

The Tale of Beatrix Potter Study Guide

The Tale of Beatrix Potter by Margaret Lane

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Overview

Most readers need no introduction to Beatrix Potter's nursery classics, which include *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1902), *The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin* (1903), *The Tailor of Gloucester* (1903), *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny* (1904), *The Tale of Mrs. Tiggy Winkle* (1905), *The Tale of Tom Kitten* (1907), and *Ginger and Pickles* (1909). These books have become a well-established part of the common culture.

But few readers are familiar with the intriguing life of the woman who wrote and illustrated these books.

Lane's biography, begun shortly after Potter's death in 1943 at the age of 77, was the first and in some ways remains the best. Born into the deep conservatism of the Victorian middle class, Potter lived to see an almost modern assertion of the strength and capability of women in a masculine world. During her life, she fought against incredible obstacles to become economically independent and to free herself from demanding and rigid parents. Her small books, composed almost on the sly, were an important part of this struggle.

The Tale of Beatrix Potter is not written specifically for young readers, but readers of all ages have read and enjoyed this account of an extraordinary person.

To some, her life may appear to have been excessively conservative. She was an exaggeratedly obedient daughter whose only open rebellion against her parents occurred when she married—at age forty-seven—a country solicitor and real estate agent. She was exceedingly shy and very private, but her interior life brimmed with humor, conflict, and even adventure.

Potter was never sent to school, was never permitted playmates, and very rarely participated in the social life of her parents, yet she grew neither sullen nor bored. Resourceful, intelligent, and creative, she developed interests that helped her combat the loneliness of her home environment. She taught herself to draw and enjoyed capturing precise details. She investigated natural history with astonishing care and accuracy, collecting all sorts of things and sneaking them back into the house for further study.

Later, she wrote and published her "little books" and thrived on the details of business—something women were not supposed to do, and something her parents made every effort to stop. For each book she painstakingly matched every illustration with a real place or animal. By now she kept a veritable zoo of mice, hedgehogs, rabbits, snails, and ravens.

As she grew up, she did manage to make friends, although her parents' unrelenting views of propriety constantly stunted her social life. Not until late middle age did she ease her way out of London and away from her parents. She displayed a combination of great courage and incredible timidity, as she continued her role of dutiful daughter while

building up an independent income and managing a successful farm and sheep breeding operation. When she died she left thousands of acres of land in the Lake District to the National Trust, a private land preservation group.



About the Author

Margaret Lane was born on June 23, 1907, in Cheshire, England. She was educated at St. Stephen's College, Folkstone, and St. Hugh's College, Oxford. Following in the footsteps of her father, a newspaper editor, she took up a career in journalism, working in London and New York from 1928 to 1938.

In 1934 Lane married Bryan Wallace, the eldest son of Edgar Wallace, the flamboyant and popular British novelist. She soon began to write novels also.

Her first, *Faith, Hope and No Chanty* (1935), won the Prix Femina-Vie Heureuse. A second novel, *At Last the Island* (1937), followed shortly, after which she produced a careful and well-received biography of her eccentric father-in-law, *Edgar Wallace: The Biography of a Phenomenon* (1938). Her marriage to Bryan Wallace ended in divorce in 1939.

Biographies of eccentric British characters have formed a major part of Lane's writing career. *Walk into My Parlour* (1941) is a biography of Emma Shardiloe, the nineteenth-century medium and spiritualist. *Life with Ionides* (1963) concerns an Englishman who collected poisonous snakes in East Africa. In *The Bronte Story* (1953) and *Samuel Johnson and His World* (1975), she takes on somewhat better known but no less eccentric subjects.

In a way, Lane's most successful biographical find was Beatrix Potter, the shy and very private person who created the beloved characters of Peter Rabbit, Tom Kitten, and Hunca-Munca. When Lane wrote her book, few people knew much about Potter's life. Indeed, it rather surprised the public to learn that Beatrix Potter died in 1943; most would have said she had died years before.

When she married Willie Heelis of Sawrey, Potter put aside her life as a children's author and became Mrs. Heelis, blunt country woman and sheep breeder. Her publishers were warned not to give out her address.

The Tale of Beatrix Potter remains the standard biography and has inspired a generation of Beatrix Potter scholars.

Since it originally appeared in 1946, Lane has revised and enlarged her work several times, most recently in 1985, as new information has come to light.

Margaret Lane's second marriage was to Francis John Clarence Westenra Plantagenet Hastings, fifteenth earl of Huntingdon. She became the Countess of Huntingdon and had two daughters.

She and her husband took up hunting for Zulu treasure on the border of Rhodesia and Mozambique. She describes it all in *A Calabash of Diamonds* (1961).



In the 1980s, Lane turned to children's books, composing a series of picture books for young children on the natural history of common creatures—The Squirrel (1981), The Beaver (1982), The Fish (1982), The Fox (1982), The Frog (1982), and The Spider (1982). The unsentimental, slightly humorous tone of these books recalls Beatrix Potter's works. Lane has been president of the Women's Press Club, the Dickens Fellowship, the Johnson Society, the Jane Austen Society, and the Bronte Society.

She lives in Beaulieu, England.



Plot Summary

The Tale of Beatrix Potter is a biography of the life of Beatrix Potter Heelis, one of the most famous children's book authors of all time. She wrote the timeless classic The Tale of Peter Rabbit, along with The Tailor of Gloucester, The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin, The Tale of Mrs. Tiggly-Winkle and many others. Beatrix was born to parents who lived on an inheritance and paid little attention to her. She grew up lonely and isolated, left to her imagination. The highpoint of her childhood years were her family's summer visits to the Dalguise House, their summer home, in Scotland. Beatrix and her brother Bertram loved the countryside, the plants and all the animals and quickly took to cataloging them and writing about them. Thus began Beatrix's deep love for nature and animals.

As she grew up, Beatrix longed for what she regarded as a happy childhood. In her journals between her mid-twenties and mid-thirties, Beatrix was unhappy and spent most of her time privately writing, sketching and painting. By her mid-thirties, however, she had started writing letters to children of her friends and illustrating them with beautiful pictures. Beatrix was eventually given the idea to compile some of these letters into what later becomes the now legendary The Tale of Peter Rabbit. While she had some trouble publishing it, a private printing made it clear that the book was a classic. The illustrations and the stories were simple but beautiful and contained subtleties that adults could appreciate.

The Tale of Peter Rabbit began a ten-year period where Beatrix wrote over a dozen classic children's books sometimes cooperating with one of her publishers, Norman Warne. Beatrix and Norman fell in love and became engaged, much to the chagrin of her parents, but Norman died before they could wed. During Norman's life and afterward, Beatrix became increasingly famous and wealthy, but usually eschewed the attention that came with it. Instead, she used her wealth to become independent from her parents and buy a farm in the country known as Hill Top Farm. The countryside of Britain continued to draw her in and for years Beatrix longed to fully immerse herself in a life at Hill Top Farm among the landscape and community of Sawrey, the town where Hill Top was located.

