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**Heard But Not Seen: Gardens and Their Child Ghosts in Rudyard Kipling, T. S. Eliot
and Lucy M. Boston**

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Abstract

The post-Romantic idealisation of childhood in much late-Victorian and Edwardian literature often makes use of a garden setting as a *locus amoenus* associated (like childhood itself) with qualities of innocence. There was inevitably a disjunction between this idealised image and the lives of actual children, however. One aspect of that difference was the high incidence of child mortality, a phenomenon notably absent from most Golden Age children's literature, though present in the lives of many of its authors. The depiction of child ghosts was one way of acknowledging this trauma. Rudyard Kipling's story 'They' is a powerful case in point, one that echoes in the work of writers as diverse as T. S. Eliot and Lucy M. Boston. It is a text unusual both in the directness with which it exposes the disjunction noted above and in its willingness to explore (though not wholly embrace) new narrative and genre approaches to its resolution, some of which would go on to inform key texts of modernism and of twentieth-century rurality.

Keywords: Rudyard Kipling, T. S. Eliot, Lucy M. Boston, ghosts, gardens

Heard But Not Seen: Gardens and Their Child Ghosts in

Rudyard Kipling, T. S. Eliot and Lucy M. Boston

Children and gardens alike have long served in Western culture as sites of innocence and, still more, the loss of innocence. On encountering a text combining both gardens and children, writers and readers will be alert both to echoes of the Edenic expulsion and to Romantic evocations of the end of childhood, as well as to the potential analogies between the two. Such notes may serve a supporting or harmonic function rather than constituting a text's primary theme, but even books that explicitly celebrate the growth of child characters to maturity, such as Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911), are liable to be read in these 'Edenic' terms.¹ The persistence of the Romantic parallel between childhood and Edenic innocence is perhaps not surprising. The mythic power of Eden lies in its exiled inaccessibility; and, as Jacqueline Rose² and others have long insisted, for adult writers the experience of childhood likewise belongs by definition to the irrecoverable past. The child of literature is to that extent always a spectral figure, and never more so than when encountered in a garden. While children may be associated with youthful vitality, they also function as powerful symbols of transience and even, paradoxically, as *memento mori*.

In this essay I explore the figure of the child ghost as a way of highlighting the juxtaposition of childhood and mortality. In the texts discussed here, gardens and their ghostly child inhabitants are indeed strongly marked by a sense of loss and by the desire to undo, sidestep or transcend the separation imposed by death. In tracing a line from Rudyard Kipling's 1904 short story, 'They', by way of T. S. Eliot's 'Burnt Norton' (1936) to Lucy M. Boston's 1954 children's novel, *The Children of Green Knowe* and its sequels, I will not primarily be making an argument for the direct influence of the earlier texts on the later, although I consider such influence very possible and will present some evidence to that

effect. Rather, I wish to explore and illustrate a set of mutually informing themes and tropes connecting gardens and child ghosts, exemplified by these works but also haunting multiple other late-nineteenth and twentieth-century texts, for both adults and children and across multiple genre boundaries. In doing so I will deviate from established literary itineraries of modernism, which may accommodate the liminal children of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) but are unlikely to find a place for those of Kipling (despite Eliot's advocacy), still less for the subaltern literature of childhood itself.³

Mighty Children of the Golden Age

Rose's *The Case of Peter Pan* (1984) was a landmark book in children's literature studies. It was particularly provocative in that it offered a largely negative account of that literature as defined by impossibility and precipitated by an adult consciousness of lack that impelled authors to invent compensatory childhoods that had never existed in reality. Provoked by this existential challenge, children's literature critics have since offered numerous alternative analyses,⁴ among the most sophisticated of which, and for my purposes the most relevant, is Clémentine Beauvais's 2015 monograph, *The Mighty Child*.⁵ Beauvais's is a philosophically subtle argument, but part of its appeal lies in its proposal of a simple and pleasing symmetry: a vision of childhood and adulthood as complementary states, and a model of almost mechanical neatness for understanding the transition from one to the other in terms of acquisition and loss. In Beauvais's account, the binary division between children and adults assumed by Rose is replaced by a dynamic system of exchange, in which all humans are involved in an economy of power, its currencies being authority and potential. Children are born with abundant potential, their cup of possibility brim-full, and in this lies their potency – their 'mightiness,' to use the pun at the heart of Beauvais's book. However, every

circumstance encountered, every choice made, every opportunity taken or foregone, drains that cup a little. On the other hand, something is gained in exchange, namely authority, which accrues with experience, knowledge and seniority. When is the cup of childhood half empty? When is the cup of adulthood half full? For every adult who views children with regret at their own ‘exile’ from the garden of childhood, there is a child looking no less enviously at the accomplishments, authority and agency of adults and longing to be grown up. Children’s literature – not least children’s literature from the so-called Golden Age of the decades prior to the Great War, when most future modernists did their own formative reading – is full of children thinking about what they will do when they are older, whom they will marry, what work they will take up, and so on.⁶

Kenneth Grahame’s 1895 book of childhood reminiscence, *The Golden Age*, which, at least in a nominal sense, inaugurated that period, expresses all this with programmatic clarity. The classical Golden Age fulfilled for the Greek world some of the functions of the Garden of Eden in the Abrahamic tradition – that of being a lost world of simplicity, innocence, plenitude and happiness. Grahame’s book implicitly identifies that age with his own childhood, scenes from which he recounts in a series of idealised vignettes. The games and garden adventures of the narrator and his companions, and their care to avoid the unwanted notice of adults (‘the Olympians’), are fondly related, and clearly struck a nostalgic chord with many adult readers in the 1890s. *The Golden Age* is not a children’s book, but without it and its 1898 successor, *Dream Days*, there would be no *Peter Pan*, for Barrie caters to (and satirises) the taste that Grahame’s books popularised and partly created. The Preface to *The Golden Age* sets out a division between children and adults as sharp as the ‘Olympian’ tag suggests:

[The Olympians] treated us, indeed, with kindness enough as to the needs of the flesh, but after that with indifference (an indifference, as I recognise, the result of a certain stupidity), and therewith the commonplace conviction that your child is merely animal. At a very early age I remember realising in a quite impersonal and kindly way the existence of that stupidity, and its tremendous influence in the world; while there grew up in me, as in the parallel case of Caliban upon Setebos, a vague sense of a ruling power, wilful, and freakish, and prone to the practice of vagaries—‘just choosing so’: as, for instance, the giving of authority over us to these hopeless and incapable creatures, when it might far more reasonably have been given to ourselves over them. These elders, our betters by a trick of chance, commanded no respect, but only a certain blend of envy—of their good luck—and pity—for their inability to make use of it. Indeed, it was one of the most hopeless features in their character ... that, having absolute licence to indulge in the pleasures of life, they could get no good of it.⁷

Here we have Beauvais’s model expressed eloquently, albeit in a partisan way, with the energy and inchoate power of childhood balanced against the leaden authority of adulthood. Their frustrations run in parallel – one with the desire and energy to act but no authority, the other with authority but no will to act. Moreover, the transition from one state to the other is inexorable, as the Preface’s final words confirm from the speaker’s own experience:

Well! The Olympians are all past and gone. Somehow the sun does not seem to shine so brightly as it used; the trackless meadows of old time have shrunk and dwindled away to a few poor acres. A saddening doubt, a dull suspicion, creeps over me. *Et in Arcadia ego*—I certainly did once inhabit Arcady. Can it be that I also have become an Olympian?⁸

And, with that final acquisition of authority and wisdom and the concomitant loss of potential, the tragi-comedy of the human condition is complete.

Et in Arcadia Ego

This way of thinking about the relationship between childhood and adulthood, and the qualities exchanged between them, assumes, and indeed rhetorically coerces, a temporal symmetry: all adults were once children, and the no-less-inevitable fate of children is to become adults. ‘All children, except one, grow up’, writes Barrie in the opening words of *Peter and Wendy*,⁹ with the air of rehearsing a truism. However, this apparent symmetry is deceptive, as Barrie and his readers had good cause to know; some children never grow up at all.

The association of children and death is more often hinted at than stated in Golden Age literature; if there at all, it is a sidelong presence, as in the spine of Grahame’s sequel, *Dream Days*, which shows an infant girl holding an hour-glass (Fig. 1). The primary purpose of this picture is no doubt to act as an emblem of the temporary nature of childhood itself. However, the common use of hour-glass imagery on gravestones, and its more general connotations of mortality, are inevitably invoked. Grahame’s ‘*Et in Arcadia ego*’ does similar work, as does his reference in the last chapter of *Dream Days* to the ‘bereavement’ visited on the growing children by having their nursery toys donated to a children’s home at the behest of an Olympian uncle.¹⁰ In these examples, death is of course primarily metaphorical, a melodramatic (indeed hyperbolic) acknowledgement of the onset of adulthood; but the metaphorical status of such language is not altogether secure. The opening chapter of *Peter and Wendy*, for example, contradicts the epigrammatic certainty of its first line by having Mrs

Darling remember that ‘when children died’ Peter Pan was said go ‘part of the way with them, so that they should not be frightened’.¹¹ Barrie’s precursor text, *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* (1906), in turn extracted from his 1902 novel, *The White Bird*, describes how Peter Pan sometimes buries children who have died of exposure after being left in the Gardens overnight.¹² The deaths that haunt the garden of childhood are literal as well as figurative.

Figure 1 Spine of Dream Days.

Beyond fiction, it was even clearer that by no means all children grow up. Infant mortality had been considerably reduced over the preceding century, but a British child born in 1900 still had a 13% chance of dying before the age of five.¹³ Death rates might be lower among the middle-class families of Golden-Age authors than among their working-class contemporaries, but they were far from immune. Indeed, of the prominent Golden-Age authors who had children of their own, who did not live to mourn at least one? Frances Hodgson Burnett buried her son Lionel, the likely inspiration for Colin from *The Secret Garden*, when he died of tuberculosis aged sixteen in 1890. Edith Nesbit’s son Fabian succumbed to complications after a tonsil operation, aged 15. Alistair Grahame, for whom Kenneth Grahame wrote *The Wind in the Willows*, was nineteen when he lay down on a railway track to await the train that would decapitate him. Rudyard Kipling’s daughter Josephine died of pneumonia in 1899, aged six, and his eighteen-year-old son John died at the battle of Loos in 1915. Of the five Llewelyn-Davies brothers who became J. M. Barrie’s foster sons and who collectively gave rise to the figure of Peter Pan, one (George) died in the Great War, while a second (Michael) drowned aged twenty, possibly in a suicide pact. Moreover, the death of Barrie’s elder brother David in a skating accident two days before his fourteenth birthday famously had a decisive influence on the young writer’s character and

preoccupations. T. S. Eliot too, though (like Barrie) childless, grew up in the shadow of child death, his elder sister Theodora having died in infancy less than two years before he was born.

