

ISSUE 12.3 (WINTER 2016)

Special Issue:

Gender in Victorian Popular Fiction, Art, and Culture

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**Refashioning Spaces of Play in Victorian Doll Stories**

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<1>Nineteenth-century doll literature often claimed didactic ends. Countless images within doll stories depict scenes of domestic activity. Paired with instructive prefaces and introductions, a trend in advice for Victorian girls materializes: playing with dolls and reading doll stories will mold girls into exemplary middle-class women. For example, *Florence and Her Doll: A Tale* (1865) by Margaret Gatti instructs her readers that girls' playtime should not be "associated with either indolence or folly," "ought to be rational," and should "contribute materially to their improvement" (5). The idea of doll play contributing to a young person's education and improvement persisted into the late nineteenth century. In *Queen Victoria's Dolls* (1894), Francis H. Low suggests that Victoria's ability to rule the nation, be a good mother, and develop as an attentive wife was the direct result of her interaction with dolls. Particularly, frontispieces and illustrations in popular literature and the periodical press mirror the educational ends dolls were intended to have on girls' play time. In *Dolly Dear; or the Story of a Waxen Beauty* (1883) by Mrs. Gellie, girls are depicted in parlors, nurseries, and bedrooms embracing dolls. This story lauds the self-sacrificing love girls should display in caring not only for their dolls but also the less fortunate. Sophronia, the doll narrator, instills her owners with patience, empathy, and care-taking.



Figure 1. "The New Dolls." *The Children's Treasury*. 1879. p.269.

<2>In "The New Dolls," pictured here, Ida and Monica cradle gifts from their aunt. In this brief sketch from *The Children's Treasury* (1879), their dolls inspire them to sew clothes, sparking an industrious spirit. Their aunt responds approvingly: "I hope it will teach you to sew well which is one of woman's best accomplishments" (270). Their aunt's words work in conjunction with the illustration and caption, "learning to be useful," to convey the message that dolls should inspire girls with a domestic work ethic. Judy Simons observes that "[c]hildren's literature was supposed to prepare youthful readers to enter a society where strict, even unforgiving, codes governed male and female conduct" (146). This sentiment manifests in many prefaces and storylines, intending that girlhood was a time of training for future womanhood.

<3>In the preface to *Memoirs of a Doll; Written by Herself: A New Year's Gift* (1856), Julie Gouraud clearly intends for her readers to conflate doll play with future motherhood. She claims the doll is the

first child, on whose person one learns to tend, to carry, to dress, and to love those who one day will also arrive! Household talents, industrious habits, maternal skill, all awaken in the heart of the little girl who finds herself in the presence of this dear head of pasteboard. . . . the tenderness of her mistress is the first ray of maternal love—a doll!  
(v)

Gouraud further asserts that girls' interactions with their dolls of "one period will determine the women of the world a few years later," making dolls the "pivot of humanity" (viii). Not only

do the futures of all girls stem from their treatment of dolls, but the entire fate of humanity is also determined by young girls' properly gendered play.

### ***Doll World's Departures from the Norm***

<4>One of the most popular doll story narratives throughout the nineteenth century follows the adventures of a doll protagonist and her interactions with various girl owners, often warning specifically girl readers about the dangers of mistreatment and the rewards of self-sacrificing care and love. However, *Doll World; Or Play and Earnest: A Study from Real Life* (1872), by Eleanor Grace O'Reilly, features a heroine who repurposes her doll as a tactic to access play spaces outside the circumference of domesticity and supervision. O'Reilly's heroine gleans lifelong friendship and a lasting memory of agency that girlhood affords, even if temporarily, through her doll play.

<5>In stark contrast to popular doll stories and their illustrations, the frontispiece for *Doll World* depicts the heroine, Birdie Somers, with her doll slung over one shoulder as she steadies a little boat. She stands ankle deep in water with no shoes or socks on. Surrounded by cattails, tall grass and foliage, a surprised little face peeps out between the leaves. Birdie stands tall and confident in the water among the brushy, marshy banks while the other little face of her friend Florence remains hidden in fear of getting dirty and wet. There are no adults, no buildings, no gardens, and no chaperones pictured in this frontispiece. From the outset, *Doll World* promotes a different set of aims for girls than those traditionally outlined by prescriptive prefaces and doll literature.



Figure 2. Frontispiece for *Doll World; or, Play and Earnest* by Eleanor Grace O'Reilly  
Illustrated by C. A. Saltmarsh London: William Cowes and Sons, 1872.

<6>*Doll World* reworks more familiar doll story plots that narrowly attend to an explicit series of moral and mannerly instructions. Rather than viewing dolls as an instrument of social and cultural indoctrination, they become strategic devices used to explore nontraditional play spaces and a means to access a land of girl culture. While *Doll World* does not overtly contradict the recommendations of the most popular prescriptive doll stories, the narrative focuses on Birdie's girlhood adventures instead of her formation into an ideal Victorian woman. At the center of her excursions are her favorite doll, Robertina, and her best friend, Florence. Although Birdie's adventures are bookended with domestic scenes, this story's departure from conventional doll tropes depicts late-Victorian girlhood as a sacred space and time for women.

