockout time. When the fairies find her, they build a fairy house around her, tailored exactly to her size. Yet, when she wakes, she knocks her head against the roof, just as Alice did in the rabbit’s house in *Alice in Wonderland*. Maimie’s house shrinks slowly away when she becomes too large. In a scene charged with remorse and nostalgia, Maimie stands aside to watch her fairy house disappear, and she bursts into tears as it vanishes into nothingness. At the precise moment it completely disappears, a naked Peter Pan arrives to comfort her, making the boy the paradoxical figure of sequestered and sanctifying childhood—the redemptive dream-child—for the weary and disillusioned little girl.

So it is that *Peter Pan*, and the later novelization *Peter and Wendy*, hearken in the age of the boy with a sort of nod and obeisance to the long-revered paradigm of the dualistic little girl figure. As much as Peter is a celebration of the ever-youthful and ever-fearless boy-man, he is equally a testament to the disappointment that all girls must mature into wives and mothers. Barrie casts Peter in the traditionally female paradoxical role, but the influence and endurance of the cult of the little girl is unmistakable. Peter, as incarnation of the Greek god Pan, is both immortal spirit and fleshy boy; he embodies sexual passion and unsullied youthfulness. He is nature incarnate and a symbol of fin-de-siècle Decadence, and the narrator teases and torments a specifically adult audience as Peter tenuously balances the extremes of life and death, childhood and adulthood, innocence and eroticism. For Barrie, as it was for so many Edwardian lovers of youth[s], males could remain boyish forever; the identities of father and son, man and boy, civilized and savage existed simultaneously and harmoniously. Females, on the other hand, were Jekyll/Hyde figures, divided
between two generations, in whom these paradoxical identities waged a constant war.

Yet, the little girl provided the prototype for the eternal boy figures, and men like Barrie continued to focus on these girl figures, despite their desire and proclaimed goal to rescue the boy figure from obscurity. Unfortunately, in these Edwardian stories, little girl figures always outgrow any fantasy worlds around them—a tragic fate or flaw, even, that inevitably leads to the deep sense of loss that motivates most of Barrie’s fiction.

So it is that *Peter Pan* begins and ends with mother and daughters (not fathers and son) and their nostalgia for lost girlhood. The first scene, indeed the first lines, show Wendy and her mother discussing her inevitable maturation and degeneration:

> All children, except one, grow up. They soon know that they will grow up, and the way Wendy knew was this. One day when she was two years old she was playing in a garden, and she plucked another flower and ran with it to her mother. I suppose she must have looked rather delightful, for Mrs. Darling put her hand to her heart and cried, “Oh, why can’t you remain like this for ever!” (*Peter Pan* 1).

If the story stopped at this point or the focus moved entirely to the boy characters, readers could assume that Mrs. Darling is making this wish as a mother who wants to keep her children close. Yet, there is an immediate link between the plucked flower and the fading girl, and the mother is more likely speaking these lines as a woman who longs for her own lost girlhood. In fact, the narrator goes on to explain that “until Wendy came her mother was the chief one” (1). Although “the chief one” is never defined, Wendy has clearly taken over a preferred position of some kind that her mother once held. Like *Alice Sit-by-the Fire*, the mother represents the little girl’s loss and the little girl represents the mother’s former allure, and Barrie plays with the two female roles, intermingling and manipulating them to reveal the bifurcated
duality of his heroine, and the story opens with Wendy and her mother, who is sorry to see her little girl growing up. Wendy is a prototypical middle-class daughter who is taken away and transformed into a mother of savages. She returns to London as a middle-class daughter but transformed immediately again into a mother (and wife to one of the former savages). The story closes as Wendy’s daughters and granddaughters take her place in the recurring cycle. Each Darling girl is removed from the nursery and transformed from English daughter to Neverland mother. The two opposing poles of each girl’s duality cannot appear simultaneously; she is always either daughter or mother, never both and never neither. Once again, when one identity comes out, the other must go in. In fact, Peter Pan provides a matrilineral chain of mother-daughter figures.