As well as the mighty child, then, we ought to consider the might-not-be-child, and all the more so because in British Golden-Age fiction the fact of child death is so generally repressed by authors and readers alike. We might expect that the opening of *Peter and Wendy*, with its assurance of the universality of the experience of growing up, would have been felt as jarring by the millions of readers with first-hand knowledge of its untruth. Yet it appears to have been accepted as (emotionally if not factually) axiomatic. Experience showed that children died, but the belief that children inevitably grow up clung on tenaciously. It is in the dark fissures between psychological need and lived reality that the garden ghosts with which this essay is concerned find their birth. If children die physically, surely they must survive in some other form? Precipitated by the unspoken demands of readers and writers alike, ghost children fulfil a teleological and spiritual imperative.

Born in 1892, Josephine Kipling was Rudyard Kipling's eldest child, and one to whom he was devoted. Her death from pneumonia devastated him, and those who knew him reported that he suffered a permanent alteration in his personality.¹⁴ The absence of the event from his memoir, *Something of Myself* (1937), confirms rather than detracts from this view. Kipling did, however, address her death more obliquely, most notably in the short story 'They', which appeared in *Scribner's Magazine* in 1904 and was published later the same year in his collection, *Traffics and Discoveries*, before being produced by Macmillan as a stand-alone volume, *They*, in 1905, with illustrations by F. H. Townsend.

The first-person narrator of 'They' is a man exploring Sussex by motor car one spring day, who loses his way and finds himself going down an unknown road through some woods,

only to arrive at an old mansion. He sees and hears children in the grounds of the house and at its upstairs windows. Soon he encounters the house's owner, a blind woman, who forgives his accidental trespass and invites him to drive his car slowly down a walk in her garden so that the children will be able to enjoy the novelty. She then has her butler show him his way back to the crossroads, whence he returns home. His second visit, a month later, is half-intentional (although 'it may have been that my car took the road of her own volition').¹⁵ Again he sees the children, and attempts to intrigue them by laying out his tools on a rug as he effects a minor repair to his engine, but they remain shy and elusive. He converses again with the blind owner, but their conversation is interrupted by a distraught villager, whose grandchild is desperately sick, and he helps to fetch a doctor and medicine. It is only on his third visit, as summer gives way to autumn, that he finally enters the house. Sitting next to the house's owner and hearing more of her story, he begins to understand what readers may already suspect, that the house's children are ghosts, and that the custom of the local bereaved parents is to 'walk in the woods' with their dead sons and daughters. The realisation comes home fully only when he feels a familiar sensation on the palm of his hand: 'the all-faithful half-reproachful signal of a waiting child not used to neglect even when grown-ups were busiest—a fragment of the mute code devised very long ago'.¹⁶ On realising this, he tells his hostess that he can never return to the house, and the story ends.

The significance of the parallels between Kipling's own situation and that of his protagonist has never been seriously disputed. Both are relative newcomers to the area (the Kiplings had lived in Sussex since 1897 but bought their permanent residence, Bateman's, only in 1902), both have a love of motoring, and both are fathers recently bereaved of their young daughters. It is possible to read 'They' as, in part, the therapeutic self-examination of an author still in the throes of grief. The enigmatic conclusion of the story, in which the narrator rejects the opportunity to 'walk in the woods' with his daughter's ghost, draws a veil

over the reasons that underlie his decision, delegating the matter to the judgement and psychic sensitivity of the house's owner:

‘You think it is wrong, then?’ she cried sharply, though I had said nothing.

‘Not for you. A thousand times no. For you it is right. ... I am grateful to you beyond words. For me it would be wrong. For me only. ...’

‘Why?’ she said, but passed her hand before her face as she had done at our second meeting in the wood. ‘Oh, I see,’ she went on simply as a child. ‘For you it would be wrong.’ Then with a little indrawn laugh, ‘and, d’you remember, I called you lucky—once—at first. You who must never come again!’¹⁷

The wish to communicate with the recently dead connects ‘They’ not so much with traditional ghost stories as with practices such as spiritualism and psychic phenomena, subjects in vogue at the time and ones with which Kipling had familial connections through his sister Trix, a member of the Society for Psychical Research who was then deeply engaged in experiments in automatic writing.¹⁸ Kipling’s own disavowal of spiritualism appears to have been a personal rejection of a phenomenon he believed in, rather than an expression of scepticism. Asked whether there was any truth to it, he is said to have replied: ‘There is; I know. Have nothing to do with it’.¹⁹ His narrator’s equally vehement refusal of further contact with the spirit of his dead daughter may spring from similar motives of self-protection. It certainly accords with Kipling’s own practice, as described by Lord Birkenhead:

Such was the pattern Kipling always followed—a putting aside or even destroying of anything that would remind him of the person he loved. Upon the death of his mother and father, he destroyed family papers that would have been incalculably dear to most

grieving sons. He even burned letters that they had written to him when he was a child. While living in Vermont, he told a friend that if his daughter Josephine should die, 'he would never be able to think or speak of her again'.²⁰

Modern Ghosts and their Genres

'They' is a story populated by child ghosts. However, these are not the ghosts of a distant past; they are children for whom their parents' grief is still fresh, to be eased only by 'walking in the woods'. Indeed, the narrator initially mistakes them for living children, and the numerous illustrations provided by F. H. Townsend for the 1905 Macmillan edition, most of which feature the children observing the protagonist from hiding in trees and elsewhere, depict them in contemporary clothes (Fig. 2). The translucence indicated by the strands of branch and foliage that occasionally show through their bodies may indicate the subjects' spectral natures but can equally be read as a feature of Townsend's drawing style, rendering them ambiguously supernatural. Nor are their deaths exceptional or conventionally romantic; rather, they have succumbed to the quotidian diseases of childhood, like thousands of others in Edwardian England. The butler Madden's daughter died of croup ('I drove eight miles in a tax-cart for the doctor. She was choked when we came back' [44]), and the child for whom the narrator seeks medicine on his second visit is dying of cerebro-spinal meningitis, a disease for which no effective treatment then existed. Josephine Kipling's pneumonia was another of that suite of commonplace killers. For all Kipling's autobiographical reticence, he makes explicit what most Golden Age children's writing conspires to keep secret. For children not to grow up was an everyday occurrence.