<7>Building upon Sally Mitchell's claims about the shifting concept of girlhood as a "separate stage of existence with its own values and interests," (1) my analysis includes a prototypical doll story that illustrates a similar set of alternate values. *The New Girl: Girls' Culture in England 1880-1915* (1995) observes that fiction for girls before 1870 "generally emphasized home life and home duties," while fiction towards the end of the century "dwelled on the values, ethics, and interactions of girls themselves, with hardly any adults present" (Mitchell 1). While adolescent literature earlier in the century had overlapping aims with female education, later

stories begin to show a change in focus from proper femininity to an emphasis on the importance of girlhood as having “value in itself, not merely a transitional stage to hurry through” (Mitchell 9). Jane H. Hunter’s *How Young Ladies Became Girls: The Victorian Origins of American Girlhood* (2002) further recognizes “changing ideas of the female self” in late nineteenth-century American literature.<sup>(1)</sup> She argues that once “[f]reed from the constant scrutiny of adults, these girls created a culture which allowed for a greater sense of fun and play” (5). While Mitchell and Hunter examine adolescent literature primarily focused on urban school-going children, their claims about girl culture find resonance in Birdie Somers’s doll play. Birdie’s doll gives her the opportunity to escape the constant surveillance found in doll literature produced for middle-class audiences, giving her access to pleasure, friendship, and new forms of play outside the confines of home.

<8>Unlike the middle-class heroines of most doll stories, Birdie is not in need of strict monitoring, correcting, or molding. Oscillating between domestic interiors and outdoor wilderness spaces, Birdie and her best friend, Florence, fluidly craft a kind of play focused on autonomy and female friendship, anticipating later cultural commentary on active, healthy girlhood.<sup>(2)</sup> The origins of the author’s name, O’Reilly, and Birdie’s associations with wildness would have registered with readers as having a particular Irish quality. Birdie’s ability to move more freely challenges rigid middle-class standards of British girls, rather than Victorian femininity as a whole.

<9>Throughout the story, Birdie’s neighbor, Mr. Deane, represents the voice of an older generation who believe that women need supervision throughout the entirety of their lives. Although his beliefs do not make much of an impression on Birdie, Mr. Deane feels compelled to convey the importance of appropriate female play. Mr. Deane takes issue with Birdie’s free-ranging play, reminding her that dolls and play will be replaced by womanly duties and marriage eventually. Despite Mr. Deane’s supervisory advice, Birdie resumes her own version of doll play with her favorite friend, Florence. The rest of the novel follows Birdie through adolescence and gives readers a brief sketch of her adulthood. She and Florence lose touch, but their bond and its legacy survive through Birdie’s handing down of doll play to her daughters. The novel ends with an image of Birdie living a life of contentment and happiness, regardless of her strong love of dolls and her fondness for Florence. Mr. Deane’s fears never come to fruition, and Birdie’s story instead offers evidence that proper femininity is not threatened by a focus on girl-centrism. Birdie’s life trajectory displays a keen awareness of girlhood as a separate time in life that represents a “discord with adult expectations” (Mitchell 3). Dolls become part of what Mitchell describes as an emergent girl culture. Rather than prepare her for marriage, Birdie’s doll play provides a specifically girl-centric pastime that fosters a rich imaginative life and life-long friendships.

<10>Recent criticism of nineteenth-century doll literature explores the subversive and transgressive play girls derive from interactions with their dolls. For example, Sharon Marcus's chapter, "The Feminine Plaything" in *Between Women* (2007), reveals the potential doll play has to incite erotic desire between women. Marcus claims that the erotic female-female gaze was a necessary component of Victorian patriarchy and that "heterosexual women eroticized women ... and thus considered a woman's erotic interest in other women compatible with her roles as wife and mother" (112-113). She includes the idol worship, tender caressing, and torture of dolls within the bounds of proper femininity and normative training of young girls. Although Birdie and Florence's play does focus on the bonds between girls forged by dolls, a different story about female-doll interaction emerges within *Doll World*, one in which dolls aide in the creation of girl-centric and girl-saturated play that is not concerned with and does not necessitate the presence of men. Dolls give heroines the opportunity to occupy a space separate from—though not challenging to—Victorian patriarchal structures of marriage and motherhood.

