BEATRIX POTTER, OR THE BRITISH MOTHER NATURE IN DISGUISE

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Abstract: *Beatrix Potter is one of the best-loved children's authors, with 28 books that she illustrated herself. Her books, translated into more than 35 languages, sold over 100 million copies, and helped their author achieve something worthy of a modern Mother Nature: preserve natural beauty. In other words, Beatrix Potter wrote about the animals at the farm for children to learn good manners and life lessons, drew beautiful illustrations of rabbits, ducks and mice – which highly increased the value of her books - , created and sold animal toys, and, with the money earned, she bought land and farms that, on her death, she donated to the National Trust. A modern woman, Beatrix Potter may be considered a British Mother Nature in the disguise of an author of children's books, whose importance in the preservation of the Cumbrian landscape is to be acknowledged at full value.*

Keywords: *Beatrix Potter, conservationist, children's books.*

Introduction

The idea behind this paper came to me after I happened to watch the 2006 film *Miss Potter*, starring Oscar winner Renée Zellweger and Ewan McGregor. The landscape and history of the locations in the Lake District included in the movie were so powerfully depicted, and the authoress's life story so impressive, that I was immediately persuaded to order and read as many Beatrix Potter children's books as I could find available online. With such a creative and generous nature, the British writer and conservationist may well be viewed as a modern Mother Nature – a wonderful example of the feminine conceived as a generating and founding principle. That is the main reason why, in this paper, I will focus more on the cultural aspect of Beatrix Potter's life choices, rather than on the literary merits of her books; with this view in mind, I will firstly remind you about some beliefs regarding the feminine principle in the cultural repository, then I will refer specifically to the way in which the British authoress helped save and preserve the Lake District, her favourite part of the world.

The concept of feminine – some considerations

If we choose to conduct a research on the feminine principle throughout history, we may, undoubtedly, discover that it is replete with images depicting various aspects of the concept, from motherhood to unattainable goddess figures, from sinner to saint. In Christianity, on the one hand, we have the image of the first woman in the Bible – Eve – as the sinner who is to be blamed for man's banishment from the Garden of Eden, and for giving birth to the first murderer in history – Cain, then, on the other hand, we also have the image of the woman who is the immaculate mother of the redeemer of mankind – the Virgin Mary. If, in the Scriptures, The Song of Songs begins with a eulogy of the wife, the best aspect of the feminine, at the time, in the New Testament, it is the concept of mater dolorosa that steals the spotlight. It is indeed obvious that all

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Christian cultures and literatures have valued the feminine, as a natural projection of the veneration of Virgin Mary and of the Immaculate Conception. However, other cultures and religions have embraced other facets of the feminine to worship; more than a few of them have chosen to focus primarily on sexuality and procreation as defining features to a successful feminine figure, worthy of her name.

In her book on the image, roles and portrayals of goddesses in culture and literature, Gillian Alban investigates, amongst others, Asherah the Wife of Yahweh, or the goddess of Israel (Alban: 128). According to Alban's research, the goddess Asherah was the progenetrix of gods, as well as "the mother goddess involved in the increase of the land, and at the temple […] sexual rituals were celebrated in her name." (idem: 129).

It is not only the image of the woman as a goddess that is worthy of celebration, but also that of the ordinary women who, by simply performing their daily chores, contributed to the progress of mankind. Actually, according to cultural researchers, the feminine has always been that special engine that kept life moving on,

> Industry, science, and human need were combined in women's work, and the daily tasks were infused with magical meaning. Women converted plants and herbs into medicines […] World Health Organization figures show that 95 percent of the world's health care today is still provided by women, using many of these ancient remedies. (Sjöö: 31)

That is why mundane tasks, such as cleaning, cooking, nursing the baby or healing the sick, weaving and knitting have gradually become what we may call the "job description" of women everywhere in the world.

In the 20th century, at the beginning of it, there was no visible change in the general perception of the feminine: most people, of both sexes, still believed that the only way a woman may get a fulfilling life experience was to devote herself to a man and start a family. The next part of this paper intends to present the unusual evolution of a 20th century young woman, who breaks free from her parents' bourgeois constraints and makes a name for herself in the world.

Beatrix Potter's life story

The life story of one of the most remarkable British women authors begins rather ordinarily, with her birth in London in 1866; both Beatrix Potter's parents lived on inheritances from the cotton trade, which allowed her father to cultivate his passion for art and photography. Both Rupert and Helen (Beatrix's parents) enjoyed an active social life among a group of writers, artists and politicians and the family included many connoisseurs and practitioners of art. Moreover, since Edmund Potter, Beatrix's paternal grandfather, was co-founder and president of the Manchester School of Design, we may easily say that art was in Miss Potter's blood, and her talent was to be traced in her family genes. Her father took Beatrice on visits to his notable friends, including the Pre-Raphaelite painter Sir John Everett Millais. The latter inspired and encouraged Beatrix's extraordinary artistic talent, with the commendable result that, by the age of eight, she was filling home-made sketchbooks with drawings of animals and plants.