*Figure 1 Illustration by F. H. Townsend for **They**, p. 29*

Just as the child ghosts are not Romantic shades but rather contemporaries of the modern narrator and reader, the story's setting is the modern world. The house's blind owner, for all her interest in her ghostly companions, is a practical woman of business, seen dealing competently and briskly with a tenant farmer's attempt to badger her into giving him money, while the narrator's motor car is welcomed as an exciting innovation rather than resented as an intrusion. Yet Kipling also adds many touches that unsettle his story from this contemporary and realistic milieu. The house's location, for one thing, is uncertain. Once back on the main road, the narrator looks behind him only to find that 'the crumpled hills interlaced so jealously that I could not see where the house had lain'.²¹ He is unable to locate it on a map or in the county gazetteer, and an enquiry to a friend with deep local roots yields only the 'name of a family which conveyed no meaning'.²² The owner twice describes the place as 'out of the world',²³ suggesting a more-than-geographical isolation. Moreover, when he first approaches the garden as a trespasser, the narrator finds his way barred by forbidding topiary figures of yew in the shape of lance-bearing knights and peacocks set to challenge and repel his presence. They may not be an angel with a flaming sword, but they hint at the garden's identity as a sequestered, Edenic *locus*.

The most significant such touch for my purpose comes in the context of what is arguably hardly more than a throwaway line. When the narrator first sees the house, an Elizabethan manor of rose-red brick, his impulse is to imaginatively unmoor it from the present day altogether. In the story's first appearance, in *Scribner's Magazine*, he muses: 'If I am not packed off for a trespasser, or if this [topiary] knight does not ride a wallop at me ... Shakespeare and Queen Elizabeth at least will come out of that half-open garden door and ask me to tea'.²⁴ The thought is semi-jocular and not pursued, being primarily a wry acknowledgement of the house's impressive Tudor façade, and Kipling's narrator never returns to Shakespeare and Elizabeth. However, it is not clear that the same is true of Kipling

himself, for the versions of the story published in *Traffics and Discoveries* and the Macmillan standalone volume both made small but significant changes to this line. In *Traffics*, ‘at least will’ becomes ‘at least must’,²⁵ accentuating the narrator’s humorous hyperbole; but in the standalone volume the entire phrase is replaced with a simple ‘will’ – a more neutral locution open to a wider range of readings.²⁶ Released from the humorous framing, we are free to wonder: what if Shakespeare and Elizabeth had indeed appeared? Would it have been as ghosts? Would it have meant that the narrator had travelled back in time? Might it even imply the potential of house and garden to sit within a temporal bubble where different ages coexist? Behind these interpretations lies a distinct set of genre possibilities, all concerned with ways to overcome, at least in part, the barrier imposed by mortality, notably the ghost story and its twentieth-century rival, the time-slip fantasy.

The ghost story itself was of course already well established and enjoying a golden age of its own when ‘They’ appeared in 1904; its most celebrated Edwardian exemplar, M. R. James’s *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, would be published the same year.²⁷ The child ghosts of ‘They’ are very different from the malicious entities typically envisaged by James, however; Kipling’s is potentially a consolatory ghost story, one that offers to rob death of its sting, just as spiritualism did. Its dead still exist and can be seen and communicated with. Although the narrator of ‘They’ refuses this consolation for himself, it remains a valued part of the experience of others in the house and village, and its possibility is offered to readers as a way to fill the gaps of their own grief.

Time fantasy fiction, still in its early years as Kipling wrote ‘They’, also has consolatory potential; if not only departed individuals but the past as a whole exists and can be visited, either deliberately (as in time travel fiction) or otherwise (as in time slip fiction), the finality of death is much mitigated. The compensatory potential of time fiction was as yet

largely unrealised, however. Time travel stories around the turn of the century, exemplified in the work of writers such as H. G. Wells, typically faced towards the future rather than the past;²⁸ and, although E. Nesbit's *The Story of the Amulet* (1906) would soon provide a classic series of encounters between modern protagonists and historical figures, these would take place in times and locations so distant as to obviate the kind of personal connection at the heart of 'They'. In Kipling's story, Shakespeare and Elizabeth are empathetically distanced by the narrator's ironic framing, but in any case their deaths three centuries before could hardly be a matter for personal grief. The same is true of the vignettes that by 1904 Kipling was already beginning to devise for *Puck of Pook's Hill*, published the same year as Nesbit's book.²⁹ In that work and its sequel, *Rewards and Fairies* (1910), the child protagonists, Dan and Una, are introduced to a succession of figures from British history and myth, who are summoned by Puck's enchantment to another Sussex *temenos*, the fairy ring on top of Pook's Hill, a place receptive to such encounters.