<11>Eugenia Gonzalez situates her reading of *Ethel's Adventures in Doll Country* (1880) by Clara Bradford within the context of nineteenth-century educational theories. Using a Foucauldian lens, she suggests that nineteenth-century doll stories aim to entice little girls into good behavior with the threat of constant surveillance by mothers or the dolls themselves. Gonzalez argues that *Ethel's Adventures* is an exception to Victorian doll stories in its heroine's refusal to imbue her dolls with imaginary humanity and feeling. Thus, according to Gonzalez, Ethel's treatment of her dolls as objects to be owned and collected divests them of their disciplinary powers. Both Marcus and Gonzalez offer revisionist ways of reading doll tales. While my own argument also encourages revisionist readings of the popular genre, my analysis reveals a different set of pleasures. Birdie and Florence engage in what Miriam Forman-Brunell calls a "process of constructing their own notion of girlhood" (223). Instead of realizing that dolls are objects to be collected as Gonzalez claims, Birdie's doll becomes the means to re-imagine girlhood play.

<12>If readers are to identify with Birdie and mirror her behavior, then the themes and models for middle-class Victorian girls' behavior undergo a significant shift in this doll story. Dolls do not act as agents of surveillance to monitor young girls' behavior, but rather, they show heroines engaged in a "struggle to define, decide, and determine the meaning of dolls in their own lives and as representations of their own girls' culture" (Forman-Brunell 223). In fact, the narrative gives no indication that Florence and Birdie are "good" or "bad" despite their range of play in doll world. Birdie especially feels no such prompting to monitor her behavior, and she never acknowledges that her actions are in keeping with propriety or feminine expectations. Birdie determines the meaning of dolls in her own life, which at different points in the narrative collides with adult meanings.

### ***Doll World in the Context of The Mill on the Floss***

<13>Published just twelve years prior to *Doll World*, George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) depicts a Victorian girlhood with similar overlaps to Birdie's experience. Both Maggie Tulliver and Birdie wander away from their families and homes to explore the countryside. While the implied audiences are different for each of these texts, *The Mill on the Floss* (adults) and *Doll World* (children) illustrate distinct dissimilarities in their experience of girlhood. While the generic conventions of each text determine the portrayal of childhood to some extent, both narrators tell their stories as older women looking back over their lives. Maggie is continually punished for wandering off, displaying little interest in domestic activity, and coming home muddy. For example, when her brother Tom is expected to arrive home from school, Maggie refuses to let her mother smooth out her wild hair. Rather than submit to her mother's complaints and brush, "Maggie suddenly rushed from under her hands and dipped her head in a basin of water standing near—in the vindictive determination that there should be no more chance of curls that day" (Eliot 31). Not only is her hair ruined but her "clean pinafore" is soaked "from top to bottom" (31). In another instance, she runs away from her aunt's house after pushing her prim little cousin Lucy in the mud. The narrator indicates that wandering away from cultivated landscapes near home is not so out of the ordinary for her: "She was used to wandering about the fields by herself . . . Sometimes she had to climb over high gates, but that was a small evil" (108). Her mother fears that Maggie's life has only two paths: to "tumble down and be drowned" or that her aunts will "never love [her] no more" (16, 31). Through Maggie, Eliot critiques Victorian notions of girlhood as a time in life where girls trained for proper womanhood. Maggie continually fails in these conventional Victorian feminine benchmarks. She is constantly disparaged in comparison to the pretty, neat, and tidy Lucy.

<14>Maggie's girlhood is punctuated with humiliation, shame, and disappointment, emotions she works out in the solitary space of her attic with a rag doll:

she kept a Fetish which she punished for all her misfortunes . . . a large wooden doll, which once stared with the roundest of eyes above the reddest of cheeks; but was now entirely defaced by a long career of vicarious suffering. Three nails driven into the head commemorated as many rises in Maggie's nine years of earthly struggle. (31-2)

Her treatment of the doll paired with her behavior would signify to the writers of educational doll story prefaces that Maggie will make a poor wife and mother. Yet, Caswell A. Ellis and G. Stanley Hall recognize that mistreatment of dolls was not uncommon in many girls' doll play. They suggest that the small scale of dolls makes emotions and objects of fear in everyday life seem less terrifying and more manageable (48). Ellis and Hall cite Maggie Tulliver's nails in the eyes of her doll as a way "to vent [her] reaction to the parental tyranny of anger" (48). They further explain, "[a]s the microscope and telescope bring minute and distant objects within our

purview, so a doll microcosm opens up a world of relationship so large, and simplifies things so complex as to be otherwise closed to the infant mind” (49). Maggie’s doll abuse becomes a way for her to work out her feelings about her mother’s constant disappointment in her. Disfiguring the doll gives her an outlet for her anger, and her care for the doll’s wounds provides her with a self-soothing activity. Maggie sees her doll as an extension of self, mirroring the pain and punishment she feels. The doll is a mediator of her feelings—a way to achieve catharsis. Marcus might argue that this moment for Maggie is an opportunity for her to experiment dominating another female form. Yet, Maggie’s experience of girlhood is pivotal in highlighting the difference between hers and Birdie’s doll play.