Home-schooled, Beatrix and her brother Bertram spent hours watching and sketching the menagerie of pets that lived in their schoolroom. Their collection included lots of small animals (frogs, a tortoise, mice, hedgehogs and rabbits) smuggled into the

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house in paper bags. Annual holidays in Perthshire and, later, in the Lake District, kept the children's interest alive – and it provided them with plenty opportunities to roam freely in the countryside, and to observe, sketch, catch and even skin and dissect a wide variety of animals and birds.

In her 20's, apart from cultivating her talents as a naturalist, Beatrix Potter also began to write illustrated letters to the children of her former governess, Annie Moore. The famous character Peter Rabbit was born in a letter she wrote in September 1893 to Annie's son, Noel. *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* was a story which, in 1901, Beatrix defiantly published herself, as her own edition of the rabbit story, after the idea was rejected by no less than six publishers. Fortunately, on seeing a copy of the children's book, Frederick Warne decided to publish it, with the result that, within a year, he had to produce six editions to meet demand.

As we may easily find out from all sources, the year 1902 stood out as a turning point in the spinster Beatrix Potter's life. The success of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* led to the publication of two other books, and also to a beautiful love-story between Beatrix and her publisher. However, Norman Warne, Beatrix's fiancé, died of pernicious anaemia in the month following the two lovers' engagement. Devastated, but all the more intent to make plans for her own future as a person independent from her parents, who had opposed the prospective marriage, Beatrix was able to buy Hill Top Farm in Sawrey in the Lake District less than a year after Norman's death.

Although expected to spend time with her parents in London, she began to learn the business of running a farm, whilst still writing and producing one or two new children's books each year for the next eight years. In 1909, when she purchased another Cumbrian property near to Hill Top, she met William Heelis, a local solicitor who (against her parents' wishes) was to become her husband in 1913.

Once married, Beatrix was finally able to settle properly in the Lake District, where her heart longed to be. There, she took the role of lady farmer seriously, and enjoyed physical, day-to-day tasks such as helping with hay-making and unblocking muddy drains. As a true British conservationist, Beatrix also became an expert in breeding Herdwicks, a type of sheep indigenous to Cumbria, which she actually saved from extinction. She became an expert Herdwick sheep breeder and the first female president designate of the Herdwick Sheepbreeders' Association.

Due to her eyes problems, particularly from 1920 onwards, Beatrix Potter focused less and less on creative work, and shifted her interest to the preservation of the beautiful nature surrounding her. Indeed, apart from farming, Beatrix's major passion in the final part of her life was conservation, an interest inspired by her friendship with Canon Rawnsley, one of the founder members of the National Trust. Although she was no longer writing or illustrating any books, Beatrix Potter had the financial means not only to expand her own estate, but also to fulfil her ambitions: to preserve parts of the Lake District's unique landscape, and to keep the area's traditional farming methods unchanged. Weakened by bronchitis, Beatrix died aged 77 on 22nd December 1943. In her will she left 14 farms and over 4000 acres to the National Trust, land that it still owns and protects against development today.

Beatrix Potter's imaginary world

In *Miss Potter*, the movie, we listen to a wonderful explanation of the main character's progress in life:

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> There's something delicious about writing those first few words of a story. You can never quite tell where they will take you. Mine took me here, where I belong. (Beatrix voiceover).

In an attempt to explain how imagination – words and drawings put on paper – has led to a massive change in the real life (acres of land being saved from destruction), we must have a look at the delightful stories of a few representative stories for children written by the British author.

Beatrix Potter's stories are centred upon characters shaped as little animals that go on little adventures and get an education the hard way. There are certain groups of animals that make an appearance in more than one book, while other animal characters may only have one chance at fame. For instance, the bunnies and the cats are favoured with plenty of stories whereas others, such as the duck, the hedgehog, the frog or the squirrels may have less appearances on stage. Still, the most numerous characters depicted by the author are mice. Rodents may have been of particular interest to Miss Potter, since she chose so many of their species to inhabit her imaginary world.

A special tale featuring Beatrix Potter's own two pet mice, Tom Thumb and Hunca Munca, enables the author to make use of another infusion of reality; thus, in *The Tale of Two Bad Mice*, she describes the doll's-house that belonged to a little girl who was her publisher's niece. The two naughty mice actually destroy the interior of the doll's house (and then pay for the damages, as they are not that bad, after all) and steal some pieces of furniture and doll's clothes.

