

The dichotomous nature of childhood presented in byatt's the children's book



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Byatt's character Tom Wellwood in her novel *The Children's Book* resents fairytales, especially Peter Pan. Tom's resentment is the result of a troubled inner self and belonging to a mother who uses her own children to create characters—characters that Tom, specifically, will never live up to. Unlike Peter Pan, Tom will make that inevitable progression from childhood to adulthood. In that process, assumptions will be questioned, secrets will be revealed, and shocking and damaging realizations will come to light. The main adult characters in the novel treat childhood as a fairytale—a temporary oasis away from the hardships and unfortunate realizations that come along with adulthood. Because of the adult characters' idealistic notions towards childhood, they do not realize how much damage they are creating by manipulating and using their children for artistic means. For example, Olive Wellwood does not realize that she is forging a very destructive path for her favorite child, Tom, by constructing his identity for him and then unapologetically revealing it to the public. By creating a story that depends on the growing up of the main young characters and (in many cases) their eventual fall, Byatt is describing childhood both as a time of freedom and vulnerable fragility. Byatt develops her theme of the complicated nature of childhood by creating a sense of opportunity for her young characters and then polluting it with forebodings based on the actions and sentiments of the adult characters. Many of the characters that Byatt presents in *The Children's Book* are Fabians and artists. These characters are not as conservative as other characters in the novel (for example, Basil Wellwood) and they are not so rigid in terms of their parenting styles. Olive Wellwood, a fairy-tale writer, and her husband, Humphrey Wellwood, allow and encourage their many children to run around in the woods, use their

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imaginations to play make believe games, and dress up in order to partake in the Midsummer festivities. Additionally, during the Midsummer party that Olive and Humphrey Wellwood put together, the children were given some time and attention from their artistic and socialist guests: Everyone, old and young, now gathered... As happens in such gatherings, where those whose lives are shaped fortunately or unfortunately, are surrounded by those whose lives are almost entirely to come, the elders began asking the young what they meant to do with their lives, and to project futures for them.

(Byatt 72) As Byatt states, the children attending the Midsummer party have lives that “are almost entirely to come” while the adults have lives that are already shaped. This commentary reinforces the theme that childhood is a time of opportunity (where the possibilities of the future are free, open and possibly endless) and, also, a very permeable time where elders have a large impact as they “project futures”. The idea of childhood as a time of opportunity becomes widened and less exclusive when the “forward-looking” party guests go so far as to ask both the boys and the girls what they would like to be when they reach adulthood (Byatt 72). Most of the children have an idea of what they would like to be when they grow up: Julian would like to work in museums, Geraint would like to make “a comfortable living”, and Dorothy would like to be a doctor (Byatt 72). As the children voice their desires for their futures (securing childhood as a time characterized by freedom of choice and exploration), the adults add their own opinions in order to influence the children’s ideas and goals: Prosper Cain explains Julian’s “fine eye for antiques” (Byatt 72) before Julian speaks for himself, Seraphita Fludd states her hope that Geraint will become an artist despite his lack of artistic talent, and Violet undermines Dorothy’s goal

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when she feels the need to state that she had never “ heard of that idea” (Byatt 73). Phillip Warren, a poor adopted runaway, is another young character in the novel. Throughout Philip’s stay with the Wellwood and Fludd family, he expresses his desire to make something. Although he was born into a very unfortunate station in life, he becomes a rather lucky boy when the Wellwoods take him in and he, later, finds himself as an apprentice to Benedict Fludd, a potter. Philip’s childhood has its share of misfortune, but it is filled with hope in terms of his prospective career as a potter and as an artist. During his childhood, Phillip is allowed to dream and strive for an artistic goal—his artistic self is very much alive even while he is unable to physically manifest his artistic vision into a pot that he makes with his own two hands. Fludd, on the other hand, is an adult who has manifested his artistic vision into something tangible, a collection of intricate pottery. In other words, Fludd’s life and artistic expression has already been shaped. However, Fludd is violently controlled by his art. Fludd lives the ugly reality of life as an artist while Phillip is momentarily sheltered from that reality: Philip’s uncorrupted and simple artistic vision is forcefully contained in his mind during the course of his childhood. Therefore, during the transient period of childhood, Philip is not controlled by art; he is free to seek artistic expression without yet suffering from the consequences of living life as an artist. However, Byatt forges a strong connection between Philip and Fludd. The two artists work together and become dependent on one another: Philip relies on Fludd for guidance and shelter while Fludd benefits from Philip’s presence for his resourcefulness and practicality. In placing the two characters so close together in terms of plot, Byatt is allowing her readers to connect Fludd’s erratic, destructive, and dysfunctional present to Philip’s

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future (similar as to how the Fabian adults at the Midsummer party use their already formed opinions to influence the children's growing ideas). Although Philip is one of the few young male characters who ends up surviving throughout the story, he does comment on his near death experience: "it's a good end for a potter, to sink in a sea of clay. Clay and blood" (Byatt 870). Philip connects his art to bloodshed and death. In doing so, he is commenting on the painful experiences that come along with artistry—this comment is based on both his experiences and on the experiences of Fludd, his influential mentor. The older children of the story know something that their parents or mentors do not, even if they do not fully understand what it is that they know. Tom's dislike of fairy tales is the result of Tom's knowledge that childhood cannot be treated as something impermeable and akin to an impossible fairy story. Tom is privy to this knowledge through firsthand experience, as his mother constructs Tom's life through her stories. As a result, of course, Tom commits suicide. By taking her characters like Tom from childhood to adulthood throughout the story, Byatt is commenting on childhood's dichotomous nature: while children have the freedom to run around in the woods and dream of their future career choices, they are subject to their parent's faults and misgivings which can make growing up unbearable. While Tom feels just as lost as his mother as he is constantly trying to find out his own identity (which has been clouded by fairytales and stories), Philip's only real and hands-on experience of the artistic world during the early years of his life is made vulnerable by the influence of Fludd, a dangerous yet influential man. Works Cited Byatt, A. S. *The Children's Book: A Novel*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009. Print.