In each mother-daughter pairing, the mothers are targets of harsh aggression and resentment, punished for growing into adult women, while the fathers continue to live as part boys and part men. Both Mrs. Darling and Wendy are rejected and “forgotten” by Peter when he realizes that they are grown-ups. He “gnashes his little pearls [his teeth]” at Mrs. Darling, and he gives a “cry of pain” and “draws back sharply” when he sees that Wendy is an adult in the final chapter (11,189). Even the narrator berates the story’s adult women and seems bitter that they are no longer girlish. Mrs. Darling is criticized for her lack of “proper spirit”—a sense of fair play and adventure that is closely associated with the boys (the “youths”) of the story (170). The narrator “despise[s] her” and refuses to say anything nice about her (170). By the end of the story, Wendy’s mother is dismissed as “dead and forgotten” (185). When Wendy grows up, the narrator again shows little care for adult women and
encourages us to forget her, explaining, "You need not be sorry for her. She was one of the kind that likes to grow up" (184). On the contrary, while Mr. Darling is "one of the deep ones who know about stocks and shares," he is also boyish, rebellious, and always looking for a game (2). Indeed, "he might have passed for a boy again if he had been able to take his baldness off" (170). When Mr. Darling and his son Michael must take their medicine, for example, the father behaves like one of the children. Wendy counts to three and Michael takes his dose, but Mr. Darling slips his medicine behind his back. When the family notices, he retorts, "I meant to take mine, but I—I missed it" (19). He then tries to feed it to the dog and becomes pouty and frustrated when she gets coddled instead of him. Furthermore, because the same actor usually plays both Mr. Darling and Captain Hook, the character seems able to travel back and forth between London and Neverland, even though he is an adult—always somewhere between two opposing extremes.

Yet, even though Barrie's individual female characters can not exhibit both paradoxical identities simultaneously in one body, Barrie does maintain a paradigm for feminine duality in Peter Pan. As a Victorian little girl, Wendy is, of course, the ultimate insider, commanding a decisive role in the invention of middle-class English identity and national character. Yet, for Barrie this same middle-class girl is also a liminal figure who travels back and forth between the story's various landscapes and tempestuous borderlands—"neverlands"—out of which the little girl figures of earlier chapters were actually made. Whereas the cult of the little girl constructed heroines who embodied these borderlands, imagining little girls as a physical space in which paradoxical categories and identities collapsed into gray area, Barrie keeps these
oppositions distinct from each other. He removes female characters to distant, imperial locales to build layers of conflict, both internal and external to the girls themselves. So, Wendy is not only both daughter and mother, she is civilized English middle-class daughter and mother of primitive island “savages.” She seems innocent and childlike when compared to Tinker Bell and Tiger Lily, but she seems ladylike and knowing she interacts with Peter and the boys. By doing this, Barrie is able to further explore the subtle boundaries that balance childhood and adulthood, working class and middle class, civilization and savagery without collapsing them, and girls like Wendy are able to simultaneously embody and distinguish between the exotic and familiar territories prevalent in an era of imperial expansion and cultural change.

Wendy—domestic, middle-class, and English—battles against the erotic, working-class, Orientalist girls who inhabit the island. Each girl is able to switch back and forth between paradoxical identities, but they are always one or the other. Tinker Bell is a young girl; she is “still growing” (23). However, when she first arrives on the scene, she is “exquisitely gowned in a skeleton leaf, cut low and square, through which her figure could be seen to the best advantage. She was slightly inclined to *embonpoint*” (23-24). She also uses foul language and is characterized as “an abandoned little creature” (114). She can play two opposing roles; even her social class is negotiable. By name, she is a working-class girl: “She is quite a common fairy . . she is called Tinker Bell because she mends the pots and kettles” (30-31). She associates with “street fairies” and walks around her “boudoir” in the boys’ house in a “*negligée*” (84, 79). Yet, at some points, she seems to be cast as
middle-class, as when Peter explains, “You know you can’t be my fairy, Tink, because I am a gentleman and you are a lady” (30).

