



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 39
Number 2

Article 14

4-23-2021

***Rebirth in the Life and Works of Beatrix Potter* by Richard Tuerk**

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Recommended Citation

Rosegrant, John (2021) "*Rebirth in the Life and Works of Beatrix Potter* by Richard Tuerk," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 39: No. 2, Article 14.

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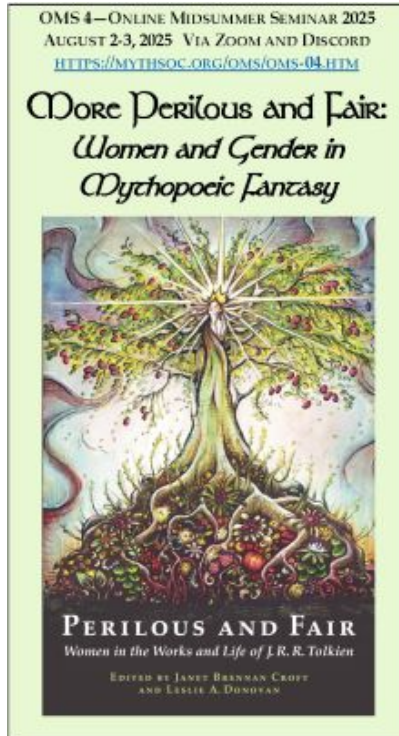
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Rebirth in the Life and Works of Beatrix Potter by Richard Tuerk

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REBIRTH IN THE LIFE AND WORKS OF BEATRIX POTTER. Richard Tuerk. Jefferson NC: McFarland, 2020. 217 pp. pbk 978-1-4766-8062-0, \$45.00. ebook 978-1-4766-3930-7.

RICHARD TUERK ANNOUNCES WITH THE TITLE OF THIS BOOK that he will be exploring the profound mythological and psychological theme of rebirth. He states his central idea on p. 7: "In work after work by Beatrix Potter, the protagonists go through a series of events that roughly correspond to processes of initiation in which a kind of rebirth occurs." Readers of this journal may be acquainted with Tuerk as an expert on Oz who has identified features of fairy tale and Joseph Campbell's monomyth in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (Tuerk). But can the supposedly simple works of Beatrix Potter support such an exploration? The answer turns out to be "Yes." Although the precise prominence and shape of rebirth fantasies in Beatrix Potter's life and work remain unclear to me after reading this book, Tuerk's exploration of these fantasies is original and thoughtful and deepened my appreciation of the tales and their author.

Tuerk, Professor Emeritus at Texas A&M University—Commerce, lets the reader know that this book is special to him. He begins with "A Very Personal Preface" and ends with "A Very Personal Conclusion." He closes his Preface with, "This book represents the culmination of my work on children's literature in general and Beatrix Potter in particular" (4), and closes his conclusion with, "On the most profound level, I read and reread her works to please myself, to nurture the child within me, the child I hope I continue to nourish until my death" (187). Although I am not in complete agreement with all his points, I read this book with the sense that I was privileged to be bouncing my ideas off someone who has thought about Beatrix Potter so long and so lovingly.

The bulk of the book is a brief analysis of each of Beatrix Potter's tales, particularly noting whether and to what extent they depict rebirth fantasy, but also looking more broadly at other related fairy tales and myths and at Beatrix Potter's social commentary. Prior to these analyses are sections called "What to Call Beatrix Potter" (I choose to use both names throughout this review, because although she preferred "Mrs. Heelis" after she married, that name is unfamiliar to most, "Beatrix" alone is disrespectful, and "Potter" risks confusion with the Boy Who Lived); "An Introduction to the World of Beatrix Potter," a brief biography; "Potter's Realism," a perceptive discussion of her unique ability to create characters who are simultaneously realistic animals and people; "Fairies, Fairytales and Beatrix Potter"; and "Potter's Vocabulary and Readership Awareness," a discussion of the care she took with word choice, including

studding her tales with vocabulary more advanced than children normally encounter.