<15>Maggie’s treatment of her doll not only represents the frustrating of her mother’s expectations but also corresponds to her intuitive sense of unjust treatment based on gender. For example, Maggie’s aunt Pullet “pitied [her] poor [sister’s] bad luck with her children” and wanted to pay to have Maggie sent to a boarding school, which “might tend to subdue some other vices in her,” namely her inability to stay clean and out of mud (131). Her brother, Tom, “was of the opinion that . . . all girls were silly—they couldn’t throw a stone . . . couldn’t do anything with a pocket-knife, and were frightened at frogs” (43). Maggie wants to play with Tom, yet she never gains his approval as a playmate because of her gender. On the other hand, her relatives criticize her because she continually fails their standards for proper femininity, namely passivity and neatness.

<16>The cult of domesticity continued to shape women’s early lives through the early twentieth-century, which makes Birdie’s experiences all the more important to analyze. *The Illustrated Review* claims *Doll World’s* story “must be out of [O’Reilly’s] memory” because of its “genuine and loyal” love of the doll (375). Yet, what the reviewer believes is a tale encouraging young girls toward “the love of home pleasures, home interests, and home duties,” can also be read as a sacred time for outdoor play and non-threatening unsupervised leisure, allowing for greater degrees of mobility outside the home (375). Snide remarks about Maggie’s behavior from other characters carry implicit reprimands and the belief that girls’ activities are distinct from boys and have specific goals in achieving proper femininity. In stark contrast to Maggie’s upbringing, Birdie is rarely disciplined for the ways she plays or the spaces in which the play occurs. Mr. Deane’s is the only voice of disapproval in the story, and the novel seems to take a critical stance against him. His point of view is never addressed by Birdie’s family, suggesting he may represent a dated view of girlhood. Birdie’s doll play, in contrast to Maggie’s, does not happen as a result of her un-girlish behavior. Rather, she and Florence take their dolls everywhere they go. While Maggie only has temporary access to agency, Birdie’s doll gives her a sustained agency throughout her girlhood, and even resonates through adulthood in the form of nostalgia.



## Emerging Forms of Doll Play

<17> Birdie's doll play produces adventurous, exploratory play that results in female friendship. For example, she meets Florence as a direct result of wandering away from her brother Gilbert who is tasked with watching her. Normally Birdie's older brothers accompany her to the old boathouse on the fens, and Gilbert navigates the waterways with a long pole leading their punt away from muddy banks, rocks, and the occasional rapid. However, on the day in question, "Gilbert [had] little inclination to move, still less to row his little sister 'miles and miles'" (O'Reilly 26). Thus, Gilbert's lack of interest in his sister's doll play entices him to stay in the shade of the boathouse to daydream. He lackadaisically attempts to impose guidelines on her, instructing her to do "whatever [she] please" as long as she does not bother him or wander too far (27). He instructs, "come back every five minutes or so, to let me know you're all right; and call out every now and then, that I may be sure you're not drowned" (27). Being satisfied with his "multifarious commands and suggestions," Gilbert "remembered no more the existence of his sister" (27). After running back and forth between stream and boathouse a couple of times, Birdie finds he is "safe in his castle for an unlimited period of time" (28). Gilbert's daydream castle provides some flex in his supervision over Birdie, creating an opportunity for her to fashion her own play space with her doll. Her doll gives her an alibi and enables her to move more freely, tricking her brother into thinking she does not need watching.

<18> Taking advantage of her brother's daydreams, Birdie wanders freely downstream. Although Birdie knows she should not play alone in the fens, her familiarity and knowledge of the place allow her to navigate this outdoor space with autonomy and pleasure:

in her wanderings, she reached the place where the sluggish, shallow water began to ripple almost imperceptibly over gravel, and there, pulled up amongst the reeds, she fancied she could see . . . the dingy old punt . . . Pulling off her shoes and stockings . . . the little girl splashed through the . . . intervening space and discovered that the punt was there sure enough, but, to her excessive surprise, occupied by a stranger. (28)

Moving further away from her brother, Birdie's doll play gives her access to wilderness spaces far from the reaches of home. Uninhibited by the threat of surveillance and the scolding of adults, Birdie's imagination takes over and her doll play enables her to splash through the water. Rather than seek permission for going down stream, Birdie decides for herself that she is free to play in the mud and navigate this play space at will. Pulling off her socks and shoes and splashing in the muddy water shows a disregard for typical femininity depicted in such stories mentioned in the introduction. Yet, her play in natural spaces rather than solely domestic ones could also be read as O'Reilly's Irish response to constrained English rules for girls. Birdie exists on the cusp of this change, outlined by Mitchell and Marland in *Health and Girlhood in Britain, 1874-1920* (2013). Her doll provides the necessary cover for accessing unsupervised spaces. The

marshland and the stream are not clearly marked as public spaces, but they are not necessarily domestic either. Playing with dolls propels her range of movement further downstream and allows her brother to forget about her. Gilbert assumes Birdie is content to splash nearby with Robertina, so his thoughts drift away from his sister. The doll acts as her shield as well as her key to access unsupervised, autonomous adventure.