Similarly, Tiger Lily is both a “chief’s daughter” and a “wayward thing,” “cold” and “amorous.” The narrator repeatedly refers to as a “daughter,” but his introduction reveals a familiar Barrie diptych: “Tiger Lily, proudly erect, a prince in her own right. She is the most beautiful of dusky Dianas and the belle of the Picaninnies, coquettish, cold, and amorous by turns; there is not a brave who would not have the wayward thing to wife, but she staves off the altar with a hatchet” (57).

She possesses two opposing identities, but she only reveals them “by turns,” not simultaneously. She is most often illustrated as a little girl and she refers to Peter as her “father,” but she is also an erotic *femme fatale* who keeps men away with a hatchet. Like the mermaids in the Neverland lagoon, Tiger Lily is exotic and foreign, insinuating libertinism in late-Victorian England—both alluringly physical and discouragingly distant *by turns*. Together, the various girl figures create a paradoxical construction of femininity: corrupted and corrupter, victim of vicious attack and agent of degenerative (and violent) adulthood.

So, whereas the battle between paradoxical female identities was previously waged in the body of an individual little girl, it is now (in Barrie’s story) waged by opposing girls—opposing generations, even—who embody one identity or the other. The battle is externalized, and the female prototypes contend with each other. Tinker Bell and some “street fairies” place Wendy on a great floating leaf in hopes of banishing her to the mainland (84), and the mermaids try to drown her. Wendy regrets “that all the time she was on the island she never had a civil word from one of
[the mermaids]” (86), and, as the narrator explains, “a mermaid caught Wendy by the feet, and began pulling her softly into the water. Peter, feeling her slip from him, woke with a start, and was just in time to draw her back” (99). Yet, the most significant and symbolic attack comes early on, when Tinker Bell is responsible for Wendy’s fall—both her fall to earth and her fall from middle-class girlhood. Tinker Bell “hated [Wendy] with the fierce hatred of a very woman” and “lure[s] Wendy to her destruction” (74). Wendy tries to fly, but, as the narrator informs us, the “jealous fairy had now cast off all disguise of friendship, and was darting at her victim from every direction, pinching savagely each time she touched” (93). As the little girl over the Lost Boys, Tinker Bell says to them, “Peter wants you to shoot the Wendy” (93). At the fairy’s urging, the boys shoot “Wendy in the heavens” through the heart, causing her lifeless body to fall to earth. After this “fall,” Peter frequently refers to Wendy as “old lady.”

Of course, for Peter, the idea of death is not threatening; in fact, “when children died, Peter Pan went part of the way with them, so that they should not be frightened” (8). After rescuing Wendy from the mermaids, he even yells, “To die will be an awfully big adventure” (101). Peter is not endangered by the same literal and figurative deaths that Wendy suffers. He is able to exist somewhere between life and death without being affected by either. He is both angel and boy, phantasm and flesh, but never completely either one. Barrie’s little girl, however, maintains her duality by always taking one role or the other—child or adult, living or dead. Like Ernest Dowson, Barrie commingles the death of a particular girl with the death of girlhood. Wendy is taken out of her home during her last night in the nursery—her
last night as a little girl. She is killed and transformed into a mother figure for the boys who will never grow up. As a result, Wendy becomes a virgin mother—a role that invokes a history of paradoxical girl figures caught between heaven and earth: earlier Barrie characters like Babbage in *The Little Minister* and Grizel in *Tommy and Grizel*, Lewis Carroll’s Alice (when she is nursing the Duchess’s infant), and the many saintly, Marian girls floating in and out of Ruskin’s and Dowson’s work. Barrie finds a way to literally shoot the angelic girl (Virgin Mother and virgin mother) out of the sky and bring her down to earth. Thus, Wendy ceases to be a child when she falls out of the sky. As the boys gather around her, Slightly (Wendy’s future husband, according to *When Wendy Grew Up*) recognizes her as a mature “lady” (suggesting both age and social class) and mother figure: “I think it must be a lady . . . When ladies used to come to me in dreams, I said, ‘Pretty mother, pretty mother” (94-95). Here Wendy becomes a both a reflection of her mother, recalling Barrie’s recurring mother-daughter combinations, and a “fallen” girl who is no longer herself childlike.