Tuerk is thoroughly acquainted with the Beatrix Potter literature as well as her journal and correspondence, and synthesizes this information to demonstrate that Beatrix Potter desired a rebirth and to an extent found one. He describes childhood seclusion forced upon her by her parents so severe that “by modern standards, she seems to have been abused” (7-8), and her mother’s continuing demands and restrictions even into adulthood, so much so that she tried to block both of Beatrix Potter’s engagements and expected her daughter to live with her and take care of her. Tuerk cites a number of passages from the coded journal that Beatrix Potter kept between the ages of fifteen and thirty to make the case that she experienced clinical depression that was exacerbated by severe rheumatic fever as a teenager.

Tuerk understands Beatrix Potter to have achieved psychological and emotional rebirth when, at the age of 47, she married despite her parents’ opposition. He demonstrates that her life changed significantly afterward: she proudly insisted on being addressed thenceforth by her married name, she established marital residence away from her mother, and she shifted her main occupation from being a writer to being a farmer and landholder devoted to preserving the Lake District from development. But Tuerk considers this rebirth to have been partial; he cites occasional comments in her adult correspondence indicating that she remained vulnerable to depression, describes her continuing commitment to respond quickly to her mother’s demands, and describes her as a bit of a misanthrope: because of the way her childhood was bent she “liked children from a distance [...] not from close up, unless they were ‘well-behaved’” (25), and “She seems to have derived some pleasure from bullying people who were in a position of powerlessness to her. Is it not possible that she was unwittingly imitating the way her parents treated her?” (28).

This picture of Beatrix Potter that Tuerk draws is darker than the one I perceive in her journal and correspondence, in other biographies (Lane, Lear), and in psychological studies (Grinstein, Tutter, Scheftel). It is not that the things Tuerk emphasizes are absent in these other sources, but they also put more weight on Beatrix Potter’s playfulness, humor, pleasure in both her own art and that of others, and enjoyment of animals and nature. It is likely that this discrepancy results from Tuerk highlighting aspects of her life that demonstrate a contrast between her darker earlier years and her “rebirth” with marriage and later life. Ironically, though, this focus leads Tuerk to miss a chance to strengthen his argument: he is largely silent about Beatrix Potter’s scientific and artistic pursuits that led to her writing a paper on fungi that was read at the Linnean Society in April, 1897. She responded to the dismissal of this paper by the patriarchal scientific establishment by giving up these pursuits, quitting

journaling, and turning to the creative writing for which she is best known—a kind of rebirth.

In Tuerk's brief analysis of all Beatrix Potter's tales he demonstrates that in some but not all, "At the time of an episode that seems to be leading to imminent death of one of her characters, the character is almost always within some kind of enclosing, womb-like structure" (7). To use her most famous tale as an example, he writes that as Peter Rabbit flees from Mr. MacGregor, his "being caught in the net upside down puts him in a position that makes him appear ready to enter the birth canal. His very difficult path to rebirth is about to begin. But the birth canal he has to traverse turns out to be a very long one, involving additional dangerous events" (59). "Peter's jumping out of the window that is much too small for Mr. McGregor to follow him seems symbolic of escape from the womb. Peter's process of rebirth finally seems over. But it is not. He still must get out of the garden. In psychological terms, he still must finish passing through the birth canal" (60). Finally, "He scrunches under the gate, a kind of exit from the birth canal" (61).

As a psychologist myself, I appreciate Tuerk's openness to exploring the idea that this regular trope in Beatrix Potter's tales unconsciously represents rebirth. However, it is important when interpreting unconscious meanings to think about whether the material at hand could be more simply and directly explained by conscious experience. If one is writing exciting stories for children in which animals have dangerous adventures, the threat of bodily injury is an almost unavoidable theme, and small animals live in, and when pursued take refuge in, holes and "womb-like" enclosures. Could these conscious factors be all that is needed to explain this theme in Beatrix Potter's tales? On balance, I think that Tuerk succeeds in making the case that the rebirth scenario is so common in Beatrix Potter's tales, and at times takes such specific forms like Peter being caught in the net in fetal position, that it represents more than the realistic experience of small animals. Freud's concept of "dreams from above" is helpful here: these are dreams that are primarily motivated by daily concerns but carry extra energy provided by unconscious meanings. A reader who resonates with the unconscious meaning of rebirth in Beatrix Potter's tales will at the same time be immersed in their highly realistic quality. This is an example of Beatrix Potter's remarkable ability to combine fantasy with realism, something that Tuerk writes very strongly about in his section on "Potter's Realism"; e.g. "her ability to create animals that have the realistic characteristics of animals even when they dress in human clothing and speak a human language" (34).

