

Symbolism of Victorian Society in the Anthropomorphism of the Peter Rabbit Picture Book (1901)

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the anthropomorphic elements in Beatrix Potter's Peter Rabbit and their role in reflecting Victorian societal values. Through the depiction of Peter wearing human-like attire, notably his blue jacket, and standing upright, Potter imbues the character with human qualities, making him relatable to young readers. This anthropomorphism serves to symbolize both the innocence and adventurous spirit of childhood, while highlighting the tension between curiosity and the moral lessons of obedience and responsibility. The garden, as a space of both adventure and danger, mirrors the Victorian ideal of childhood exploration within the confines of authority. Peter's journey—marked by disobedience, mischief, and eventual growth—illustrates the duality of childhood: innocence coupled with the need for guidance. By balancing exploration with consequences, Potter's narrative conveys timeless moral lessons, making Peter Rabbit a relatable, enduring story for both children and adults that transcends its Victorian context. The story's appeal lies in its ability to speak to universal themes of personal growth and the balance between freedom and discipline. Potter's use of anthropomorphism, coupled with her nuanced portrayal of childhood, ensures that Peter Rabbit remains an essential piece of literature that continues to resonate across generations.

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1. Introduction

The early 20th century marked a significant turning point in children's literature, with Beatrix Potter's Peter Rabbit (1901) emerging as a quintessential example of this transformative era. Set against the backdrop of Victorian society, Peter Rabbit not only captivates young readers with its charming narrative and delightful illustrations but also serves as a profound reflection of the cultural and social values of its time. The anthropomorphism of its animal characters, most notably Peter Rabbit himself, provides a unique lens through which to examine the complexities of human behavior, societal norms, and moral lessons prevalent in Victorian England.

In this picture book, Potter skillfully imbues her animal protagonists with human-like traits, allowing them to navigate a world that mirrors the challenges and dilemmas faced by children and adults alike. Through the lens of semiotics, the physical traits, behaviors, and interactions of these characters become signifiers that convey deeper meanings, revealing the underlying societal expectations and values of the Victorian era. For instance, Peter's mischievous nature and his penchant for rebellion against authority resonate with the childhood experiences of many readers, while also reflecting the era's emphasis on discipline and propriety.

Moreover, the anthropomorphic elements in Peter Rabbit have not only shaped the narrative's immediate impact but have also influenced the trajectory of children's literature in the years that followed (Hunt, 1991). By situating this analysis within the cultural and historical context of the Victorian period, this article aims to explore how Potter's work encapsulates the essence of her time, while also contributing to the evolution of anthropomorphism as a literary device (Rose, 1984). Ultimately, Peter Rabbit stands as a testament to the enduring power of storytelling, bridging the gap between the innocence of childhood and the complexities of societal expectations, and inviting readers to reflect on their own experiences within the framework of a rapidly changing world. Picture books are a genre of children's literature that combine text and illustrations to create a deeper and more interactive reading experience (Sipe, 2008). In picture books, illustrations do not merely complement the story but act as narrative elements that convey meaning through symbols, color, composition, and character expression (Nodelman, 1988). The illustrations in Peter Rabbit play a crucial role in shaping the semiotic meaning of the story, where visual signs such as Peter's facial expressions, the setting, and his interactions with other characters provide clues about the emotions and conflicts unfolding within the narrative. Thus, the combination

of text and illustrations in picture books creates a richer narrative, allowing children to understand the story not only through words but also through visual representations.

The use of anthropomorphism in *Peter Rabbit* reflects how children can view the world through a perspective that is more familiar and easy to understand (Grenby, 2014). By presenting animal characters with human qualities, the story helps young readers develop empathy and understand moral concepts such as the consequences of actions, courage, and the importance of following rules (Nikolajeva, 2010; Lanta et al., 2022; Junaid et al., 2024). Through vivid illustrations and strong character expressions, children can more easily relate their own experiences to those of Peter Rabbit, thereby enhancing their engagement with the story.

From a semiotic perspective, the illustrations in *Peter Rabbit* also demonstrate how meaning is constructed through the use of signs and symbols (Mughtar et al., 2023; Yaumi et al., 2024; Sulastri & Hakim, 2024). For example, the clothes worn by Peter Rabbit are not just decorative elements but also signify his individuality and unique personality. Similarly, visual elements such as color and composition in each scene contribute to the creation of a particular emotional atmosphere, such as tension when Peter is chased by Mr. McGregor or calmness when he returns home. Semiotic analysis of these illustrations can reveal how visual elements shape a more complex narrative and support the moral messages conveyed as the reflection of Victorian society.