She eventually married William Heelis, a legal representative that helped her purchase land. They had a wonderfully happy marriage and moved out to Castle Farm, a second farm that Beatrix had purchased. However, her marriage marked the end of her creative period. Instead, she quickly became Mrs. Beatrix Heelis of Sawrey, a lived a simple farmers' life. In Sawrey, Beatrix and William would grow old together and Beatrix would no longer write. Instead, she would enjoy hard days of farm work, strolling in the countryside, protecting the beauty of the land against development and cultivating interests in various animals, particularly Herdwick sheep. Beatrix does not resent aging, but grew increasingly happy over time. She died on December 22nd, 1943.



Chapter 1, Bolton Gardens

Chapter 1, Bolton Gardens Summary and Analysis

Helen Beatrix Potter was born July 28th, 1866 in Bolton Gardens. Her parents were wealthy Victorians. Her parents schedule was mundane and routine, largely leaving out Beatrix. The Potter family never marked Christmas, but her family would go to the sea for several weeks around Easter while servants cleaned the home. When summer came, the Potters would travel to their home in Scotland, where her father would hunt and fish. This life was terribly boring for the Potters' daughter. Beatrix's nurse was a Scottish Calvinist who kept her clean and fed her well. As a child, she was quiet, solitary and watched others frequently, which led her, like so many other children, to create her own world.

Potter was born in a time and to a social group which was indifferent to childhood. Her parents' wealth was inherited, and so they were idle. Their lives became the sterile ones of those who needn't work or create to have it good. Despite officially being a barrister, Rupert Potter spent his time in clubs, making afternoon visits and engaging in amateur photography, a new fad at the time. Beatrix's parents discouraged vanity but rarely imposed church-going, as they were Unitarians. Her parents' approach to religion was calm and unenthusiastic, like everything else about them. But her grandparents had been unusually original and wild.

Rupert's father had made Rupert proud; he was a Liberal MP at one time, and friends with the powerful; he died with vast sums of money, and was both a capitalist and reformer. Despite this, Beatrix's grandfather was kind and campaigned for religious equality; he was a radical, free-trader, and defender of science. Her grandmother, Mrs. Edmund Potter, was similarly exciting; Beatrix grew up listening to her stories. She was born a Crompton, a famous and proud British family. The author then proceeds to describe the details of the Crompton family history. Much of the Crompton lineage was filled with religious and political radicalism and nonconformity. Beatrix grew up admiring her Crompton heritage and came to admire both wealth and eccentricity, qualities the Cromptons had in spades. Towards the end of the chapter, the author shows that Beatrix believed in the ideas of heredity—that a great family member could influence his or her descendants for generations.



Chapter 2, Summer Holidays

Chapter 2, Summer Holidays Summary and Analysis

Beatrix began to see her Crompton heredity influence her personality. Despite her boring and ritualized childhood, her life was full of the Crompton legend, a legend her parents respected, despite not living it. Beatrix grew up very lonely and did not take part in her parents' life. She was shy and sometimes tongue-tied but was rarely unhappy. Solitude did not bother her. Further, she was without superstition. Beatrix liked spending time with her schoolmistress, Miss Hammond, who encouraged her interests in art and nature. Hammond left eventually, as Beatrix had learned everything she had to teach. Afterward, Beatrix tended to her education herself, which she later came to appreciate.

Beatrix disliked her childhood surroundings; she saw them as pretentious and boring from an early age. But when her family stayed in Scotland in the summers, she reveled in the beauty of the Scottish countryside and in real farms, cottages, and animals. She loved the country and the animals of the country. The air had a magical feel that fascinated her—witches, fairies and "the creed of the terrible John Calvin."

Beatrix's brother was named Bertram, and the two often played together. They collected plants and animals together; they would skin animal corpses or boil them away and keep the bones, sometimes reassembling skeletons; they would often draw and paint the plants and animals they observed. They even restored an old printing press together and made their own ink. Yet however much Bertram and Beatrix liked the countryside, they were there only for their father's amusement. Beatrix would sometimes write of Mr. Potter's acquaintances in Scotland and of the people who lived nearby.

After Bertram left home, Beatrix would spend her days in Bolton Gardens focusing on the animals and plants that the two had collected. She pressed flowers and tended to mice. Time passed as she was absorbed and Beatrix passed through governesses. As she spent more time alone, she became increasingly shy and did not participate in social gatherings of those her age. Many thought of her as old-fashioned; as she aged, many saw her as eccentric. In her travels, she not only carried regular luggage but animal carriers and bags for carrying books, seas-shells, and so on.



Chapter 3, Peter Rabbit

Chapter 3, Peter Rabbit Summary and Analysis

Chapter 3 opens with Beatrix in her early twenties; Bertram chose to be an artist, but Beatrix had no similar choice. Bertram's art focuses on the Scottish countryside. Most of the family, save Mrs. Potter, was quite interested in art themselves. Beatrix's diary contains many comments on famous paintings, some quite critical. She preferred depictions of nature, as did her brother. She often drew herself, but most as a naturalist would draw, spending hours on small details. Beatrix also became interested in geology and fungi.

Beatrix even considered illustrating a book on fungi, but in 1896, her uncle Roscoe, decided to schedule a meeting with the Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens and some others and invited her along. Many of the botanists disliked her drawings as they were amateur. However, Beatrix had also formed her own botanical theories, yet when she shared them, the botanists again were skeptical. Uncle Henry was angered by their condescension. This led Beatrix to write a paper on mold spores; the paper was given to the Linnaean Society of London, but not by Beatrix as women were not allowed. Little came of the paper, and Beatrix put her painting and botany aside. But there were still people in Beatrix's life to encourage her, including Canon H. D. Rawsley.

Canon Rawsley was a vicar in Wray parish. Beatrix's family spent some time at Wray castle and became acquainted with Rawsley. Rawsley was charming and published many books; he was also an enthusiastic man willing to crusade for what he believed to be just causes. Not only was he pugnacious, he was also a naturalist and lover of nature. Beatrix would ask Rawsley for advice on her first children's book, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*.

The period of Beatrix's life between her mid twenties and mid thirties was something of a mystery until Potter's diary was discovered decades after her death. Her diaries had been known of, but they were written in code, code that the possessors of the diaries could not crack for some time. In 1958, on Easter, the code was cracked. However, Mr. Linder, the man who cracked the code, took five years to translate the whole document, in part due to the obtuseness with which Beatrix wrote. Beatrix had little to hide and was always desperate to create. The document talks little about herself and often focuses on her family members' pasts. But it became clear from the journals that Beatrix resented becoming an adult as she missed her childhood happiness.

Her life since then had not been as good, but her passion for drawing and writing continued and she took drawing lessons. Afterward she was free to pursue her writing on her own, but she was often depressed and lonely. She was easily exhausted as well, having had rheumatic fever at one point. What she hated most was idleness and so spent all her time creating or working. Her sketches were improving in quality, which can today be seen in her sketchbooks.



Her best sketches from the 1880s are in her letters written to children. Throughout Potter's travels, she always connected with children and knew what to draw for them. In her words, she "never grew up." One of her first letters was written to Noel, the son of her German teacher, Mrs. Moore. He was quite sick at age five, and Beatrix wrote for him a tale of rabbits named "Flopsy, Mopsy, Cottontail and Peter" who wanted to eat from Mr. McGregor's garden. There Peter Rabbit appears for the first time. Many of Potter's unique characters appear in these letters. The author then quotes some of the original patterns, which are surrounded by beautiful illustrations of the characters.