The Tale of Peter Rabbit is written with an obvious educational purpose in mind. It begins, as all educational stories or fairy tales, with an interdiction, '"Now, my dears," said old Mrs. Rabbit one morning, "you may go into the fields or down the lane, but don't go into Mr. McGregor's garden." (Potter, 1902: 8). Obviously, the warning is disobeyed and the naughtiest bunny, Peter, gets into trouble; if he wants to return home unscathed, the little rabbit has to leave his nice little blue jacket and his shoes behind, in a hurry to escape the fearsome Mr. McGregor, who would not let his vegetables unattended or protected. Eventually, Peter returns home with only a bad cold, which requires mother care and camomile tea.

This very first delightful story for children has a sequel in *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny*, which sorts things out; here, we learn that, on calling on the Rabbits and hearing about poor Peter's adventures (resulting in leaving him with no clothes whatsoever for the second time in a fortnight), cousin Benjamin Bunny comes to the rescue and accompanies Peter on a mission to get his jacket and shoes off the scarecrow and back on Peter's body. They succeed in doing just that, but fail miserably when it comes to return home on time. Rescued by Benjamin's father from a cat that, unknowingly, had sat down upon a basket where the two scared bunnies had taken refuge, they receive a good thrashing from the former and learn their lesson.

The Tale of the Flopsy Bunnies takes the reader (or, actually, the listener, if we consider the age of the target audience) back to Mr. McGregor's garden, for more adventure - and lessons to be learned by the little ones. The six children born by Flopsy (Peter Rabbit's sister) and fathered by Benjamin Bunny, their cousin, eat too much lettuce (known for its soporific effect) and are caught off guard by their eternal enemy, Mr. McGregor. Helped by a very resourceful Thomasina Tittlemouse, that "nibbled a hole in the bottom corner of the sack" (Potter, 1909: 35) where the six little bunnies were tightly tied, the Flopsy bunnies manage a narrow escape, and learn to appreciate the value of real friendship.

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Rather harsh, *The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin* explains to children why a certain naughty squirrel happens to have a rather short, bunny-fashioned sort of tale, instead of the bushy ones his relatives all had.

The Tale of Mrs Tittlemouse, the wood-mouse who helped to rescue the Flopsy Bunnies, was beautifully illustrated by its author with delightful pictures of the many uninvited guests, from spiders to bees, which she finds in her underground house. This 1910 story revolves around the wood-mouse's obsession with tidiness, and her efforts to evict uninvited guests, (be they as big as frogs or as small as bees). When she decides to throw a party, Thomasina Tittlemouse has it her way, with mice inside, and dirty frogs outside; clever, she manages to both have a party and keep her recently cleaned house free from dirty feet - which nobody minds at all.

The Tale of Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle presents the reader with a nice character, resembling a real person in the writer's childhood, a charming old Scottish country washerwoman called Kitty MacDonald. Actually, many other characters that populate Beatrix Potter's imaginary world are mentioned here, as the washerwoman does the washing for all of them.

In *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck*, the real Hill Top duck who was not good at hatching eggs, and Beatrix Potter's favourite sheepdog, Kep, become imaginary characters that help teach children to keep away from strangers.

Actually, as anyone can notice, all those children's books were delightful lessons in life for little children in need of education and pleasant instruction; that is why, instead of giving a long and detailed account of all Beatrix Potter's books, I will try to conclude with a few remarks.

Final considerations

To follow in the real-life Potter's footsteps, we are advised, by Internet sources, to take a trip to Brockhole – The Lake District Visitor Centre. We are also told that The World of Beatrix Potter in Bowness-on-Windermere is an incredibly popular attraction for children and adults alike. Open throughout the year, the Beatrix Potter attraction is advertised to offer different shows and themed days throughout the year, so people are advised to make sure they get the right day and book in advance for specific events.

Instead of any other conclusions, I have chosen to give you a glimpse of the heritage of Beatrix Potter, with its wonderful transformation of reality. The fact that this British artist and conservationist, who was never a biological mother, actually managed to cater both for the educational needs of children, with her books, and for the life needs of future generations, with the land she donated to the National Trust.

We may travel back in time and re-visit our childhood when we enter the world of Peter Rabbit, or Jemima Puddle-Duck in their natural landscape; at The World of Beatrix Potter, we can also meet the famous characters on a new Beatrix Potter trail around Brockhole's beautiful lakeshore grounds, while learning more about the wildlife that inspired her. All that is living proof that, with no exaggeration, Beatrix Potter's fertile imagination and resolve, combined with her love of nature in all its forms, make her worthy of the title of Mother Nature.

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