This “unnatural” maturity—unnatural, at least, in Neverland—prevents Wendy from immediately living in the children’s home (although Wendy’s adventure later takes her underground to the cave hideout). As a daughter, she could live with boys, as she had done with John and Michael. However, the boys are unable to carry Wendy into their house because touching her “would not be sufficiently respectful.” The boys therefore build a house around the little girl, much like the fairy house built around Maimie in *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*. As the boys build around her, Wendy begins to wake. She passes from death back into life and mimics Dodgson’s
Alice by emerging from a dreamlike state to find herself a young woman. Without opening her eyes, Wendy begins to sing as the boys build around her: “I wish I had a pretty house,/The littlest ever seen,/With funny little red walls/And roof of mossy green . . . Gay windows all about,/With roses peeping in you know,/And babies peeping out” (104). Wendy the little girl has died; Wendy the mother awakens. She comes back to life as a mother figure to all the boys, even her brothers. Michael, in fact, is placed in a basket and forced to play the role of the baby “peeping out.” Though many of the boys are close to Wendy’s age and Wendy is supposedly in a place where children never grow up, she is forced into her mother’s role, while the boys remain unquestionably, even exaggeratedly, childlike. Gathering around her, they plead for her to “play along,” saying, “Wendy lady . . . we are your children . . . O Wendy lady, be our mother” (107). The scene is both domestic and quasi-religious, reflecting in the little girl the familiar dual image of holy Virgin Mother and secular virginal mother. Even so, she does not accept the role immediately. Like so many of Barrie’s female characters, she is unaware of her own transformation. She explains to the boys gathered around her, “Of course it’s frightfully fascinating, but you see I am only a little girl” (107).

Interestingly, despite their need for a mother, both Peter and the lost boys seem to favor little girls. They want a mother to help them defeat Captain Hook, but girls are still revered over adult women. The narrator explains that the boys “knew in what they called their hearts that one can get on quite well without a mother and that it is only mothers who think you can’t” (81) As for Peter, “Not only had he no mother, but he had not the slightest desire to have one” (25). Little girls however, are
different. According to Peter, girls are more clever than boys are, and “one girl is more use than twenty boys” (27). Even Captain Hook, to whom Wendy is clearly a child, treats her deferentially: “A different treatment was accorded to Wendy . . . With ironical politeness Hook raised his hat to her, and, offering her his arm, escorted her to the spot where the others were being gagged. He did it with such an air, he was so frightfully distingué, that she was too fascinated to cry out. She was only a little girl” (133).

Nevertheless, as a mother to the boys, Wendy is ultimately an intruder and “disturber of the peace and play” of Neverland (Kincaid 285). Because girls are more clever, she gives the lost boys an unfair advantage. Many of the pirate schemes to trap the boys rely on the absence of a mother and the resulting vulnerability of the boys. Once Wendy arrives, Hook laments, “The game’s up . . . those boys have found a mother” (Barrie Peter Pan 93). She also sets up a school, asking the boys questions about home, beginning with “What was the colour of Mother’s eyes?” and ending with “Describe Mother’s Party Dress.” The lost boys are even forced to behave like “English gentlemen” towards her—the very role they sought to escape. Tootles is inspired to “blood” anyone “who does not behave to Wendy like an English gentleman,” and when the boys are preparing to walk the Jolly Roger plank, Wendy says, “I feel that I have a message to you from your mothers, and it is this: ‘We hope our sons will die like English gentlemen’” (121, 150).