The children who received the letters loved them and perfectly preserved them. Beatrix made copies of the drawings and then compiled them into *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* and submitted it for publication on the urging of Canon Rawnsley. Many publishers rejected the book, so she eventually paid to have it engraved and printed herself. The original book was four by five inches, containing only a few sentences per page. By the end of 1901, the book was finished and Beatrix had 250 copies in her possession. She sold the books cheaply and later shows a copy to one of the publishers that rejected her. After she printed a second edition, Warnes the publisher, offered to publish the book only if she would color her drawings.

Before publication, Bolton Gardens was full of excitement over the details of the book, including the matters of copyright, royalties, and so on. Beatrix's parents aided the negotiations. Rupert was being stern and Beatrix stayed behind the scenes. She did complete the color sketches, however, but she found the going difficult.



Chapter 4, The House in Bedford Square

Chapter 4, The House in Bedford Square Summary and Analysis

Chapter 4 opens with the introduction of Beatrix's cousin, Caroline Hutton, who invited her to her home in Harescombe Grange when Beatrix was twenty-eight. Caroline was something of a political and religious radical and a feminist. She was against organized religion, for poverty relief, and so on. Beatrix at the time thought marriage to be "the crown of a woman's life." The visit was pleasant, and Beatrix took some photographs of animals in the countryside. One day on a trip into Gloucester, Beatrix asked to be able to sketch some of the cottages; she did so then and on many subsequent days. As she drew, she wrote the story, and composed the tale and illustrations of *The Tailor of Gloucester* and sent it to Wandsworth. Potter regarded the book as superior to *Peter Rabbit*.

The Tailor of Gloucester is fairly long with varied pictures. It contains many rhymes, and in general possesses more diversity than Potter's other books. Warnes was sent a copy around Christmas 1902. Potter and her publisher agreed to see how the book did in Potter's private edition. She was a bit concerned that her publisher would not like her water color illustrations. As she is working on the paintings, *The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin* began to enter her mind, and it appears in the summer of 1903; it quickly became popular. Children loved the book.

Beatrix's successes made her happier and supplied her with enough money to live on her own; she had a social life independent from her parents. Her parents did object to her distance, however. Her father had something of a quarrel with Norman Warnes about publication details as well. Apparently her parents were uncomfortable with her distance, despite the fact that she was nearly forty years old. They thought the Warnes would corrupt her, and Norman and Beatrix were getting closer, indicating a possible marriage. Her parents very much did not want Beatrix to marry a publisher, which was considered lower class at that time. The Potters were concerned about maintaining their social standing.

And indeed, the Warnes family was the polar opposite of the Potters. They had a large, loud home that much of the family lived in and the rest often visited. Family life was vibrant and Beatrix found this surprising. But despite the energy of the family, Norman was rather shy. This only made Beatrix more comfortable around him, however, as she was shy as well. Warmth was growing between them. The author describes an exchange between them about a positive review of Potter's *The Tailor*. Norman and Beatrix collaborated on several books, particularly *The Tale of Two Bad Mice*. The story had been inspired by two mice that Potter caught in a trap in her Harescombe Grange kitchen. They planned *The Tale of Two Bad Mice* with great excitement. Many of the illustrations were drawn from small models that Norman and Beatrix built.



They finished the book in 1904, and it was published after *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny*, the follow-up to *Peter Rabbit*. Beatrix claimed she was glad to focus on mice since she had been "glad to get done with rabbits." During this time, *Squirrel Nutkin* was doing well, and Beatrix decided to follow it up with a tale about a hedgehog that children would like. Norman had proposed the idea. The drawings of the hedgehog character, Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle, were very funny. In their letters, Norman and Beatrix discuss each detail of the book meticulously.

Beatrix wanted to plan out a book prior to the summer of 1905; this may have in part been motivated by a desire to stay in close contact with Norman. They had become deeply connected, and by the summer Norman Warne proposed and Beatrix accepted. They were both nearly forty, but the marriage seemed fitting. The Potters were wholly against it and made the subsequent months difficult for Beatrix. She had always honored her parents, but she thought their objections to the marriage were unfounded and that her happiness depended on her decision to marry Norman.

It is not clear what disobeying her parents took away from her, but she was achieving her independence. Despite the fact that a public announcement had not been made, Beatrix openly wore a ring; the Warnes accepted her with open arms. But tragically, Norman became sick, was found to have terminal leukemia, and died in August. Beatrix was completely devastated; few of her friends knew of her engagement so they could not comfort her. Over the next eight weeks, she kept working to keep her mind off her pain. She had constructed a refuge for herself to the north, in a stretch of land in Lancashire between Westmorland and the sea. She hid herself in writing and in that stretch of land.



Chapter 5, Hill Top Farm

Chapter 5, Hill Top Farm Summary and Analysis

Beatrix bought a farm in 1905 as had enough money to invest by this time. She was surprised she had enough money to buy anything. The farm was between Windermere and Coniston in an area she knew by heart. While in the area, she heard about the sale of Hill Top Farm and then acted quickly. The pasture was beautiful and crowded with woods; the farm was wholly unpretentious, but the purchase of Hill Top was more symbolic in order to ground her independence in something she loved. Hill Top represented her life of self-determination and hence rejected wholeheartedly her life with her parents. Bertram apparently encouraged her as well. She stayed busy there, not only maintaining the property but writing. She had loved the local area since she was a child and was delighted by the people, who she saw as simple and homey, but in a good way.

Initially Beatrix did not think Hill Top Farm would be her home; instead, the farm would be managed from afar and house a farmhand. The tenant farmer's name was John Cannon, who had a wife and two children. She initially wanted to evict him, but when she met him she changed her mind. Cannon would stay there for twelve years and help bring her into farm life. A year after buying Hill Top, Beatrix had recovered from much of her illness and grief from the winter; she added on to the farmhouse and built herself a small place within the home to live. Her records show she was delighted with the additions, with Cannon's management of the farm animals, and of the village. She seemed happy. Some frustrating rats at the farm lead her to write *The Roly-Poly Pudding*, but eventually the rats had to be kept out of the house, as one rat had killed a chicken and injured two others.

Unfortunately for Beatrix, she could only visit Hill Top Farm for one week or two at a stretch. Her parents kept a tight leash on her; she was always rather busy. But she still took part in the local village's affairs and was excited to show her farm animals at the county fair. She also got to know most everyone in the village of Sawrey. When the renovations were finished, she wrote that she was very pleased by them. However, one difficulty for her on the farm was seeing farm animals slaughtered; this was something she knew was required by farm life, but she could hardly stand the practice.

During this time, she grew interested in pigs, and the sketches she made of the pigs ultimately became *Pigland Bland*. Pigs were becoming central to the financing of the farm. Cannon often sold them; as the farm expanded, Cannon taught Beatrix how to farm. Once this began, Sawrey residents became used to seeing her often. She was partly regarded as eccentric, as she was indifferent to how she dressed and looked generally. She had a little plump figure for a forty-year old woman and was completely authentic, with common-sense energy. She felt as though she belonged there; over time her vision of Hill Top became a reality. Beatrix came to dislike her former life and grew weary when she was away from Hill Top.