<19>In Birdie's trek through the swampy fens, she expresses no semblance of shame or guilt in her actions, as could be expected of her as she is in a place she should not be. In fact, she moves through the muddy embankments with the clear goal of finding the punt. When Birdie discovers the little boat, it is already occupied by an unfamiliar doll. As she begins to maneuver the boat out of reeds away from the sticky bank, she hears a muffled gasp. A little girl, mostly hidden by cattails, anxiously watches her doll in the boat, and "the stranger" from the bank. Birdie "point[s] to her own bare feet," as an invitation for the girl to join her in the water, but the other girl nervously "shook her head and said she was forbidden to do so" (O'Reilly 34). It is this exact moment that the frontispiece captures as the representative illustration for this doll tale. Birdie stands sturdily in the water with bare feet as Robertina balances on her shoulder. Florence peeps sheepishly out from behind the reedy fauna unsure of her doll's fate and the reckless actions of her new acquaintance. While this meeting provides some contrast between the two girls, readers must have wondered how Florence's doll ends up in the boat. Her curiosity and desire for adventure, although tamped down in comparison to Birdie, are still present. This wood etching provides a new illustration of doll play as its own special time in a woman's life.

<20>The context of the frontispiece and this key scene focus on doll play as repurposed to experience autonomy rather than reinforce roles within the home. Birdie seamlessly engages in both girlish doll play and boyish expedition as she ventures away from the safe spaces of gardens and home to explore the weedy, watery landscape of the fens. Although the plucky tomboy emerges as a recognizable heroine about the mid-century and fashion plates depict women in sports clothing,<sup>(3)</sup> doll stories often remained quite conservative in their emphasis on domestic roles for girls. Even though Florence and Birdie's initial encounter portrays two different types of doll play, their lives still happily intertwine without criticism on either's part. For example, Florence remains fixed to her spot on the bank, claiming she is forbidden to join Birdie in the water. The fear of disappointing her uncle keeps her stationary.<sup>(4)</sup> Despite their behavioral differences in this moment, Birdie and Florence quickly establish common ground through their love of dolls. Birdie eagerly introduces herself as "Lady Silverreed" and presents her doll, Robertina. She learns that "Lady Rushwater" (Florence) and her doll Mabel are visiting their uncle, Mr. Deane, who lives in the manor house near the fen. While the girls excitedly chatter about their doll's lives and families, both real and imagined, Birdie notices the water rising. She becomes aware "that there was no boat-hook in the punt, and that the water was

already deeper than she dared step into . . . it was running now over the treacherous mud, against which she had been so often warned” (36). As the distance between the girls continues to grow, Florence expresses her fear that “Mabel will be sea-sick, she is not accustomed to boating” (37). Birdie courageously jumps in the boat as it floats away from Florence, shouting, “don’t be alarmed . . . I will take every care of your daughter,” to which Florence cries ““Oh! you’ll be drowned!”” (38). In this scene, Birdie expresses a confident heroism in navigating the boat through deepening waters and saving Mabel from danger. Her fearless reassurances to care for Mabel further illustrate two different models of girlhood. Florence maintains her proper place on the bank, afraid to move any further, while Birdie’s movements through the swamp, starting at the boathouse and winding downstream, highlight her re-fashioned play outside the guidance of adult supervision.

<21>It is not until her boat “swung heavily round the corner” and “Mr. Deane’s harsh voice sounded in Birdie’s ears” that she is confronted with a sense of transgressing proper feminine behavior (39). His quick and harsh reactions abruptly end her unsupervised play. Conveying deep disapproval, Mr. Deane stares down at “her bare feet, and her two dolls. Hearing that Lady Rushwater was his own niece, and being otherwise enlightened as to all that had taken place, with many a ‘pish!’ and ‘pshaw!’ he pushed his way through the rushes and willows until he reached a spot from which he could catch sight of Florence” telling her “to go home at once and never on any account come to the fens alone” (40). Mr. Deane then turns his reprimands to Birdie, grumbling that a punt is an ““utterly dangerous thing—if they wished to drown a child they couldn’t find a surer way of doing it!”” (40). At first it seems what angers Mr. Deane is a girl alone in a boat. Then it becomes clear that Mr. Deane’s complaint is not solely concern for Birdie and Florence’s safety. Embedded in his response to the girls’ play is a conflicted knowledge and ownership over space. He confesses that:

[b]eing a stranger to the place, he had wandered about from one group of reeds and island of rushes to another, until at last he found further progress barred by the mere, and was preparing to retrace his steps altogether when the sound of childish voices met his ear, and he had become a perplexed listener to Lady Silverreed’s last words. He was now quite angry to find to what a dangerous play-place he had himself introduced Florence, and very anxious to see her safe out of it. (42)