Puck of Pook's Hill and *Rewards and Fairies* are not time-slip narratives, at least by the definition I have tentatively offered above, for there is nothing accidental about the children's experience: Puck acts as a master of ceremonies, conjuring a historical pageant not unlike those that were starting to become popular in Edwardian England, and serving much the same purpose, as an affirmation of national and community tradition. (The historical pageant 'craze' began in 1905 in the small town of Sherborne, with the playwright Louis Napoleon Parker playing the part of Puck for the townsfolk of Dorset.)³⁰ Nevertheless, the half-expectation of Kipling's narrator that Shakespeare and Queen Elizabeth will or must appear before him hints at a view of certain places as preternaturally capable of accommodating the past, as Pook's Hill does for Dan and Una. The narrator is rehearsing, at least in imagination, an experience similar to that undergone in the summer of 1901 by the protagonists of the so-called Moberly-Jourdain incident, when two Oxford academics visiting

Versailles as tourists found themselves unwittingly wandering through the palace gardens as they had existed in August 1792. Charlotte Anne Moberly and Eleanor Jourdain's account of their experience was later pseudonymously published as *An Adventure* in 1911³¹ and became a celebrated example of a well-documented psychic encounter. The incident was the subject of speculation through the first half of the twentieth century and provoked many reactions, ranging from outright disbelief to a theory that the pair had encountered and misinterpreted a historical masquerade, the suggestion that they were victims of a mass hallucination (a subject in which Kipling would later show profound interest),³² or indeed that they really had, as they claimed, somehow stepped more than a century into the past. The model that the incident provided for time-slip fiction was later bolstered by the note added to the fourth edition of *An Adventure* in 1931 by the aeronautical engineer and time-theorist, J. W. Dunne, then at the height of his fame. Dunne had published *An Experiment with Time* in 1927, a book that proved influential in literary circles, most famously on J. B. Priestley's 1937 play, *Time and the Conways*, though less so among the philosophers and physicists who were the author's intended audience. Through its suggestion that dreaming offers the unconscious mind access both to future events and to a still-extant past, *An Experiment with Time* and Dunne's subsequent books became, along with *An Adventure* itself, both an inspiration and a template for writers of time fantasy, especially those involving time-slips.

Time slip fantasy is a quintessentially mid-twentieth-century genre, the protagonists of which move from one period to another without either conscious intention or external aids such as charms, magical helpers or time machines. For Penelope Taberner in Alison Uttley's *A Traveller in Time* (1939), Tom Long in Philippa Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden* (1958), and Tolly in Lucy M. Boston's *The Chimneys of Green Knowe* (1958), passing between historical periods may occasion some speculation as to the physical and metaphysical forces in play (*Tom's Midnight Garden* even includes a character who repeats a garbled version of

Dunne's theories),³³ but it ultimately remains mysterious, a function of the potent combination of certain places, people, and states of emotional receptivity. I shall return to time-slips a little later, but through its Shakespearian-cum-Elizabethan aside, 'They' embryonically anticipates all these texts.

Garden Ghosts in 'Burnt Norton'

Some three decades after the publication of 'They', T. S. Eliot published 'Burnt Norton' (1936), later to form the first of his *Four Quartets* (1943). 'Burnt Norton's' debt to 'They' was acknowledged by Eliot himself, although it appears to have been unconscious. In 1941 he confessed to his friend and unofficial archivist, John Hayward, that he noticed it only when rereading Kipling's story several years after 'Burnt Norton's' publication, as part of the preparation for his anthology, *A Choice of Kipling's Verse* (1941).³⁴ At the same time, he acknowledged a debt to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem, 'The Lost Bower', part of which is quoted in Kipling's story, noting that its presence in his subconscious was likely due to Kipling's use of it. Although Helen Gardner suggested that 'The Lost Bower' was in the end the more significant catalyst for 'Burnt Norton', the part played by 'They' should not be underestimated. Its presence is most explicit in the sounds of laughter and unseen children that recur in the poem, where the parallels to Kipling, though not exact, are certainly suggestive. Here is Kipling:

Then I heard a laugh among the yew-peacocks, and turning to make sure (till then I had been watching the house only) I saw the silver of a fountain behind a hedge thrown up against the sun. The doves on the roof cooed to the cooing water; but

between the two notes I caught the utterly happy chuckle of a child absorbed in some light mischief.³⁵

And Eliot:

Go, said the bird, for the leaves were full of children,
Hidden excitedly, containing laughter. (ll. 40-41)³⁶

Sudden in a shaft of sunlight
Even while the dust moves
There rises the hidden laughter
Of children in the foliage
Quick now, here, now, always—
Ridiculous the waste sad time
Stretching before and after. (ll. 169-75)

Kipling may also have come to Eliot's mind because of other parallels. When Eliot visited the Cotswold manor of Burnt Norton with Emily Hale in 1934, the house was unoccupied and its gardens overgrown, qualities that lend the poem part of its tonal melancholy. The prospect was quite different from the well-tended gardens that greet the narrator of 'They'; but Eliot too was a trespasser in the grounds of a private English country house, and he too found himself in an ambiguous physical environment without definitive evidence anchoring it in modernity, a place 'out of the world'. His response is couched in more philosophical terms than those of Kipling's story, but the underlying sense of temporal displacement, that 'all time is eternally present' (l. 4), is to be found in both.