The eight years after buying Hill Top were among the happiest in Beatrix's life. She wrote thirteen children's books during this time, among which included *Jemima Puddle-Duck*, *Ginger and Pickles*, and *Miss Moppet*. Six are about Hill Top and Sawrey. These books expressed her delight living there. The townspeople and the Cannons were often depicted in the book. The books also record various changes in the village. Ms Lane writes about how the various books reflected Hill Top and Sawrey life. Potter was in love with life there and began to expand her acquisitions. Despite it all, she was not quite free to live there full time. Seventy-five percent of the time she had to spend in Bolton Gardens.

Beatrix found ways to pass the time at Bolton, focusing on various side projects. Some involved translating her books, particularly into French. *Peter Rabbit* became a doll during that time; the children very much loved the doll. But due to free trade policies in Britain, German dolls overloaded the market, making it difficult for Beatrix to find someone to mass produce the doll. Even worse, pirated *Peter Rabbit* dolls began to be sold from Germany. While her grandfather had supported free trade, she came to question it. In 1910 she focused on producing propaganda for tariffs on behalf of the Tories and against the Liberals; in her diary she half joked that life would be better if "some lunatic had shot old [Liberal Prime Minister] Gladstone." Beatrix financed the reproduction and distribution of her own tract in favor of protectionism; it was beautifully illustrated.

She argued that the United States had become rich with tariffs and that Britain could as well. Oddly at this time, she found the Suffragettes silly, despite her heavy hand in politics. But in the election, the liberals led by Prime Minister Asquith, were still the largest party despite no longer having a majority. After this time, she became a staunch conservative in politics and stayed involved for the remainder of her life. Beatrix also became concerned about protecting her work against copyright infringement, which was becoming a problem due to her increasing fame.

Potter continued to long for Hill Top. The elections were over and the small matters concerning copyright and translation had lost their allure. She felt her life was wasting away and thought often of the farm. Beatrix bought Castle Farm in 1909, land that could be seen from Hill Top. The man who wrote her contract, Mr. William Heelis, stayed in touch with her through letters, which brought her some comfort, particularly during an illness that had left her weak and depressed that she found difficult to fight. Mr. Heelis proposed to her; she did not want to risk her physical and mental health by raising the matter with her family. But she did, and they reacted negatively as she knew they would. She was forty-seven and not well; it was not clear whether her stamina would hold up. But this time Bertram was home and defended Beatrix; he then confessed to his parents that he had married a farm girl without their permission and had been quite happy. But by midsummer, the conflict was over and Beatrix and Mr. Heelis were engaged.

They married on October 14th and Beatrix was now Mrs. William Heelis. They spent their honeymoon in a bungalow near Castle Farm. It was larger and modern enough for her husband. But now Beatrix had a home with her husband near Hill Top and was quite

happy, particularly to be married. William and Beatrix cured hams that Christmas; she came to love William a great deal. Now fifty, most of her best work was behind her and she was married, famous and had enough money to live on her own. She was happy to move past the woman she once was, Miss Potter of Bolton Gardens; she was now Mrs. Heelis of Sawrey and spent the next thirty years as a famed character in Lake County. She had the life she always wanted and quickly gave up any celebrity status.



Chapter 6, The Beatrix Potter Books

Chapter 6, The Beatrix Potter Books Summary and Analysis

Beatrix's marriage marks the end of her creative period, although she published six books during this period, but they were drawn together from past work and do not match the quality of previous work. Her best writing was done in a single decade, and then her understanding of herself changed. Yet she produced work during this short time that is unmatched in children's literature. What made her work so powerful and excellent?

The author argues that she made good art, well executed and founded in love and character awareness. Her water-coloring is beautiful and perfect for her genre. Further, her use of animal characters was the core of her genius, as she was able to illustrate human emotion through these animals with wonderful efficacy. Expressing truth through fantasy is a high art, and this was Beatrix's talent. Ms Lane illustrates Beatrix's expression of humanity through animals with some cases from her books. Because Beatrix knew animal beauty so well, she avoided the grotesque element in many nursery books of poorly drawn and frightening animals. Her books express no vulgar commercialism, and subtleties lie in the books that will amuse adults and give children enjoyment not only as children, but when they return to the books as adults. Her female animals are all good housewives, but they still display a certain pride and self-reliance.

Beatrix's settings were also important for expressing a simple message—her sense of the beauty of the countryside was very important to the excellence of her work; the settings are often real and capable of being identified. Potter's works express natural beauty, innocence, and freshness. The books convey ironical comicality on each page, with a seam running underneath the main narrative that the author describes as "toughness."

The books reflect the reality of animal and human life and of fear and strength. Hunter and prey is a common theme in her work. The stories resist being preachy and usually have no moral. Beatrix's work is special because she creates a small world to bring her characters to life and expresses her sense of an entire species through those of the individual characters. It should also be recalled that many of Beatrix's characters had real-life counterparts among the animals Beatrix cared for, which gave her the ability to add a deeper level of reality to her characters.



Chapter 7, The Fairy Caravan

Chapter 7, The Fairy Caravan Summary and Analysis

Only Johnny Town-Mouse, written in 1918, can be compared to the works of Beatrix's golden decade of writing. Beatrix's marriage refocuses her; her life was about farming and she did as she pleased. Beatrix ran several farms, had lots of capital and became interested in sheep. The life was demanding and satisfying. During World War I, she tended to farming herself. But even without the war, she probably would not have continued writing. In 1927, when a fan visited her, he discovered that she did not plan on any new writing. Yet she did publish *The Fairy Caravan* exclusively for her American friends as the work was too autobiographical for the English public. Chapter Seven focuses on the odd details of its publication and how it reflected the intimate details of Beatrix's life.

As seen earlier, Beatrix had a lonely and sheltered childhood and found fame alarming in middle-age. She did not enjoy strangers and much preferred private life. When married, she quickly adopted her new name and resisted being referred to as Miss Potter. Beatrix always refused interviews with the press and many came to believe she was dead. But her reticence to interact with the public softened in the twenties when she visited the United States. Americans loved her work and Beatrix felt protected by the distance of the Atlantic. Many aristocratic women sought her out; Beatrix found that these women, along with many others, took children's literature seriously. She was always friendly to Americans, and they always treated her with great respect. Beatrix often believed that the British took her less seriously, but this may be unfair to her countrymen.

The author argues that *The Fairy Caravan* is not a good work, but has good aspects. It contains the left-overs of her other works. The caravan in the book is a caravan of many different sorts of animals; they tell each other stories. She even includes "some deplorable fairies." Children loved the book and still do. *Sister Anne* and *Wag-by-Wall* were also published only in America and had a similar patchwork feel. She sometimes retold nursery rhymes and fairy tales in her own way; this strategy caused *Sister Anne* to fail. On the other hand, *Wag-by-Wall* is alright, but *Little Pig Robinson* is dull. These later stories were published mostly to show her appreciation to her American fans and are not among her best work.



Chapter 8, Mrs. Heelis of Sawrey

Chapter 8, Mrs. Heelis of Sawrey Summary and Analysis

Beatrix Heelis had a happy marriage and a simple life that she loved, and she stitched herself into the local community, invigorating it with her strong personality. Her father Rupert died at age eighty-one, just months after Beatrix married. The lead-up to his death had been difficult for the family. Mrs. Potter was left alone at Bolton Gardens; Beatrix wanted her to move to Sawrey. William kept his law office running during World War I and Beatrix held down the farm. Bertram died just before World War I ended, the same year Beatrix's harvest was ruined by bad weather. And after the war, Beatrix decided that her mother would not return to London and that Bolton Gardens would be sold. Instead, Mrs. Potter would live at Lindeth How, a Victorian house near Lake Windermere. Beatrix helped move Mrs. Potter's fortune and hired servants for her. The move was stressful on Beatrix and Mrs. Potter, however. Her mother lived to be ninety-three and died in 1932.