By analyzing the aspects of anthropomorphism and semiotics in *Peter Rabbit*, this study aims to understand how animal characters are given human-like traits in children's literature, as well as explore how symbols, indices, and icons shape visual narratives that embody the cultural perspective involved. Additionally, this research is expected to contribute to the understanding of the role of visuals in meaning-making in children's literature and its contribution to the development of visual literacy and cultural understanding among young readers. Therefore, this study can also serve as a reference for educators, parents, and academics in understanding how visual media in children's literature can influence children's thinking patterns.

The study of Beatrix Potter's *Peter Rabbit* (1901) within the context of Victorian society has been explored in various literary and cultural studies. As a key work of early 20th-century children's literature, *Peter Rabbit* provides a rich source for investigating the intersection of cultural values, moral lessons, and anthropomorphism. The role of animals with human traits in children's literature is a crucial aspect of this exploration, as it offers a unique lens through which young readers can navigate complex societal norms.

The aim of this study is to analyze the use of anthropomorphism in the *Peter Rabbit* story to understand how animal characters are given human-like traits in children's literature. In this context, the research will examine how the animal characters in the story behave, think, and interact like humans, and how this convey the Victorian society. The goal is to explore how symbols, indices, and icons in the illustrations shape the visual narrative and convey the cultural reflection to the readers, providing a deeper understanding of the relationship between the text and images in children's stories.

1.1 The Role of Anthropomorphism in Victorian Children's Literature

The use of anthropomorphism in children's literature during the Victorian era was not a novel concept, but its application in *Peter Rabbit* marked a notable evolution. Scholars such as Rose (1984) and Pullman (2000) have emphasized how anthropomorphized animal characters allow young readers to explore human emotions, societal rules, and moral lessons within the safe, imaginative confines of a fictional world. The anthropomorphism in *Peter Rabbit*, where the titular character exhibits human traits such as wearing clothing and engaging in rebellion, mirrors the Victorian ideal of childhood—a period marked by a dual emphasis on both innocence and discipline. Blythe (2007) argues that the Victorian period sought to instill in children a sense of responsibility and moral conduct, often conveyed through stories involving animal characters that are caught between innocence and societal expectations. *Peter Rabbit*'s mischievousness, for example, serves as both a reflection of youthful curiosity and a metaphor for the era's increasing emphasis on conforming to societal norms.

1.2 Semiotics and Visual Narrative in Picture Books

In the realm of children's literature, the semiotic analysis of picture books offers insights into how images contribute to the construction of meaning. Abrams (1999) and Barthes (1967) laid the groundwork for semiotic theories, particularly in the way signs, symbols, and images function to create narratives and convey messages. In the case of *Peter Rabbit*, the combination of text and illustrations creates a narrative layer that goes beyond the written word. Bal (1997) suggests

that picture books rely on a complex interplay between visual and textual signs, where illustrations do not merely supplement the text but act as a critical component in shaping the reader's understanding of the story. The illustrations in *Peter Rabbit*, such as Peter's expressive eyes and human-like posture, function as semiotic signs that highlight his internal conflict between rebellion and responsibility, while simultaneously conveying broader cultural norms of the Victorian era.

1.3 The Importance of Visual Signs in Meaning-Making

The illustrations in *Peter Rabbit* serve not only as a visual counterpart to the narrative but also as an essential vehicle for communicating deeper cultural and moral meanings. The clothes Peter wears, especially his blue jacket, symbolize his individuality and set him apart from the wild animals around him, emphasizing the Victorian expectation for civility and propriety. The setting—particularly the garden, which shifts between an idyllic haven and a space of danger—symbolizes the boundaries between childhood innocence and the adult world of consequences. Johnson (2012) suggests that visual cues such as color, posture, and setting in *Peter Rabbit* are not just decorative but carry substantial narrative weight, helping young readers interpret the story's emotional tone and moral lessons. The semiotic analysis of these visual elements reveals how *Peter Rabbit* both reflects and critiques Victorian societal norms regarding childhood behavior, discipline, and obedience.