Texts and authors so generically and temperamentally disparate are likely to be compared, if at all, in terms of their differences, but as Andrew Lycett notes, Eliot

‘appreciated the subtle mixture of tradition and spirituality’ in Kipling’s work,³⁷ and there are also significant continuities between them. One lies in their shared emphasis on the unsaid or unsayable. The mystical-cum-psychoic insights of the house’s owner in ‘They’ and the motives that exile the narrator at the story’s conclusion are more powerful for remaining unspoken, while the ghost children’s distant shouts of playful laughter underline even as they notionally counteract the silence of death. In ‘Burnt Norton’, Eliot too was intensely interested in silence as a vessel of meaning. He bewails the time-bound nature of language and music, which can be spoken, played, read and heard only in an attenuated series of moments strung one-dimensionally through time, contrasting it with the fullness and self-expression of silent forms such as the ‘Chinese jar’ that ‘moves perpetually in its stillness’ (ll. 142-3). Only that which can be contemplated as a spatial or conceptual ‘pattern’ rather than experienced as a temporal performance can achieve a state of ‘co-existence’ (l. 145) where ‘all is always now’ (ll. 149). Kipling’s reticence may be a symptom of his emotional repression, but in Eliot’s performative doubt, too, as in the stylised withdrawal of his more hermetically mystical passages, there often seems an element of deflection.

Eliot’s most characteristic mode of ‘silence’, both in *Four Quartets* and elsewhere, is his exploitation of juxtaposition and of the ‘gaps’ between textual fragments to imply or accommodate meaning. Indeed, there is even ambiguity as to the boundaries of his work’s component parts. Is *Four Quartets* one text or four? Is it a multi-part poem or a bijou anthology inhabiting a shared spiritual and emotional landscape? Analogous techniques and questions arise in the case of ‘They’, which was initially published as a standalone story in *Scribner’s* magazine but, like ‘Burnt Norton’, subsequently acquired a permanent textual companion.

Each of the stories in *Traffics and Discoveries* was paired with a poem, as was Kipling's usual practice. In the case of 'They', this was 'The Return of the Children', which prefaced the story in both *Traffics and Discoveries* and the standalone Macmillan volume the following year. 'The Return of the Children' is a small (and theologically dubious) fantasy, a four-stanza story set in the Christian heaven, where a group of deceased children find themselves bored with the radiant crowns and harps and ask permission to return to Earth. The Virgin hears their appeal, takes the keys from St Peter and releases them. Jesus, observing this, approves, commenting:

'Shall I that suffered the children to come to me

hold them against their will?'³⁸

At these words, the poem notes, the 'Guards of the Void resheathed their swords',³⁹ allowing the children to pass back to Earth.

What is the relationship of 'The Return of the Children' with 'They', and how far should the pairing direct our reading of either text? The poem's presence immediately suggests a reading of the Kipling's story in which the child ghosts of 'They' are to be viewed as just such returned spirits. We may even see in the poem's sword-bearing 'Guards of the Void' a foreshadowing of the topiary guardians encountered at the entrance to the garden. However, nowhere is this reading overtly referred to in the words or attitudes of the narrator or other characters in 'They'. Lacking such confirmation, the status of the texts' juxtaposition remains open to interpretation. Much of Kipling's short fiction was poetically paired in this way, creating multiple hermeneutic issues. Kipling was no modernist, but his juxtaposition of genres and styles to generate interpretative lacunae is a technique that modernists would later exploit, and none more so than Eliot. The tripartite structure of 'They', with its three visits to

the house, each conducted in a different season (spring, high summer and early autumn), at a different tempo and with a different mood, also anticipates the musical structure of Eliot's quartets.

Ghosts and Time Slips in Green Knowe

If 'They' was influential on 'Burnt Norton', Eliot's poem in turn went on to inform many later texts, not least those with garden settings.⁴⁰ Eleven years after the publication of *Four Quartets*, the lines drawn by Kipling and Eliot converged in another story of child ghosts, this one centred on the Manor at Hemingford Grey in Cambridgeshire – or rather on its fictional avatar, Green Knowe, the setting of Lucy M. Boston's *The Children of Green Knowe* (1954) and its five sequels.

Boston was born in December 1892, just nineteen days before Josephine Kipling, whom she would nevertheless outlive by more than ninety years. She was in her mid-forties when, in 1939, she bought the twelfth-century manor house of Hemingford Grey, a home that became the centre of her activities for the next half century, as architectural restorer and historian, novelist, gardener and seamstress. She achieved worldwide renown as a quiltmaker and designer, but the role that brought her most fame was probably that of children's writer, in which capacity she went on to win the Carnegie Medal with *A Stranger at Green Knowe* (1961), the fourth in her series. Boston's subtle control of tone and her combination of a traditional social outlook with a willingness both to take artistic risks and to foreground the perspectives of subaltern groups such as children, refugees and animals (all among the protagonists who find shelter at Green Knowe) provide striking continuities with Kipling's work.

Her first novel, *The Children of Green Knowe*, tells of young Tolly Oldknow, who goes to live with his elderly great-grandmother, Mrs Oldknow, a figure not entirely unlike Boston herself, in a home that has been in the family since Norman times. Tolly, whose mother is dead and whose father and stepmother live in Burma, has been lonely and unhappy at school, but soon acclimatises to his new home and takes his place in the complex fabric of Green Knowe's history. Unlike the narrator of 'They' or Eliot at Burnt Norton, Tolly is the opposite of a trespasser; rather, this is the story of his coming into his spiritual, emotional and familial inheritance; we realize from Tolly's name and facial features (both shared with many of his ancestors) that he evidently 'belongs' at Green Knowe.