Just before Mrs. Potter moved to Windermere, Beatrix bought Troutbeck Park, a two-thousand acre farm estate with hundreds of sheep; these were Herdwick sheep, and Beatrix developed a great interest in them that lasted for some time. She was mesmerized by the scenery at Troutbeck and spent much time there alone, tending sheep, or watching wild animals. She would often observe the social habits of Herdwick sheep, describing their interactions as a "drama." She was impressed by the shepherds who could spin the tough wool of the Herdwick sheep and survive difficult weather on behalf of their flocks; she also noted the grace and intelligence of sheep dogs. Later she joined the Herdwick Sheep-Breeders' Association and became chair, the first woman to do so.

Ms Lane believes that Beatrix's greatest accomplishment after her golden decade of writing was her work on behalf of the National Trust. Rawnsley had always loved the Lake District, and this love was passed on to Beatrix. She fought to protect the Lake District from industrial development, pollution and commercial and residential expansion. The goal of the National Trust was to buy up land and prevent it from being used by the private sector—the Trust had various advantages. Beatrix's interests were perfectly aligned with the trust and saw her land acquisitions as similar to the Trust's. The author then proceeds to describe some of her joint activities with the Trust. She would cooperate in the purchase of land and help manage Trust land.

Old age came naturally and beautifully to Beatrix. She was not upset by it, nor did she resent it. She loved the wisdom and experience of it. She maintained a desire to work until she died and thought idleness would depress her. In those days, no one lived at Hill Top, and Beatrix would occasionally visit it alone. Little had changed save the absence of animals and the Cannons, who had retired. Beatrix believed that the old cottages of the area belonged to the people as a whole. Beatrix hated change because



she loved the good features of past times. She enjoyed her memories and with William pursued her Crompton genealogy once again.

In 1939, Beatrix's health worsened; she needed an operation but faced it heroically. She had expected the sickness for some time. Prior to the operation, she tended to her affairs and wrote her will. She left her copyrights to her husband and then to Norman Warne's favorite nephew. She visited Hill Top for one last time; she and William were able to survive the bombing of England. Sawrey was not really a target. December 25th, 1942 was her last Christmas. Her husband was aging as well. She was happy to see Hitler "beaten past recovery." Beatrix Potter Heelis died on December 22nd, 1943 at age seventy-seven with her husband by her side.



Characters

Helen Beatrix Potter Heelis

Helen Beatrix Potter Heelis was born July 28th, 1866 and was to become one of history's greatest children's writers, penning nearly two dozen children's books with classic animal characters such as Peter Rabbit. The book, *The Tale of Beatrix Poor*, has Beatrix as its main focus. Beatrix was born into a family of inherited wealth and grew up a lonely and isolated child, taught and reared primarily through governesses. Her happiest times as a child were in her summers in the Scottish countryside, where she and her brother Bertram cataloged plants and animals and learned to draw. This began Beatrix's lifelong love of animals and nature, which would lead her to do scientific work on fungi, naturalist painting and children's writing.

Her first book, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, was compiled from a series of letters she wrote to the child of a friend of hers. The book was enormously successful, leading her to write a series of books over the next decade. She was engaged to marry Norman Warne, her publisher, but he died before they could marry. Afterward his death, she wrote full time and earned enough money to buy her own farm in Sawrey—Hill Top Farm. She eventually marries a local solicitor (lawyer), William Heelis, adopts his name, and lives in Sawrey full time, first at Castle Farm. Beatrix stopped writing once she married, but took up the cause of conservation; when she died in 1943, she left her wealth to her husband, but when he died two years later, he left it to the National Trust to protect the Lake District from commercial and residential development.

Norman Warne

The Warne family was involved in the publication of Beatrix Potter's children's books. The youngest of the Warne brothers, Norman remained unmarried but helped to care for his many nieces and nephews. Norman was Beatrix's publisher and often collaborated with her in the books' publication and distribution. Beatrix did most of the original works, save a few where Norman aided her quite a bit. He did review and control each step of the productive process. As Beatrix and Norman grew closer, she began to spend more time with the Warne family, and their letters to one another grew noticeably warmer over time. This leads Norman to propose to Beatrix, who accepts the proposal. Her parents adamantly opposed the wedding, as Norman was of a lower class and Beatrix's marriage would diminish her (and their) social status.

Beatrix fought mightily against her parents, who at the time exercised great control over her despite the fact that she was over thirty-five years of age. She was desperate not to alienate them, but despite the fact that she usually submitted to them, she fought back because she believed her happiness was at stake. As the battle wore on, Beatrix seemed to have won and was enormously happy with a bright future ahead of her with Norman. But tragically, Norman Warne died from pernicious anemia at age thirty-seven



before they could be married. Beatrix was very depressed and withdrew part-time to the countryside where she would later come to live full-time. Beatrix stayed in touch with Norman's sister Millie for the rest of her life.

Mr. Rupert Potter

Rupert Potter was Beatrix's father. His father was a great and interesting man, but Rupert was a bit quiet and boring in his own way.

Mrs. Potter

Mrs. Potter was Beatrix's mother. She spent little time with Beatrix when she was a child, but as an elderly woman came to live close to Beatrix near Sawrey.

Bertram Potter

Bertram is Beatrix's brother who was an artist; the two remained close until Bertram died in his forties.

William Heelis

A local solicitor in Sawrey and Beatrix's husband. They were happily married until Beatrix's death in 1943.

The Cannon Family

The Cannon family were the tenant farmers at Hill Top Farm. They helped Beatrix learn farming techniques.

The Warne Family

The Warne family were Beatrix's publishers; she became close to them when she was engaged to Norman.

Caroline Hutton

Beatrix's cousin and long-time friend, Caroline was an early socialist and feminist.

The Cromptons

A legendary British family from whom Beatrix was descended through her mother.



Miss Hammond

Beatrix's governess who resigned when she had nothing left to teach Beatrix.

Canon Rawnsley

A local priest and political activist on behalf of conservationist, Canon helps Beatrix to publish *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*.

Peter Rabbit and Beatrix's Characters

Beatrix Potter created some of the most memorable children's book characters in history, such as Peter Rabbit. These characters were often based on real animals for whom Beatrix cared.

Uncle Roscoe Henry

Uncle Henry tries to help Beatrix promote her scientific work on fungi.

Children

Beatrix was always a child at heart and loved children.

Elderly Women

Many elderly women loved her books, appreciating their subtleties.

Americans

Americans were major fans of Beatrix's books and often visited her in Sawrey. She cobbled together some of her old ideas for books just to be published in the United States, although these books were not her best work.



Objects/Places

Bolton Gardens

Bolton Gardens was the Victorian estate where Beatrix was raised.

Dalguise House

The house in the Scottish countryside where the Potter family spent their summers and Beatrix learned to love nature.

The House at Bedford Square

The Warne family home where Beatrix published some of her first novels.