1.4 Impact on the Development of Children's Literature

The impact of *Peter Rabbit* on subsequent generations of children's literature is also significant. Potter's innovative use of anthropomorphism and semiotic narrative structure set a precedent for future picture books. Authors like White (1945) and Lobel (1970) followed Potter's example by using animal characters with human characteristics to explore themes of personal growth, morality, and social values. Nussbaum (2001) discusses the educational role of children's literature, highlighting how animal characters in books like *Peter Rabbit* teach empathy by encouraging readers to relate to characters who experience both joy and misfortune. The visual aspects of the story further reinforce these lessons, helping children understand moral consequences through their engagement with illustrations (Mahdori et al., 2025; Andini, 2017; Jumriati et al., 2021).

2. Methodology

The method used in this research is descriptive qualitative. This approach was chosen because the study aims to provide an in-depth description of the use of anthropomorphism and semiotics in *Peter Rabbit*, both in terms of the text and illustrations. Descriptive qualitative research allows for a comprehensive analysis of how animal characters are given human-like traits and how visual signs shape the narrative and moral messages in the story.

According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research aims to explore and understand the meaning that individuals or groups assign to a social or cultural phenomenon. This approach is highly suitable for literary and visual research because it allows for deeper interpretation of symbols, indices, and icons in the illustrations of *Peter Rabbit*. Creswell (2014) also emphasizes that in qualitative research, data are collected in the form of text or images, analysed by identifying patterns and themes, and the final results are interpretive. Thus, this study will use narrative and semiotic analysis techniques to understand how text and images work together in shaping meaning in children's literature.

Through this method, the research will not only focus on describing the elements of anthropomorphism in the text but also on visual analysis that involves colour, character expressions, setting, and interactions between characters. Using semiotic theory, this study will examine how icons, indices, and symbols in the illustrations convey Victorian society that can be understood by young readers. Therefore, the descriptive qualitative method provides an appropriate approach to interpret how *Peter Rabbit* uses anthropomorphism and visual signs to build the narrative and convey cultural values to its readers.

3. Result and Discussion

Here is an illustration of *Peter Rabbit* depicting the scene when he sneaks into Mr. McGregor's garden. The image captures Peter's mischievous expression and cautious posture, emphasizing the tension of his daring adventure. The vibrant colors of the garden contrast with Peter's blue jacket, highlighting his intrusion into a world that is both familiar and forbidden. This visual moment enhances the story's theme of childhood curiosity, which often leads to both excitement and consequence.

3.1 Peter Rabbit is wearing a blue jacket and standing in the garden

Data 1



In the illustration of Peter Rabbit, anthropomorphism is evident as Peter wears a blue jacket, resembling a human in his attire. This literal anthropomorphism emphasizes the human-like qualities of the character. From a semiotic perspective, the blue jacket acts as an icon, symbolizing the unique and recognizable character of Peter Rabbit that children can easily identify. The posture of Peter standing upright serves as an index, indicating his readiness and courage as he prepares to venture into Mr. McGregor's garden. Additionally, the color blue functions as a symbol, potentially representing innocence or vulnerability, highlighting Peter's unpreparedness when faced with the dangers of the garden.

3.2 Peter Rabbit is hiding behind a wooden crate in Mr. McGregor's garden

Data 2



In this scene, Peter Rabbit's action of hiding reflects partial anthropomorphism, as it is an instinctive behavior for a rabbit, but his fearful expression is more human-like. From a semiotic perspective, the wooden crate acts as an icon, symbolizing shelter and protection. Peter's crouching posture serves as an index, indicating his anxiety and an attempt to avoid danger. The act of hiding itself becomes a symbol of fear, representing the deep need for safety and security in the face of potential threats.

3.3 Peter Rabbit escapes from Mr. McGregor

Data 3



Peter Rabbit's panic and running like a human illustrate partial anthropomorphism, as his frantic expression and behavior resemble those of a human in distress. From a semiotic perspective, the act of running is an icon, symbolizing an escape from danger. The direction in which Peter is running serves as an index, indicating his attempt to save himself. Additionally, the garden represents a symbolic space in the narrative, reflecting the conflict between nature and humans, as it is a forbidden area for wild animals like Peter Rabbit.