As a “lady,” Wendy also intrudes into the game by interrupting the innocent, even naïve, homosociality of Neverland with a more “grown-up” English heterosexuality. In the clearest example, Wendy wishes to exchange “kisses” with
Peter, but Peter is unaware of what a kiss is or how it is exchanged. Peter thinks acorn buttons and thimbles are "kisses," so he is able to exchange kisses with Wendy without being overtly romantic or adult-like. As the narrator explains, Wendy "said she would give him a kiss if he liked, but Peter did not know what she meant, and he held out his hand expectantly" (27). Wendy is surprised and proclaims, "Surely you know what a kiss is?" to which Peter replies, "I shall know when you give it to me" (27). Wendy gives him a thimble. Of course, Wendy is aware of what a kiss really involves, and Barrie reminds us that this knowledge "cheapens" the little girl: when Peter offers to give Wendy a kiss, "[s]he made herself rather cheap by inclining her face toward him, but he merely dropped an acorn button in her hand; so she slowly returned her face to where it had been before" (28).

This mock courtship becomes a child's game for Wendy and Peter. Any potential sensuality is diffused by substituting innocuous objects for the kisses. The exchange is full of suggestion and paradox, but the tension remains in balance. When Wendy finally kisses Peter, she tells him that the kiss is a thimble. Wendy, of course, knows that the kiss is real and again makes her "rather cheap." Peter "thimbles" her in return, which begins Wendy's descent or "fall" to maturity and motherhood:

She kissed him. "Funny!" said Peter gravely. "Now shall I give you a thimble?" "If you wish to," said Wendy, keeping her head erect this time. Peter thimbled her, and almost immediately she screeched. "What is it, Wendy?" "It was exactly as if someone were pulling my hair." "That must have been Tink. I never knew her so naughty before." And indeed Tink was darting about again, using offensive language. "She says she will do that to you, Wendy, every time I give you a thimble" (32).

After they kiss, Wendy is immediately tormented by the jealous fairy-fatale—the story's clearest symbol of threatening female sexuality. And, of course, it is Tink's
rage over the girl’s affection for Peter that inspires her to have Wendy shot down to earth. Peter, who is unaware of the romantic meaning behind the “thimbling,” treats the exchange as a game, but Wendy wants the boy to return her affections as a suitor or even a husband might.

Wendy assumes, presumably due to their similarity in ages, that Peter is her male counterpart and partner. If she is going to act as female guardian to the boys, it seems only logical to her that he will be their male guardian. She sees Peter and herself as parents to the lost boys; if she is their “mother,” she assumes that he is their “father.” And Peter does play with a fatherly role, but he always maintains an equal balance between child and adult, son and father. He proudly states his famous lines, “I don’t want ever to be a man... I want always to be a little boy and to have fun,” but he encourages Wendy (the “loyal housewife”) to defer to him because “Father knows best” (108). The Picaninnies call Peter the “Great White Father,” and the boy occasionally slips into reveries in which he imagines that himself as the lost boys’ father (107): “‘Ah, old lady,’ Peter said aside to Wendy, warming himself by the fire and looking down at her as she sat turning a heel, ‘there is nothing more pleasant of an evening for you and me when the day’s toil is over than to rest by the fire with the little ones near by’” (113).

In these reveries, Wendy is consistently maternal—a relatively “old lady” who will resume her filial role only after she returns to her mother. Peter, on the other hand, is able to play with a paternal role while sustaining his boyish character as well. He is only titillated (and titillating) while he is able to move swiftly between opposing identities, flirting with a fall from childhood but moving away just in time to keep the
game alive. For him and his admirers, once the “danger” or tension is gone, the fun is over.

In the clearest example of this playful dynamic, Peter and Wendy talk as if the lost boys are their biological children. Wendy even imagines that she is actually an “old lady” without any value:

“Peter, I think Curly has your nose.”
“Michael takes after you.”
She went over to him and put her hand on his shoulder.
“Dear Peter,” she said, “with such a large family, of course, I have now passed my best, but you don’t want to change me, do you?”
“No, Wendy” (113).