Hill Top Farm

The farm and getaway home that Beatrix purchased after Norman died; she often yearned to live there full time and would nearly get her wish when she and her husband moved to Castle Farm nearby.

Sawrey

The town where Hill Top Farm and Castle Farm were located.

Castle Farm

The farm where Beatrix and William Heelis lived.

Troutbeck Park

Late in life, Beatrix purchased a two-thousand acre farm known as Troutbeck where she raises Herdwick sheep.

Herdwick Sheep

A rare breed of domestic sheep originating in the Lake District. Beatrix raised them and eventually was president of the Herdwick Sheep Breeders Association.



Sketches

Beatrix learned to sketch at an early age and colorized her sketches for her book illustrations.

Water-Color Paintings

Beatrix was an excellent painter with water-colors; many of her paintings appear as classical illustrations in her children's books.

The Tale of Peter Rabbit

Beatrix Potter's first children's book and arguably her most famous, which concerns a mischievous young rabbit named Peter.

The Tailor of Gloucester

Beatrix Potter's second children's book which concerns a tailor who gets sick and cannot complete a job.

The Tale of Two Bad Mice

The Tale of Two Bad Mice is another one of Potter's most famous books and features two mice, Tom Thumb and Hunca Munca, two famous names from English literature and folklore.

The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin

The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin was Beatrix Potter's fourth novel which concerns a red squirrel named Nutkin.

Private Printing

Beatrix had trouble finding a publisher for her first two books and issued private printings with funds of her own, which helped to spread her fame enough to find her a publisher.



The Fairy Caravan

A book Beatrix published later in life only in the United States on behalf of her fans there; it was cobbled together from old unused ideas and was not of the same quality as her earlier works.

The National Trust

The National Trust protects special places in England; Beatrix Potter often collaborated with the trust to protect land in the Lake District. After Beatrix and her husband were both deceased, most of their property holdings were donated to the National Trust.

Beatrix's Diary

Beatrix kept a diary for long periods in her life; her diary between her mid-twenties and mid-thirties was written in code but was finally deciphered ten years after her death.

Copyright Infringement

Beatrix's books and illustrations were often subject to copyright infringement, which she fought against vigorously.

Protective Tariffs

Beatrix wanted to manufacture a Peter Rabbit doll in England but the Liberal Party's policy of free trade had given the German doll makers the upper hand. As a result, Beatrix could not find a local manufacturer. This led her to bitterly oppose the liberals and write propaganda for the conservatives on behalf of a tax on imports, otherwise known as a protective tariff.

Genealogy

William and Beatrix loved to do their genealogies, particularly tracing Beatrix's Crompton heritage. Beatrix was interested in genealogy from an early age.

Farm Work

Beatrix refused to grow idle as she aged and thus engaged in hard farm work from the time she bought Hill Top Farm until her death in 1943.

Setting

Born in 1866, Potter grew up in London during the last decades of the nineteenth century, an era usually referred to as the Victorian period. In many ways her life, confined as it was, is but a reflection of this period's oppressive treatment of children and women. Her mother, for example, consistently refused to allow Beatrix to visit friends, for fear that these visits would upset Beatrix and make her ill. Nor would her mother allow young people to visit Beatrix at home because they might bring germs into the house. There is no evidence that Beatrix was a sickly child, and these extreme attitudes were symptomatic of a social culture that considered such protectiveness of the "weak" female health not only proper but a sign of parental love.

Overall, the obedience demanded of Beatrix and the discipline and routines that were imposed should be viewed as part of the middle-class Victorian culture. Beatrix, like most girls, was not sent to school. Instead her parents hired a governess who lived in their home and taught subjects considered appropriate for girls—languages, literature, a little history, and some drawing. Her younger brother, on the other hand, was sent away to boarding school at age seven, which was considered proper for boys of his social class.

Even the difficulty that Beatrix had in eventually leaving home, as well as her parents' unwillingness to allow her to marry, should be understood within the historical context. The Victorians sometimes appeared to have mixed feelings about their daughters. They wanted them to marry, and yet they did not want them to marry. If parents argued that a husband was not "good enough," it indicated how highly they valued their daughter. Beatrix's wealthy, but not aristocratic, parents considered neither Norman Warne (who died shortly after asking Beatrix to marry) nor William Heelis (the country solicitor she did marry) "good enough." In addition, one daughter in each family was supposed to sacrifice her own happiness and remain at home to take care of her parents in their old age. Beatrix was the only daughter, so this task fell to her.



Social Sensitivity

One of the most difficult tasks for some young readers of this book will involve coming to a fair understanding of Victorian attitudes toward children and women. These may appear very peculiar, if not cruel, to modern sensibilities. Readers may want to turn Beatrix's mother into a cruel, witchlike character. She was not. Lane is sensitive to this difficulty and offers some background on Victorian attitudes. She carefully paints the Potter parents as stiff and conventional rather than meanspirited, noting that their daughter does not hate them, although she sometimes finds them irritating.

Young people may also have trouble understanding why Potter does not simply run away or rebel. In fact, this biography illustrates very well that open rebellion is often not necessary; Potter does get what she wants in the end. She is spunky and manages her parents remarkably well without causing too many outright wars. If she fails to change their attitudes, neither does she submit to them. This is the story of the success and triumph of a shy person.

Literary Qualities

Lane, a novelist, uses many of the techniques of fiction to write *The Tale of Beatrix Potter*. She creates well-defined characters, draws detailed scenes, and even constructs a sort of dialogue through extensive quotations from Potter's own letters and diaries. Lane draws on the memories of William Heelis, friends, cousins, and local people from the village of Sawrey to give this biography a very personal quality.

The narrator's affectionate and admiring voice is strong throughout. Lane recounts with respect and awe how the scholar Leslie Linder worked for years to decode the alphabet cipher that Potter used to write her journal. The reader gets both a sense of how difficult the decoding task was and a portrait of the adolescent Beatrix composing long, detailed journal entries in elaborate code, not because she is being secretive, but because she enjoys the difficulty of writing in code.



Themes

Nostalgia for Childhood

Beatrix Potter, like so many other children in the Victorian Era, was to be neither seen nor heard. She was isolated from her parents, who were often at social outings in English high society. As a result she spent most of her time with a long string of governesses, most of whom had little to teach her. Her childhood was isolated and lonely as a result. And yet, childhood was a happy time for her, particularly during her summers at Dalguise House. She learned to love the flora and fauna of the North English countryside, cataloging plants and animals with her brother and learning to sketch what she saw.

When she grew up, she missed those times, and found much of her life between her mid-twenties and mid-thirties to be very unhappy. In one very important way, Beatrix was always a child at heart. Her children's books helped her to connect with her childhood by connecting with other children. She displayed a keen insight into what pleased a child because her nostalgia for childhood and the fantasy life it involved led her to it. Beatrix's nostalgia for childhood was also on display in her predilection for the English Countryside later in life. She ended up living out her years in Sawrey, not far away from the Dalguise House of her youth. And she stitched herself into life in the countryside, something she had no doubt dreamed of since she was a little girl.

The Love of Nature

From an early age, Beatrix Potter displayed a deep love of nature. In her childhood, she spent many summers with her brother Bertram observing, studying and cataloging various plant and animal species at her family's Dalguise House in the North English countryside. Early on in life, she would press dead leaves into book pages and reconstruct animal skeletons. In her later teens and early twenties, she started to study animals professionally and even wrote a paper on fungi but was unable to gain recognition in the scientific community of her day.