His concern for their physical well-being is mixed with disdain at having caught Birdie with no shoes or socks on in the muddy stream. Though he does not know where he is and must rely on a little girl to guide him home, he assumes she is the one who is out of bounds. Despite Birdie’s assurances that she knows “every inch of the ground and could come to no possible harm,” Mr. Deane “steadily refused to lose sight of her until he had seen her safe beyond the marshy lands” (43). In claiming to know “every inch of ground,” Birdie implies she knows her own

safety better than this adult male, and her hint that she knows better and more conveys a disregard for his assistance. However, Birdie never realizes her transgression of gendered expectations despite Mr. Deane's reprimands. In addition to possessing more knowledge of the place than Mr. Deane, Birdie serves as his guide. Mr. Deane can only "refuse" for her to walk alone and watch her movements until she is in the care of another chaperone. In fact, it is possible that Mr. Deane needs to "see her" because he is lost without her guidance.

<22>As they walk, Mr. Deane directs his criticisms in another direction. He compares his childhood play space with Birdie's, asserting "[w]hatever treasures she found here were nothing compared with the treasure which he himself, when a boy, had found in a certain brook that had been the companion of his childhood" (45). His comparison makes it clear that Birdie violates his expectations of girlhood play. However, Birdie remains steadfast in her proclamations of love for her muddy play space. Not satisfied with his effect on her, he falls into criticizing the kinds of things that can be found there: "I suppose you like . . . [m]ud, tadpoles, mess and rubbish of all kinds; delightful isn't it? And punts. . . . Child and punt—the two were never meant to go together" (43). Unaffected by his insults, Birdie maintains her delight asserting, "she did like the place dearly, and did find there treasures of all sorts and kinds" (44). In this passage, mud and tadpoles are frowned upon attractions for a little girl. As if threatened by her familiarity with a place he deems unsafe and dirty, he continually denigrates what and where she likes to play. Yet, Birdie remains loyal, affirming her position of expertise by naming all the plants and animals that live near the fens, further showing her mastery of space outside the home.

<23>When they reach Gilbert, Mr. Deane scolds him for letting his sister wander off to drown. In his defense, Gilbert says "something about a girl being able to take care of herself at nine years old," but Mr. Deane will not hear excuses: "What do years matter either? Nine, ten, twenty" (49). Mr. Deane's concern for Birdie's life again pivots toward the voice of an older generation of Victorians who believed all women "want taking care of . . . at any age" (49). According to his reasoning, it is not the rushing water, the boat, or the sticky mud that threatens Birdie's life. It is her being left alone that poses the real threat, since women always need "protection" because they cannot be expected to stand by themselves (49). Yet, the irony is that despite his insistence on her supervision, it is he that needs Birdie's adept skill of navigation. To assert that women need and want protecting all the years of their life, can be read as an attempt to invalidate Birdie's autonomous doll play.

<24>Mr. Deane's disapproval of Birdie's play and its implications resurface through the guise of a gift book. While Birdie convalesces from a dangerous fever, Mr. Deane sends her a book called "What I Found in the Brook." Once Birdie is well enough to sit up in bed, she recognizes the title: "It's what he promised to tell me long ago. . . . The very first day I ever saw him; the

day he would keep declaring the fen was not a brook—and you know I never said it was. I've so often wondered what he found; and now he's sent it to amuse me because I've been ill" (132). Despite Birdie's belief in the book's intended amusements, Mr. Deane's story further develops his old criticisms of Birdie's doll play.

<25>While Mr. Deane's own childhood is far from typical and full of its own exceptions from the norm, his emphasis still warns about the dangers of girls' play. His real warning proves to be that dolls are an unproductive form of play. Mr. Deane finds a golden, fairy girl in his brook who later becomes his wife. In Mr. Deane's story, girls are given permission to spend their leisure time in water if they play with the boys. For example, although the young Mr. Deane agrees to share candies with his fairy friend, Joy, and allows her to play with his homemade boats, she is not granted autonomy. She is granted access to his play space because she bolsters his imaginative play, and eventually supports him through life by becoming his wife. When he criticizes Birdie's free-ranging play, he overlooks the fact that Birdie meets Florence, like he meets his fairy-friend-wife. Mr. Deane seems to suggest, via his own model of childhood play, that childhood is training for adulthood. His narrative paired with his flippant remarks about dolls implies that female friendships and doll play cannot achieve the same results.(5)

<26>Not only is Birdie's play space devalued based on Mr. Deane's perception of its inappropriateness and dirtiness, but it is also incapable of generating a future husband. His story closes by revealing its true didactic ends. His mother marries the fairy's father, and when he expresses excitement about seeing the fairy more often, his sister Miss Deane predicts their marriage: "Miss Deane was right; it had been my wife and not my sister that the brook brought to me that June day long ago. Now you know why a brook is better in my eyes than a fen; why I have so often told you that your fens here will give you no treasure so great as I once found in the clear running stream familiar to my childhood" (173). The fairy girl, Joy, is the product of his childhood play. While Joy is not denigrated in quite the same way as Maggie when Tom shuns her on the basis of gender, Mr. Deane indeed scorns Birdie's specific girl-centric play. Earlier in the narrative, he refuses to carry his niece's doll back home. Read alongside his implication that what he found in his brook was better than what Birdie finds—female friendship and another doll—his suggested disapproval of Birdie's play with dolls is tangled up with his notions of proper femininity within designated space. The fens are barren according to Mr. Deane. Therefore, the tacit moral of his story reads that dolls lead girls into unprotected and unproductive play spaces, while boys lead girls into safe, generative places. Comparatively, Birdie navigates real boats through muddied waters with a doll in place of a boy, resulting in friendship rather than marriage.