3.4 Peter Rabbit hides inside the watering can

Data 4



Peter Rabbit's tactic of hiding inside a man-made object demonstrates accidental anthropomorphism, as this is not a natural hiding spot for a rabbit. In terms of semiotics, the watering can function as an icon, representing a gardening tool. Peter's presence inside it serves as an index, signaling a state of urgency and fear. Symbolically, the watering can represents the themes of fear and creativity, as Peter uses an unexpected and resourceful method to face danger.

3.5 Peter Rabbit sneaks between the rows of cabbage

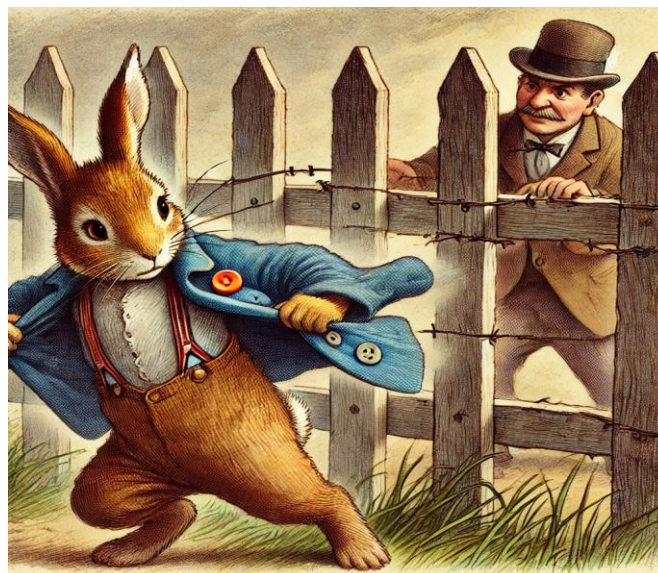
Data 5



Peter Rabbit sneaks between the rows of cabbage, displaying a sense of partial anthropomorphism as his actions mimic the stealthy movements of a human trying to avoid detection. In terms of semiotics, the cabbage serves as an icon, representing both food and a hiding place. Peter's careful movements index his resistance and survival strategy, as he navigates through the rows with caution. Symbolically, the human world represents a threat to wild animals, with the garden acting as a space of danger and opposition.

3.6 Peter Rabbit gets caught in the fence while trying to escape

Data 6



In this scene, Peter Rabbit's panic and his desperate attempts to free himself reflect a form of anthropomorphism, as his reactions resemble those of a human facing a difficult situation. The semiotic elements in this moment offer deeper insight into the narrative. The icon of the fence symbolizes both a physical and metaphorical boundary, representing the restrictions that Peter faces. The index of Peter's inability to break free from the fence suggests the limitations that animals experience in a world dominated by human-made structures. Finally, the symbol of the fence embodies the larger conflict between freedom and the constraints imposed by human society, illustrating the struggle between natural instincts and human-created limitations.

3.7 Peter Rabbit hides under the wooden cart

Data 7



In this scene, Peter Rabbit hides under a wooden cart, exhibiting partial anthropomorphism. While hiding is a natural behavior for a rabbit, his expression of caution and anxiety is more human-like. From a semiotic perspective, the wooden cart acts as an icon, symbolizing an object of the farmer's life. The index is represented by Peter peeking out, indicating his fear and wariness. The symbol of hiding reflects his survival strategy in the face of danger.

3.8 Peter Rabbit peeks out from behind a pumpkin

Data 8



Peter Rabbit's action of peeking out from behind the pumpkin with a curious expression demonstrates partial anthropomorphism, as it reflects the human-like curiosity often associated with people. From a semiotic perspective, the pumpkin acts as an icon, symbolizing agricultural life. Peter's position, cautiously peeking, serves as an index, signaling his wariness and careful observation. The pumpkin itself also functions as a symbol, representing the relationship between nature and humans, where the animal is attempting to understand the human-made environment surrounding him.

3.9 Discussion

In the illustration of Peter Rabbit, anthropomorphism is vividly portrayed through his attire, particularly the blue jacket he wears, which closely resembles human clothing. This literal anthropomorphism emphasizes the human-like qualities of Peter, making him relatable to young readers. From a semiotic perspective, the blue jacket functions as an icon, symbolizing Peter's unique and recognizable character, which children can easily identify and connect with. The choice of clothing not only enhances his individuality but also signifies the innocence and adventurous spirit of childhood, reflecting the Victorian ideal of a child's exploration of the world.