Her love of animals and the English countryside inspired her famous children novels. The Tale of Peter Rabbit was actually based on a rabbit she had named Peter. She often carried animals around with her, gaining her a reputation as an eccentric. And in fact, all her books had animals as their main characters, which again expressed her love of nature, along with the settings of the books that were often places in her life that she found beautiful. When her fiancé Norman died, she bought Hill Top Farm in Sawrey and spent all her spare time there learning to farm. When she married William Heelis, she was able to escape to Sawrey full-time. She gave up writing and lived out her years at Castle Farm, doing hard farm work, raising farm animals, buying and preserving land in the Lake District, raising Herdwick sheep and even rising to become the leader of the Herdwick Sheep Breeders Association. Her love of nature consumed her entire life, her



childhood, adulthood and golden years, albeit in different ways, from studying to writing to farming.

Ineffable Genius

Ms Lane occasionally discusses the great talent and literary and artistic genius of Beatrix Potter, which Lane argues is often hard to get a handle on. Beatrix was obviously a great artistic talent and wrote some of the greatest children's books ever penned. But what made her so talented? What exactly was it about her that made her work so excellent? The author argues that her talent was comprised of many factors.

First, she executed her art in a superb fashion. This was not simply talent and practice applied to canvas, but was also from her extensive familiarity with animal life obtained through years of observation and study. Many of her characters were sketched from photographs of Beatrix's animals of the same name. Her admiration for these animals gave her the energy to provide intricate details to her drawings. All of her work displays sympathy with her characters. This sympathy also saved her from the "grotesque" aspects of animal drawings in other children's books, as the animals were not distorted. Her response to animals, like that of a child, was direct and simple, despite its subtlety.

Her writing is also simple and direct. And while it has a subtlety of its own, it also avoids sentimentality and pretension. She knew about the harsh reality of animal life and expressed a sort of "toughness" in her descriptions of the events and attitudes within her stories. But the most unique feature of her ineffable genius is her power to create a self-contained world of memorable characters.



Themes/Characters

The most important character in *The Tale of Beatrix Potter* is obviously Beatrix herself. In Lane's portrayal, Beatrix possesses a sturdy temperament and an inner self-sufficiency that allow her to find compensations in her lonely and rather unhappy childhood.

Rather than succumbing to boredom, Beatrix develops during her solitude a life-long love of privacy and an ability to focus intensely on her own interests and fantasies. Shy, modest, and gentle, Beatrix has a subtle wit and an unsentimental innocence. Although the conventional formality of her parents' life irritates her, she remains patient and never openly rebels against it.

Rupert Potter, her father, is a dignified, whiskered, and punctual Victorian who does not share much of his daughter's life. Mrs. Potter is stern and stiff.

Some of the more positive influences in Beatrix's life include her grandmother, her brother, and her governess.

Jessie Crompton, or Grandmamma Potter, is an old lady of seventy-five when Beatrix is five years old. She has sparkling eyes, like Beatrix's own, a lively wit, and a past filled with adventure and high-spirited romance. Beatrix's younger brother, Bertram, is her companion in the nursery and during summer vacations. The two remain friends throughout their lives, sharing interests in art and natural history. When Beatrix is seventeen, Annie Carter joins the Potter household as a German governess.

Miss Carter is "sweet-natured, pleasant mannered, and—compared with Beatrix—splendidly emancipated." Although she soon leaves her job to marry and start a family in nearby Wadsworth, the friendship between Beatrix and Annie continues. Beatrix becomes known as "Auntie Bea" to Annie's children, whom she regularly visits. Beatrix brings them gifts, makes up stories for them, and draws pictures with them.

When she cannot visit, she writes the children letters. She creates *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* as a picture-letter for Annie's son Noel Moore when he is in bed with a long illness.

When Beatrix is in her thirties, she develops a close friendship with Norman Warne, whose father founded the company that publishes her books. Shy, gentle, and imaginative, his personality is much like Beatrix's. When they become engaged, an awful row erupts in the Potter household because Beatrix's parents deem him an unsuitable husband. Norman dies in 1905 before a wedding can take place.

Beatrix's next suitor, William Heelis, a solicitor and real estate agent, meets with similar objections from her parents, but she marries him anyway, beginning what she describes as the happiest period in her life.



Many of the themes that Lane highlights in *The Tale of Beatrix Potter* are those that Potter herself chose to identify as important when she looked back upon her life during her later years.

Lane also draws attention to the ironic conflict between Potter's conventional social behavior and her highly original inner life.

Tenacity and patience in the face of obstacles are important themes in this life. Beatrix's most obvious struggle is against her parents, but she also has to battle her whole society and its view of women as weak, unintellectual, and irresponsible.

Work and its relationship to happiness is another important theme. Work, not education or experience, helps Potter become self-sufficient and happy.

Tucked away upstairs where she eats her meals alone, has few toys, no friends, and only an occasional lesson from a hired governess, Beatrix fills her hours with focused activity. She reads, makes up stories, trains mice, memorizes Shakespeare's plays, and cultivates a highly sensitive eye for detail. Out of this solitude comes a distinctly unique and original personality.

She overcomes her sorrows to find happiness and peace at last.

Style

Perspective

The perspective of *The Tale of Beatrix Potter* is that of her biographer and clear admirer Margaret Lane. Margaret Lane was the Dowager Countess of Huntington and a prominent British author with over two dozen books to her name. She wrote two biographies of Beatrix Potter, which are among her best known books. Apparently, Potter helped her with the original biography. Lane tells Beatrix's Potter's story with great care, making sure to outline the important historical and psychological details of Potter's life along with telling the story of her life's outward events. Lane also wrote biographies of Samuel Johnson and Emily Bronte, so she was an experienced biographer.

Her perspective of the book is largely impartial, retelling the events of Beatrix's life until Chapter 6, where she speculates on the qualities that made Beatrix Potter such an excellent writer, arguing that Beatrix's intimate connection to nature, artistic technique and sympathy with children helped to produce her genius. Lane seems saddened that Potter gave up writing when she married William Heelis, despite the fact Lane seems to understand the reasons that Potter did so. And because Lane admires Potter so much, she is disappointed by the cobbled-together quality of the works Potter released after she married, works such as *The Fairy Caravan*.

Tone

As stated above, Margaret Lane was a biographer of great writers such as Johnson, Bronte and Potter. As such and as a writer herself, her tone reflects that of a seasoned writer analyzing her heroes. A deep admiration for Potter pervades the text, with Lane rarely criticizing Potter's life or works. Instead, she seems to empathize with nearly all of Potter's decisions at least until Potter married. The book is well-known for its lyrical and colorful descriptions of Potter in the North English countryside as a child, lush descriptions of her artwork, and fawning depictions of Potter's characters. Further, the book contains beautiful passages describing Potter's walks through her farm lands later in life and her care for the Herdwick sheep.