Both Wendy and Peter seem to be adult figures here. Wendy’s brothers are now her sons and Peter is her husband. But, with the suggestion of change, Peter becomes a child again, leaving Wendy alone in her parental role:

“Peter, what is it?”
“I was thinking,” he said, a little scared, “It is only make-believe, isn’t it, that I am their father?”
“Oh, yes,” said Wendy primly.
“You see,” he continued apologetically, “it would make me seem so old to be their real father.”
“But they are ours, Peter, yours and mine.”
“But no really, Wendy?” he asked anxiously.
“Not if you don’t wish it,” she replied; and she distinctly heard his sigh of relief. “Peter,” she asked, trying to speak firmly, “what are your exact feelings for me?”
“Those of a devoted son, Wendy.”
“I thought so,” she said, and went and sat by herself at the extreme end of the room (113).

Throughout the story, the narrator reminds readers that Peter is often unable to distinguish make-believe from reality. So, taking the whole exchange into consideration, one role is just as “real” as the other. The lines between childhood and adulthood blur completely, and he is both father to the boys and “devoted son.”
Wendy is literally relegated to one “extreme end,” while Peter establishes himself in an ever-shifting gray area. He is completely polymorphous, and girl figures remain incarnations of two extremes between which Barrie constantly negotiates Peter’s paradoxical boy/man image. From this privileged position, Peter regards Wendy (and Tiger Lily—the other girl in the story) as “queer” for playing a game he abandoned only a few lines earlier: “‘You are so queer,’ he said, frankly puzzled, ‘and Tiger Lily is the same. There is something she wants to be to me, but she says it is not my mother.’ ‘No, indeed, it is not,’ Wendy replied with frightful emphasis’” (113).

Peter is naïve and absolutely childlike/innocent again; he seems to have no knowledge of the husband or father role he had played for these girls. Thus, the boy begins to find his place in England’s cultish obsession with the paradoxical duality of children’s’ physical, mental, and social character.

When the children return to their home in London and Mrs. Darling takes over the role of mother to the lost boys, Wendy reminds us of her own duality as a little girl by immediately resuming her place as a middle-class daughter. The lost boys are adopted by the Darlings and Wendy becomes their sister, until she becomes Slightly’s wife. Yet, as with the Maimie in Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens, the little girl inevitably “outgrows” Barrie’s childhood fantasy and experiences the pain and loss that comes with that change. In Peter Pan, that eventuality occurs in the last chapter with Wendy’s final transition into womanhood, as indicated by the final chapter’s title, “When Wendy Grew Up.” Before becoming the final chapter to the novelization, When Wendy Grew Up, performed in 1908, was written as an Epilogue
to the play. Here Peter comes back to the nursery twenty years later, rejects the weeping grown-up Wendy, and flies off to Neverland with her daughter, Jane. Not surprisingly, Barrie focuses not on Peter’s life after Wendy, but only on Wendy’s life after Peter and the loss that she felt: “For a little longer she tried for [Peter’s] sake not to have growing pains . . . and when they met again Wendy was a married woman, and Peter was no more to her than a little dust in the box in which she had kept her toys. Wendy was grown up” (15).

According to the original version, Wendy is now Slightly’s wife and the Baby Mermaid is her daughter, Jane. She is an “excessively matron” grown-up woman, who repeatedly reminds us that she is “no longer young and innocent” (15). Her daughter is dressed in the familiar white nightgown from *Peter Pan*. Jane must take her mother’s place in Neverland, and Wendy must experience the adventure only through her daughter. Peter—who is, presumable, much older in years than Wendy, remains childlike, but Wendy has lost the two qualities that he still possesses: “I can’t come with you Peter—because I’m no longer young and innocent” (27).

Interestingly, Barrie does not focus on the fact that *all* of the lost boys, including John and Michael Darling, grew up. In fact, the next line of text explains, “All the boys were grown up and done for by this time; so it is scarcely worth while saying anything more about them” (257). Despite the arguments put forth in innumerable critical reviews and readings of the play, the anxiety in *Peter Pan* does not center around the end of boyhood. Clearly, it is the end of girlhood that drives
this text, and the eternal boy provides a new space for old fantasies and tensions that first flourished in (and on) the bodies of little girls.