The Children of Green Knowe is a ghost story; however, the novel's ghosts are not the recently deceased children of Kipling's text but victims of the Great Plague of 1665, Oldknow family members from a much earlier generation. Mrs Oldknow speaks of them familiarly and her stories about incidents in their lives are interspersed throughout the book, but they are necessarily more distanced than the fresh-made ghosts of Kipling's tale. The illustrations (provided by the author's son, Peter Boston, the original model for Tolly)⁴¹ never depict the book's titular child ghosts, Toby, Alexander and Linnet, in the modern-day scenes, although all three are shown taking part in adventures from their Restoration lifetimes. Nevertheless, they make themselves known to Tolly in ways familiar to anyone who has read 'They'. The ghosts, 'like shy animals',⁴² are felt and heard long before they are seen – as the residual movement of a recently dismounted rocking horse, or the hand-warmth still to be felt in a rolled marble, but above all as disembodied laughter:

While he was standing there pulling faces he heard a laugh so like a boy's that he could not believe his great-grandmother had made it, and opened his eyes to see who was there. There was no one else. Mrs Oldknow's eyes were fixed on his. The

blackbirds were scolding in the branches because they were afraid to come on to his hands and could see the margarine was nearly finished.⁴³

‘Linnet!’ [Tolly] called suddenly. ‘Where are you? Come out into the moonlight.’

There was a laugh just where he wasn’t looking, and when he turned that way, a patter of feet, and the whispering was where he had been looking a moment before.⁴⁴

Behind the door-post, flattened against the wall on tiptoe to make themselves as thin as they could, their faces puckered with holding in their laughter, he saw Linnet and Alexander. It was Linnet’s hand on the door-post. Their black eyes were fixed on him. There was no mistake, he knew them.⁴⁵

Here is Eliot’s ‘hidden laughter | Of children in the foliage’, or the ‘chuckle of a child absorbed in some light mischief’ heard across the garden by Kipling’s narrator. A still more powerful parallel is with Townsend’s illustrations to *They*, which typically show images of child ghosts gleefully concealing themselves from the adult characters (e.g. Fig. 3). Kipling’s ‘yew-peacocks’ are reprised too, in Tolly’s eventual discovery of the three ghostly Oldknows sheltering under a yew tree, where they are at length interrupted by a peacock.⁴⁶

Figure 2: F. H. Townsend illustration for They, p. 62.

A more specific Kipling resonance occurs in Boston’s suggestion that Toby, Alexander and Linnet, like the subjects of ‘The Return of the Children’, are enjoying a furlough from heaven. When Tolly is able to question them he asks where their mother is, to which Linnet replies: ‘Why, in heaven of course ... But she doesn’t mind our coming here’

(94). It is a striking echo the Virgin's permission in Kipling's poem. The concept of a temporary visit from the afterlife is of course not original to Kipling, being a feature of such traditional texts as the ballad, 'The Wife of Usher's Well', but his surprisingly heterodox suggestion that children might find heaven tedious and prefer their former home is far less usual, as is Boston's implicit adoption of the same device. If Linnet and the rest had preferred the celestial halls to Green Knowe, presumably they would not have sought permission to come in the first place.

Elsewhere I have argued that each of the six Green Knowe books is characterised by a 'base' genre, with the series including an animal story (*A Stranger at Green Knowe* [1961]), a time-travel story (*The Stones of Green Knowe* [1976]) and an island-hopping fantasy (*The River at Green Knowe* [1959]), among others.⁴⁷ In these terms, *The Children of Green Knowe* is clearly a ghost story: the seventeenth-century Oldknows are dead and they know it; and, notwithstanding the historical tales narrated by Mrs Oldknow, the story never leaves Tolly's modern day. It is in the second book, *The Chimneys of Green Knowe* (1958), that Boston begins to develop the language and conventions of time slip, banishing words such as 'ghost' in favour the more neutral 'the others',⁴⁸ having Tolly move through time to visit the house as it existed in the eighteenth century, and generally stripping away the privileged perspective of the modern characters. In fact, *The Children of Green Knowe* already hints at this reorientation away from the traditional ghost story's sharp division between the living and the dead. Speaking of Toby, Alexander and Linnet's grandmother, the only family member to survive the plague, Mrs Oldknow suggests that her grief may have been short-lived: "After all," she said, "it sounds very sad to say they all died, but it didn't really make so much difference. I expect the old grandmother soon found out they were still here".⁴⁹ The suggestion that the children stayed on in the house irrespective of death may not be incompatible with their being on a temporary visit from the Christian heaven, but it is tonally

very different, belonging rather to the world of Moberly and Jourdain's *Adventure*, or even the opening lines of 'Burnt Norton' with their suggestion that 'Time present and time past. | Are both perhaps present in time future' (ll. 1-2). In *The Chimneys of Green Knowe*, Mrs Oldknow similarly speculates that a tape recorder would be able to catch voices from multiple historical periods on a single tape: 'It might come out a real babel, all of them, all at once. A unique "historical party"'.⁵⁰

As with Shakespeare and Elizabeth's putative (if anachronistic) offer of tea to the narrator of 'They', Boston's vision here is a recuperative one. It neither checks nor reverses the fact of death but renders it irrelevant, something that does not 'really make so much difference' because death is not separation, the past is not irrevocably past, all times and voices not only exist but can be accessed. The attraction of such a vision, whether to the spiritualists who tried to contact the dead 'beyond the veil' or to the authors and readers of time-slip fantasy, is obvious. Both Kipling and Eliot had, however, resisted it: Kipling, by having his narrator quit the house of ghosts for ever; Eliot, by asserting from a more specifically Christian point of view that if 'all time is eternally present | All time is unredeemable' (ll. 4-5). Eliot of course was writing from a perspective in which the idea of 'redemption' bears a specific Christological weight. What it might mean to transcend time has long been a subject of theological discussion, but it has typically been regarded as the peculiar province of God or as a feature of the Christian afterlife. To escape time is after all to escape mortality itself, and thus a fallen world in which history and the attendant irreversibility of events are intrinsic features. Eliot's orthodoxy cannot easily accommodate either the transcendent fantasy of time-slip, which solves the problem of time's inexorable passage by stepping out of the temporal stream and re-entering at a different point, or indeed the whimsical theology of 'The Return of the Children', which integrates ghosts into a superficially Christian superstructure at the cost of making heaven intensely unappealing.