<27>In the final chapter of Mr. Deane's story, called "Lasting Toys," he warns Birdie that "toys lose their charm, but nature" never does. He claims, "The day will come when even Robertina

will be laid aside; nay, later still, when ball dresses and jewels will cease to please; but the pebbles will shine on in the water always" (174). His brand of lasting toys and "nature" seem to imply that his childhood play produced an appropriate and natural end in marriage, while Birdie's dolls, mud, and girlfriends must cease if she is to become a proper wife. For instance, he cites objects of feminine culture as culprits when used to alternate ends than conventionally conceived. In closing, he drives home a final impression: "We were quite content to join hands and float at play together down the stream of life, as we had joined hands and played together in the brook" (160). The joining of play, hands, and life in this closing passage alludes to earlier Victorian beliefs that play in childhood will determine the outcome of adult life. Mr. Deane implies his own childhood play is perhaps an appropriate tale of how childhood pleasure conditions adults for domestic life.

<28> Birdie and Florence instead use dolls to fashion their own kinds of play. Birdie's dolls lead her to a friendship with Florence and to autonomous, un-chaperoned play producing pleasures unconnected to men or to traditional middle-class girlhood. In fact, unlike so many other doll stories, their doll play fails to produce the desired results. What Mr. Deane fails to recognize is different models of doll play altogether—one that emphasizes the importance of girlhood in and of itself rather than a time of training for the future. Even as Florence begins to outgrow her dolls, Birdie's attachment to Robertina is unwavering. Her father expresses surprise that Birdie continues to play with her despite entering adolescence: "She is growing a great girl . . . I thought—I fancied, that they left off dolls about her age, eh, mamma?" (245). Her mother proves to be more like the eponymous heroine of *Ethel's Adventures in Doll Country*, claiming to have treated her dolls as "Merely toys—nothing more" (235). While Birdie's early attachments to dolls appear as positive, even conventional, signs of her future as a mother, the lingering desire to play with dolls raises parental concerns about her development. However, they can be read as a desire to cherish girlhood. This story critiques conventional maturity's requirement to leave behind the freedom and autonomy of girlhood.

### **Concluding Girlhood**

<29> Once she develops into a young woman, Birdie's attention must shift to chores and the care of her younger siblings, but the nostalgia of playing with dolls and the friendship she made through them casts a golden glow around her memories of girlhood. Later in the story, the Somers lose a large portion of their income, forcing them to move to town into a smaller home. This experience is a catalyst, pushing Birdie to learn domestic responsibility at a rapid pace. She proves an adept domestic helper, mending and making all her own clothes, helping with the household duties, and yet, the narrator laments "Birdie never formed again, or cared to form, for anyone such a friendship as that which had subsisted between Florence Murray and herself" (293). Her friendship and dolls are part and parcel of her girlhood and exist in her memory as a

time apart when she could be an autonomous subject. Birdie is forced into womanhood, and therefore must leave her dolls behind, by economic necessity. It is not awareness of boy's attentions or a burning desire to learn domestic economy that thrusts her into learning household chores. In this way, *Doll World* challenges the idea that girls will "naturally" leave behind the girlish activities that they find so satisfying and freeing.

<30>At the story's end, an adult Birdie observes her own daughters' doll play with tenderness and nostalgia. The father and the daughters are quickly glossed over, mere additions to show the passage of time. The real focus is on Birdie's nostalgia for dolls and girl-world. She watches as her daughters beg their father for a dollhouse. He claims to have no understanding about why such silly things are of import. Birdie says, "Ah! You can't understand it as I do. Men lose a great deal by never having been acquainted with Doll-world'" (308). This nostalgia is kindled even more when Birdie chances to meet her childhood friend while attending a party with her husband:

It was then that [Birdie] became aware that she was the object of the fixed gaze of a strikingly handsome and very fashionably dressed lady on the opposite side of the room. . . . As she drew near a smile stole over her features . . . and . . . she held out her hand. 'I am not mistaken, I think . . . are you not—Lady Silverreed?' . . . They both laughed, and sitting down side by side began at once . . . to learn each other over again. (312-4)