Moreover, Peter's posture, standing upright, serves as an index that indicates his readiness and courage as he prepares to venture into Mr. McGregor's garden. This stance conveys a sense of agency and determination, embodying the spirit of curiosity that was often encouraged in children during the Victorian era, albeit within the confines of societal expectations. The juxtaposition of Peter's adventurous nature against the backdrop of potential danger in the garden highlights the tension between childhood exploration and the moral lessons of obedience and caution that were prevalent in Victorian society.

Peter's upright posture serves as a key visual cue that not only humanizes him but also emphasizes his ability to take agency within the world around him. In the natural world, animals are typically depicted in their most instinctive, untainted forms—animals function based on survival and instinct. By depicting Peter standing upright, Beatrix Potter is indicating that he operates in a world of conscious choice and intention, much like a human child. This anthropomorphic element subtly invites readers to engage with Peter not just as a character, but as a reflection of themselves—someone capable of making decisions, facing consequences, and learning from his experiences.

Furthermore, Peter's readiness to face challenges, regardless of the potential danger, speaks to a common Victorian belief in the importance of building resilience and character through experience. The upright posture symbolizes his courage, his willingness to venture into the unknown, and his determination to explore. However, it is important to note that this courage is tempered by his lack of foresight, a key aspect of childhood innocence. Peter's decision to sneak into Mr. McGregor's garden despite his mother's warnings is an act of rebellious curiosity—something that is undeniably human in nature. His posture, though filled with confidence, belies the naive ignorance that often accompanies youth.

This balance of courage and naïve disobedience is central to the Victorian idea of childhood. On one hand, children were viewed as innocent and full of potential, with a natural curiosity about the world that should be encouraged. However, this curiosity also had to be tempered with lessons about obedience, discipline, and respect for boundaries. Peter, with his upright posture and adventurous spirit, embodies both the idealized aspects of childhood—innocence, curiosity, and independence—and the cautionary tale of the consequences of not respecting societal boundaries.

In the broader context of Victorian society, children were expected to explore and grow, but always within the confines of strict moral guidelines. Peter's exploration of the garden reflects this tension between the freedom of childhood and the moral lessons that were often imposed on children. His actions are relatable because they echo the natural impulse to test limits, but his eventual misadventures also serve as a reminder that rebellion without caution can have consequences.

Furthermore, the garden in Peter Rabbit is more than just a physical setting; it is a rich symbolic space that embodies the tension between freedom and the consequences of disobedience. In one sense, it represents an area of exploration, adventure, and the potential for discovery, which aligns with the innate curiosity of childhood. For Peter, the garden is an alluring space that calls to his adventurous spirit, offering an opportunity to engage with a world outside the safe confines of his home. It's a place where the thrill of discovery and independence seem within reach, but it's also fraught with risks, most notably embodied by the looming threat of Mr. McGregor.

This duality of the garden as both a place of adventure and danger is a key aspect of the narrative and mirrors the Victorian understanding of childhood. In the Victorian era, childhood was often idealized as a time of exploration and innocence, yet there was a simultaneous emphasis on the importance of boundaries and discipline. Young children were encouraged to explore the world around them, but within the boundaries of societal expectations, which included respect for authority and adherence to rules. By placing Peter in the garden, Beatrix Potter taps into this cultural belief: while children should be allowed to satisfy their curiosity and experience the world, they must also be taught the importance of caution and obedience.

Peter's decision to sneak into the garden, despite his mother's warnings, represents a moment of rebellion against authority. In doing so, he steps into a space where his actions will have direct consequences. His experience in the garden, where he narrowly escapes danger, highlights the costs of disobedience and serves as a subtle lesson for children. The danger Peter faces in the garden is not merely physical; it is symbolic of the moral consequences that can arise from defying authority or not following established rules.

However, the garden is not solely a place of punishment or danger—it is also where Peter learns valuable lessons. Through his adventure, Peter discovers the importance of caution, self-awareness, and the consequences of his actions. While his curiosity drives him to take risks, his eventual escape and the lessons he learns from the ordeal show that curiosity can be indulged, but it must be tempered with wisdom and responsibility.

In this way, the garden embodies the Victorian ideal that children should be free to explore, but within a controlled environment. The narrative does not stifle Peter's curiosity but rather shows the importance of balancing exploration with respect for boundaries. The moral lesson is clear: curiosity is a natural and valuable part of childhood, but it should be paired with an understanding of the risks and consequences that come with crossing certain lines.