In the original Epilogue, Wendy ends the play by imagining that her own lost youth and innocence will live on through her daughter and granddaughter—mothers and daughters forever changing roles, one emerging in place of the other. The final lines of the play close with Wendy’s voice and Wendy’s perspective on the future of Neverland:

This is how I planned it if he ever came back. Every Spring Cleaning, except when he forgets, I’ll let Jane fly away with him to the darling Never Never Land, and when she grows up I will hope she will have a little daughter, who will fly away with him in turn—and in this way may I go on for ever and ever, dear Nana, so long as children are young and innocent (31-32).

“Darling” Neverland seems to exist for the Darling daughters; once again, there is no mention of sons. The play closes just as it opens; with the image and perspective of a rapidly-aging Victorian little girl.

In the final chapter of the novelized Peter Pan, however, the perspective and tone change drastically. Wendy has lost her voice, and the narrator presents a distanced, impersonal, and almost cursed view of the future Neverland girls. The girl with a small arrow’s hole in her heart is almost shrunk away and forgotten, and the titillating tension of little girl romances makes way for the more “heartless” adventure stories about Peter and boys like him. This ending is not only a farewell to a single Victorian little girl, but to a particular construction of Victorian girlhood. So it is only fitting to end a study of the nineteenth-century cult of the little girl with a final glimpse of Wendy Darling, one of the kind who fell to earth and grew up, and her daughters, who foreshadow nicely the little girl’s role in twentieth-century art and
literature:

As you look at Wendy you may see her hair becoming white, and her figure little again, for all this happened long ago. Jane is now a common grown-up, with a daughter called Margaret; and every spring cleaning time, except when he forgets, Peter comes for Margaret and takes her to the Neverland, where she tells him stories about himself, to which he listens eagerly. When Margaret grows up she will have a daughter, who is to be Peter’s mother in turn; and thus it will go on, so long as children are gay and innocent and heartless (192).

Notes

1. The nostalgia for girlhood is increased in *Alice Sit-by-the-Fire* by the fact that the Barrie originally wrote the play (and the role of Alice) for an aging Ellen Terry, who was herself an icon and object of worship within the cult of the little girl.

2. The character Peter Pan was introduced as a baby in five chapters of *The Little White Bird*. Barrie took the chapters from this book and had them published as *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* in 1906.

3. Barrie’s choice of Percy Bysshe Shelley here immediately allies Peter Pan with a paradoxical boyish manliness, sensuality, and innocence with just a hint of scandal.

4. Barrie’s narrator addresses a specifically adult audience, whom he characterizes as nostalgic former children, in the description of Neverland: “On these magic shores children at play are for ever beaching their coracles. We too have been there; we can still hear the sound of the surf, though we shall land no more” (7).

5. Neverland is designed as an amalgam of exotic locations within the British empire. The children hide and play amidst lagoons, flamingoes, palms, brushwood, sugarcane, and other plants with leaves that “did not come from any tree that grew in England” (9). The island is populated by dark pirates and “redskins”—Delawares, Huron, Picaninnies—and mermaids.

6. Peter saved Tiger Lily from a “dreadful fate, and now there was nothing she and her braves would not do for him . . . They called Peter the Great White Father, prostrating themselves before him, and he liked this tremendously” (107).

7. When Slightly pretends to be a doctor, the narrator explains that the lost boys recognize the difference between make-believe, but make-believe and reality are the same for Peter: “The difference between [Peter] and the other boys at such a time was that they knew it was make-believe, while to him make-believe and true were exactly the same thing. This sometimes troubled them, as when they had to make believe that they had had their dinners” (71).
8. In the original *When Wendy Grew Up*, Wendy marries one of the lost boys: “Wendy: Most of the boys married their favourite heroines in fiction and Slightly married a lady of title and so he became a lord. Jane: And one them married Wendy and so he became my Papa!” (22). Barrie omits this twist in the final chapter of *Peter Pan*. 
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