Florence calls Birdie by her childhood doll-world name to greet her, establishing a clear connection between their doll play and the lasting bonds of their friendship. Their friendship was initially forged because of Birdie's adventures through the fens so many years ago from this moment, and yet, her autonomy led to a long standing relationship with Florence. As if to spite Mr. Deane's predictions that toys lose their charm, the focus in this passage becomes a girlhood activity, which both adult women talk about fondly. Their reminiscence at the end of the book establishes an alternate economy of doll play. Nostalgia for childhood play, specifically girl's doll play, resonates through their lives. For Birdie, it is not only something she shared with Florence that lives on in their collective memory, but it also becomes a legacy that she can pass down to her own girls. Although Birdie is recuperated back into the service of motherhood and matrimony, we can read her nostalgia for dolls in childhood as productive of an all girl pleasure. In contrast to Mr. Deane's verdict that toys lose their luster, Birdie never loses pleasure in remembering her dolls. She never recants her loyalty to them, to the fens, nor to Florence. The conclusion to *Doll World* offers a view of girlhood where play has the ability to exist as a separate time in a girl's life that is not devoted to her future as a mother or wife.

<31>Dolls not only lead girls into non-domestic play space, but they provide girls with a specific kind of female pleasure that can be passed down to daughters. Birdie and Florence's doll play produces a keen sense of pleasure, one that lingers through their lives. It becomes a secret kind

of joy and knowledge that only girls can produce and own in memory. Birdie does not share her childhood joys with her future husband. Instead, she shares them with her daughters and later reconnects with the middle-aged Florence through reminiscing. Doll play produces life-long friendships and posterity for girl-centric activity. Their friendship and their nostalgia for doll play resonate through generations of future women. The focus of doll play in *Doll World* is the bonds created between women. *Doll World* provides a contrast from other doll stories of the 1870s in its alignment with changing notions of girlhood, it emerges as a bridge and prototype of more progressive models of womanhood found later in the century.

<32>Even though O'Reilly's tale narrates from the perspective of an older woman looking back on her fond memories of childhood, *Doll World's* publication in 1872 forecasts a shift in perceptions about girlhood. The author's Irish name and the publication date work in tandem, signaling more forms of mobility for girls in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Birdie bequeaths new forms of play to her daughters, paving the way for more fluid illustrations of girlhood. *Doll World's* nostalgic conclusion plants the seeds for emergent types of autonomy that carry through to *fin-de-siècle* womanhood. For instance, New Woman writers and Female Aesthetes, such as Marie Corelli, Vernon Lee, Ouida, George Edgerton, and Sarah Grand, to name a select few, portray heroines who choose careers over marriage and motherhood.(6)

<33>Although Birdie herself is recuperated back into domestic life in adulthood, her resonant nostalgia for girlhood autonomy sows subversive futures for her daughters. In essence, Birdie turns Gouraud's prefatory instruction on its head. Gouraud's assertion that "one period will determine the women of the world of a few years later" intends that dolls will train women in domestic, wifely, and motherly practices, but instead Birdie and Florence's girlhoods anticipate values more akin to the new women of the *fin de siècle* (viii).

#### Endnotes

(1)In using American sources, I do not intend to make an exact comparison between British girls and American girls. It must be noted that American girls experienced more freedom and mobility than their British counterparts.(^)

(2)See Hilary Marland's *Health and Girlhood in Britain 1874-1920*. Birdie's uninhibited behavior aligns with prototypical "models of healthy girlhood in the late Victorian period," already in the works featuring the movement of young women out of "environments dominated by family obligations and domesticity into new roles and more public spaces" (2).(^)

(3)Marcus observes that fashion plates later in the century featured women in riding and golfing outfits (among other kinds of sporty dress). Although depictions of women in athletic clothing were a step forward, it was rare that women were shown actively participating in



sports. See *Between Women's* "The Feminine Plaything." Judy Simons suggests the trend in tomboy literature rises in late-Victorian and Edwardian fiction (146).<sup>(^)</sup>

(4) Deborah Gorham's historical and biographical accounts of women's lives, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (1982), trace the changing beliefs and experiences of education and gender roles from the early- to mid- to late-Victorian period. She suggests that women in more affluent families had more trouble breaking out of conventional forms than women in middle-class families. In addition to O'Reilly's Irishness, Birdie and Florence's class differences could account for their different attitudes toward the fens and the boat.<sup>(^)</sup>

(5) In my reading of the contrast between Mr. Deane's childhood memoirs and Birdie's experience I do not intend to present heterosexuality as isolated incidents of desire. It is my understanding that heterosexuality is, as Michel Foucault explores, a cultural structure. Mr. Deane's anxiety about Florence's and Birdie's appropriate play does not come to fruition, and the girls grow into appropriately upper-middle- and middle-class women.<sup>(^)</sup>

(6) For more discussion of changing women's roles in fin-de-siècle literature see Elaine Showalter's *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*, Talia Schaffer's *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late Victorian England*, and Melissa Purdue and Stacey Floyd's edited collection *New Woman Writers, Authority and the Body*.<sup>(^)</sup>

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