Tuerk points out that rebirth experiences in Beatrix Potter's tales do not always result in growth. Peter Rabbit, at least by the time he appears in the later *Tale of Mr. Tod*, shows growth in his bravery and decisiveness. But Jemima

Puddle-Duck remains the same after her rebirth experience, silly and oblivious, and Tom Kitten regresses after his, becoming timid and afraid of rats. Furthermore, in some of the tales the rebirth scenario is truncated; for example, in *The Tale of Timmy Tiptoes* the squirrel Timmy falls into and eventually emerges from an enclosed space, but he is never threatened with death. Tuerk links these failed rebirths and partial scenarios to the way that Beatrix Potter's own rebirth was only partially complete.

Readers of this journal may be especially interested in Tuerk's section on "Fairies, Fairytales and Beatrix Potter" where he engages with Tolkien's ideas in "On Fairy-stories." He likes Tolkien's concept of *Faerie*, and states that "for Potter as a child, the realm of *Faerie* was synonymous, she insisted, with the world in which she lived—or at least [...] the natural world," (44) and that she retained this idea into adulthood. And he agrees with Tolkien's insistence that a fairytale must be presented as true. But he then takes issue with Tolkien ruling that Beatrix Potter's tales are not fairytales. Tolkien groups them with "beast fables" in which humans if present are unimportant and the animal appearance is just a mask upon a human face. He thinks *The Tailor of Gloucester* and *The Tale of Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle* come closest to being fairytales but rules out the latter because of its hinted dream explanation. Tuerk responds that considering the animals in Beatrix Potter's tales just a mask upon a human face "seems woefully misguided" (46) and clarifies that the narrator of *The Tale of Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle* rejects the dream interpretation and states that the events really happened.

So are Beatrix Potter's tales fairytales? For me, *The Tailor of Gloucester* is definitely a fairytale—it is an only slightly-reworked version of *The Shoemaker and the Elves*, which is "officially sanctioned" as a fairytale by being in the Brothers Grimm. And I think Tuerk is right that Tolkien misreads the ending of *The Tale of Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle*—the dream explanation of the story is rejected and the overall effect is that of a fairytale. But most of Beatrix Potter's tales do not feel like fairytales to me. I think this is because of her realism. In her unique talent at blending realistic animals with human behavior, we find real combined with real. This is why some of her tales, such as *The Tale of Mr. Jeremy Fisher*, function so well as social satire: mixed with the realistic frog we see realistic pretentious high-society types. Other readers may have a different opinion about whether Beatrix Potter wrote fairytales, and that is fine with me; I am grateful to Tuerk for stimulating the kind of investigation that engages our minds without needing to be resolved.

Before leaving Tuerk's thoughts on Tolkien, I must point out one egregious error: In an interesting discussion of the riddling in *The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin*, he writes, "J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, where the riddling game *Frodo Baggins* plays with Gollum is a matter of life and death" (71, italics added).

But that is a quibble. Overall, this book presents an original idea about Beatrix Potter that connects her in a new way to the great soup of stories. I highly recommend it for anyone who is interested in Beatrix Potter and her tales.

—John Rosegrant

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THE ART OF THE OCCULT: A VISUAL SOURCEBOOK FOR THE MODERN MYSTIC. S. Elizabeth. White Lion Publishing, 2020. 240 pp. including a one-page list of books for further reading, two-page index consisting primarily of artist's names, credits, acknowledgements, and 200 colour illustrations. Hardcover ISBN 978-0-7112-4883-0 \$29.99; Ebook ISBN 978-0-7112-5416-9.

S. ELIZABETH, AUTHOR OF *The Art of the Occult*, is the online pseudonym for Sarah Walters, whose credentials include writing for the website "Haute Macabre," her blogs "Ghoul Next Door" and "These Unquiet Things," and now *The Art of the Occult*, published by White Lion Publishing, one of the Quarto Group's numerous imprints specializing in well-illustrated general interest books. This volume is exactly what its subtitle announces: *A Visual Sourcebook for the Modern Mystic*, and it is one of several new releases attracting social media buzz in 2020, the first year of COVID-19. This beautiful book full of colour pictures on an increasingly trendy subject held much promise as a refreshing