In Chapter 6, the tone becomes particularly positive yet more academic as Lane gives her analysis of the features of Potter's personality that made her such a wonderful writer and illustrator, but it turns critical in Chapter 7. In Chapter 7, Lane discusses the publication of *The Fairy Caravan* and others books after Beatrix married. They were cobbled together from Beatrix's unused ideas from her golden decade of publishing, and Lane argues that as a result the works are poor. She gives frank assessments of the books, often describing them as dull or failures. She seems disappointed that Beatrix decided to publish them without making them better. But the book ends in continued

admiration, but not only for Beatrix's writings but for her conservationism and indomitable spirit in old age.

Structure

The Tale of Beatrix Potter is not a long work but contains many details packed into eight tight chapters. They are arranged in chronological order though Chapter 6 contains mostly author commentary on what made Potter the writer she was. Chapter 1, "Bolton Gardens," introduces the reader to Beatrix and her lonely and isolated childhood. Chapter 2, "Summer Holidays," describes her childhood trips to the countryside, where she fell in love with nature, a love that would last her whole life. Chapter 3, "Peter Rabbit," tells the story of her young adulthood that led to her writing and publishing Peter Rabbit, along with some of her other first novels; Chapter 4, "The House in Bedford Square," covers her contact with the Warne family, her getting to know Norman Warne, their engagement and his subsequent death, along with the many novels she published during this time.

Chapter 5, "Hill Top Farm," follows Warne's death to Beatrix's purchase of Hill Top Farm and her continued love affair with the English countryside. Chapter 6, "The Beatrix Potter Books," takes a detour to describe the author's views on what made Beatrix Potter a special person and a classical children's writer, and Chapter 7, "The Fairy Caravan," analyzes the oddity of the circumstances surrounding the publication of the Fairy Caravan, Potter's later and cobbled-together work published only in the United States. Finally, in Chapter 8, "Mrs. Heelis of Sawrey," Lane follows Beatrix's life in Sawrey until Beatrix's death in 1943, and discusses her activities as a conservationist, land owner, and Herdwick sheep breeder. The book contains a variety of pictures, not only of Beatrix and her family, but of her illustrations and original writings.



Quotes

"For quiet, solitary and observant children create their own world and live in it, nourishing their imaginations on the material at hand." (15)

"Your Mayflower ancestors sailed to America; mine at the same time were sticking it out at home, probably rather enjoying persecution." (22)

"Thank goodness, my education was neglected; I was never sent to school ... The reason I am glad I did not go to school—it would have rubbed off some of the originality" (30)

"What we call the highest and the lowest in nature are both equally perfect. A willow bush is as beautiful as the human form divine." (40)

"I have just made stories to please myself, because I never grew up." (59)

"No more twist!" (69)

"But she thought their objections to Norman Warne unreasonable, and felt that her life's happiness was at stake." (84)

"The experience was brief. Norman Warne, who had never been robust, fell suddenly ill. He would not at first consult a doctor, and when finally he did so it was discovered that he was in an advanced stage of leukemia and beyond help. He died at the end of August." (85)

"Beatrix Potter was in love with her life in Sawrey, and with the whole of Hill Top." (101)

"I feel as if I had been married many years." (112)

"The quality which most, in the last analysis, distinguishes Beatrix Potter among children's writers (and indeed distinguishes her in a much wider sphere) is her ability to create a special world and fill it with original characters who 'come alive'." (126)

"It is rare for old age to be the happiest period of life, but there is no doubt that in middle age and after Beatrix Potter found a satisfaction and contentment that she had never known in youth." (141)

"She was wonderfully clear in mind, but ... I am glad that she is at rest." (145)

"I do not resent older age if it brings slowness it brings experience and weight ... It is a pity the wisdom and experience of old age are largely wasted." (156)

"I hope to do a bit more active work yet—and anyhow I have survived to see Hitler beaten past hope of recovery." (164)



"She died as she had lived, as simply as possible, conscious of what she was doing, without fuss or regret." (165)

"Sorrows of yesterday and today and tomorrow the vastness of the fells covers all with a mantle of peace." (165)



Topics for Discussion

How did Beatrix's childhood contribute to her writing?

What was unique about Beatrix's children's books?

What accounts for Beatrix's childhood nostalgia?

Why do you believe Beatrix gave up writing after she was married?

What led Beatrix to love life on the farm?

What is the connection between Beatrix's characters and her real life experiences with animals?

Do you find anything significant about Beatrix's relationships with men? In what way are the men in her life connected to the things she loves?

Explain Beatrix's relationship with her parents. How did they come to have such power over her? How did she finally extricate herself from their control?



Essay Topics

1. To be eccentric means to be unusual or "outside the center of things." In what ways do you think Beatrix Potter was truly an eccentric? In what ways was she not eccentric at all?
2. Potter believed in the importance of heredity in the formation of character, and as she grew older she liked to draw attention to "what she regarded as the outcroppings of native Crompton rock in her own character." How would you describe the influence of her grandparents and the Crompton family legends on Potter's life?
3. Potter once remarked, "I can't invent; I only copy." To what extent is this a true statement? How can one who copies also be creative?
4. A modern reader may be surprised to learn that Potter was outspokenly opposed to women's liberation. Can you explain this stand in terms of her character and upbringing?
5. In the later part of her life, Potter scorned English admirers who liked to emphasize her importance as an artist, while befriending American fans who emphasized her importance as a writer.

Why do you think she felt this way?
6. Potter rejected many aspects of her childhood. She disliked Bolton Gardens and all it stood for. Yet in reading her biography, one feels a great strength of character and a unity of purpose. How would you tie together the interests of her youth with the interests of her maturity?
7. Friends are important to any person's development. Who were Potter's best friends and how did they affect her life?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Critics often like to identify the people and places that inspired Potter's books. Try to separate the "fact" from the "fiction" in some of her books using this biography as a reference. Why do you think she was so careful to copy things from "real life"?
2. The Potter household is an example of late Victorian family life. Using this biography as an example, describe the Victorian attitude toward children and women. How has this attitude changed?
3. Potter's grandparents were religious and political nonconformists. How was this radical heritage reflected in Potter's own life?
4. Describe the influence of two or three people (other than her parents) on Potter's life.
5. "I cannot rest," Beatrix Potter wrote in her secret journal. "I must draw, however poor the result ... I will do something sooner or later." She appears to have been a very determined child who knew exactly what she wanted. In light of her entire life, what do you think she really did want? Did she achieve it?
6. Biographies sometimes bring up large questions that are relevant to many lives. How does Lane deal with the problem of happiness in the life of Beatrix Potter?

Further Study

Under, Leslie. *The Art of Beatrix Potter*.

1955. Rev. ed. Middlesex, England: Frederick Warne, 1972. Contains reproductions of many of Potter's drawings, including her book illustrations, sketches from her notebooks, and the mushroom drawings she intended someday to make into a book.

Potter, Beatrix. *Beatrix Potter's Americans: Selected Letters*, edited by Jane Crowell Morse. Boston: Horn Book, 1982. The letters from Potter to her American fans, written during the latter part of her life, contain many reminiscences of her youth.

. *The Journal of Beatrix Potter*, edited by Leslie Linder. Middlesex, England: Frederick Warne, 1966. This is the engaging journal that Beatrix Potter began at age fourteen and kept until she was nearly thirty years old.

Taylor, Judy. *Beatrix Potter: Artist, Storyteller and Countrywoman*. Middlesex, England: Frederick Warne/ Penguin Books, 1986. Contains plenty of pictures and provides a good overview of Beatrix Potter research since Lane's biography.



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