Through the garden, Beatrix Potter offers a nuanced view of childhood exploration. It's a space where innocence and mischief coexist with the realities of a world that requires discipline and respect for authority. By using the garden as a setting for Peter's adventures and misadventures, Potter reinforces the idea that while curiosity should be nurtured, it is the lessons learned from facing the consequences of one's actions that truly shape a child's moral development.

In Victorian society, the dual aspects of childhood were heavily emphasized: children were seen as pure and innocent, but also as beings in need of guidance. The tension between these two aspects is encapsulated in Peter's character. His adventurous actions—sneaking into Mr. McGregor's garden, disobeying his mother's warnings—reflect the natural curiosity and rebelliousness that often come with childhood. This behavior was common in the Victorian understanding of childhood as a time of testing boundaries and figuring out one's place in the world. But the consequences Peter faces, from his close call with Mr. McGregor to the reprimand he receives, reflect the societal expectation that children needed to learn the importance of obedience and respect for authority.

Beatrix Potter's skill in using anthropomorphism allows these moral lessons to be conveyed in a way that feels natural and relatable. Peter is not merely a figure to be lectured to young readers; his actions and experiences make the moral lessons feel earned. The story shows how Peter's disobedience leads to trouble, but also how he learns from it. This journey of learning from one's mistakes is crucial in the development of moral character, a lesson that Victorian parents would have considered essential for their children.

Through Peter, Potter not only entertains but also guides children through the complex moral landscape of their own childhoods. The story allows children to recognize the value of curiosity and independence while also teaching the importance of listening to those in positions of authority and understanding the consequences of one's actions. Peter's misadventures in the garden represent the boundary between youthful exploration and the limitations imposed by societal norms. The fact that Peter ultimately returns home, wiser and more cautious, echoes the Victorian ideal that children must eventually come to terms with the fact that while curiosity is vital, it must be channeled in a responsible way.

This delicate balance of innocence and morality, curiosity and caution, makes Peter Rabbit a timeless story. It resonates not only with the children of the Victorian era but also with modern readers, who can still relate to the universal themes of childhood exploration, the desire for independence, and the lessons that come from stepping outside of societal expectations. In crafting Peter Rabbit, Beatrix Potter created a character who transcends his animal nature to become a symbol of the very essence of childhood—a figure who is at once innocent, adventurous, and, ultimately, capable of learning and growing through his experiences.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Peter Rabbit by Beatrix Potter presents a richly layered narrative that intricately weaves together themes of childhood innocence, curiosity, and the importance of moral lessons within the context of Victorian societal values. Through the use of anthropomorphism, particularly Peter's human-like attire and posture, Potter creates a character that young readers can relate to and learn from. Peter's adventurous spirit and the consequences he faces in the garden embody the delicate balance between exploration and the need for discipline, which was central to the Victorian understanding of childhood.

The garden itself serves as a powerful symbol of both freedom and the risks that come with defying societal expectations. It represents the tension between youthful curiosity and the lessons of caution, obedience, and responsibility. By exploring this duality, Potter not only entertains but also imparts crucial moral lessons to her readers, encouraging them to embrace curiosity while also recognizing the importance of respecting boundaries and authority. Ultimately, Peter Rabbit endures as a timeless story because it speaks to universal experiences—children's desire to explore, the consequences of disobedience, and the inevitable lessons that come with growing up. Potter's ability to blend these themes through anthropomorphic storytelling ensures that Peter Rabbit remains a beloved character, resonating with both children and adults alike as a reflection of the complexities of childhood.

Furthermore, the enduring appeal of Peter Rabbit lies in its ability to reflect the complexities of human behavior through a seemingly simple tale. Potter's use of anthropomorphism allows for a deeper exploration of the developmental journey that children go through—learning about independence, testing boundaries, and ultimately maturing through experience. While Peter's journey is centered around his disobedience and the resulting consequences, it is also a story of growth, where innocence and curiosity give way to wisdom and caution.

The narrative structure, with its balance between adventurous exploration and the risks of defying authority, mirrors the moral framework that Victorian society instilled in children. By subtly incorporating these values into the fabric of the story, Potter not only creates an engaging plot but also offers a gentle yet firm moral guide for her audience. Peter's transformation from a mischievous rabbit to one who learns from his mistakes encapsulates the Victorian belief in the importance of moral guidance and self-discipline.

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