Boston was well read and had a particular interest in ghost stories. As well as the *Green Knowe* books she wrote numerous tales in the tradition of M. R. James, a writer whose influence on her more adult-orientated work is clear.⁵¹ By the time she wrote *The Children of Green Knowe*, Kipling and Eliot were two of a very small clutch of British nationals who had won the Nobel Prize for literature; she would certainly have been familiar with both ‘They’, Kipling’s most accomplished exercise in the ghost-story genre, and *Four Quartets*. Thus, it may well be that Linnet’s remark about receiving maternal permission to visit from heaven represents a conscious (or unconscious) reference to ‘The Return of the Children’. Boston’s hidden, laughing children, likewise, may or may not allude to those in Kipling or ‘Burnt Norton’, just as the ‘evil fingers’ of the demon yew tree known as Green Noah, which nearly catch Tolly near the story’s conclusion, may or may not glance at Eliot’s funereal vision of ‘Chill | Fingers of yew ... curled | Down on us’ (ll. 142-4). Ours is already a story of trespassers; is it one of textual poachers, too?

Intriguing as such speculation is, the more salient point may be that these writers – in many ways a diverse group, writing in different genres and for different audiences – were all forced to confront (or find ingenious ways to evade) the same ancient problem – that of mortality, and of child mortality in particular. Children had always died, generally in greater numbers than in the first half of the twentieth century; however, the valorisation of childhood as an idealised and quasi-Edenic space had rendered that fact especially indigestible. With the traditional comforts of religion increasingly ineffective, this was also an age in which alternative methods of acknowledging and coping with death had to be developed, whether in the form of spiritualist practice or of scientific and philosophical reconceptualizations of time and of human relationships with the temporal. Kipling and Eliot, in their own ways, one impassioned and personal, the other assuming a posture of religious renunciation, ultimately refused the comfort that such narratives had to offer, at least in their more demotic forms.

Boston, herself a believer in ghosts, was more accepting, but if her books invest Green Knowe with the power of crossing temporal and other boundaries it is only at the cost of eternal vigilance and (in a sense familiar to gardeners) continual maintenance. Green Knowe is a place of refuge, but, as her series demonstrates, it is one that requires protection on its own account, against threats from numerous quarters. The later books in the series, especially, show that the struggle to shore Green Knowe against the ruins wreaked by the modern world in its more bureaucratic and brutalist forms may eventually be lost. 'It happens,' says an older Tolly of the officially sanctioned desecration of a pair of ancient stones in the final lines of the last book, *The Stones of Green Knowe* (1976), written when Boston was in her eighties. 'But my grandmother and I do all we can to prevent it. She fights for Green Knowe every day of her life'.⁵² Boston's is an ecology of stewardship, in a world of fragile Edens. To the extent that modernism itself can be viewed as a rearguard action against modernity, Boston, like Eliot and indeed Kipling, has some claim to the title. All three understand the complexity and importance of gardens as places poised between nature and artifice, present and past, childhood and experience.

Without such places, what will become of the ghosts?

¹ For example, in Fiona McCullough, *The Fictional Role of Childhood in Victorian and Early Twentieth Century Children's Literature* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004), pp. 175-202.

² Jacqueline Rose. *The Case of Peter Pan, or, The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984).

³ Explorations of the connections between children's literature and modernism have been fairly scant, but significant contributions include Juliet Dusinberre, *Alice to the Lighthouse: Children's Books and Radical Experiments in Art* (London: MacMillan, 1987 and Karin E. Westman's special issue of *Children's Association Quarterly* 32.4 (2007), on the theme of 'Children's Literature and Modernism'.

⁴ For example, Perry Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins, 2008); David Rudd, *Reading the Child in Children's Literature: An Heretical Approach* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); and Marah Gubar, 'Risky Business: Talking About Children in Children's Literature

Criticism', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 38 (Winter 2013), pp. 450–57.

Clémentine Beauvais, *The Mighty Child: Time and Power in Children's Literature* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2015).

Catherine Butler, 'Lost Futures: Reading, Memory and Repression', *International Research in Children's Literature* 14.2 (2021), 156-68, p. 159.

Kenneth Grahame, *The Golden Age* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, [1895] 1918), pp. 4-5.

Ibid., pp. 11-12.

J. M. Barrie, *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens/Peter and Wendy*, ed. Peter Hollindale (Oxford World's Classics, [1911] 2008). p. 69.

Kenneth Grahame, *Dream Days* (John Lane: New York and London, [1898] 1900), p. 254.

Barrie, *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens/Peter and Wendy*, p. 75.

Ibid., p. 65

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William B. Dillingham, 'Kipling: Spiritualism, Bereavement, Self-Revelation, and "They"', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 45 (2002): 402-25, pp. 401-2.

Rudyard Kipling, *They*. Illus. F. H. Townsend (London: Macmillan and Co., 1905), p. 27.

Ibid., p. 73.

Ibid., pp. 79-80.

Dillingham pp. 405-6.

Qtd. Dillingham, p. 407.

Qtd. Dillingham, p. 416.

Kipling, *They*, p. 26.

Ibid., p. 27.

Ibid., pp. 15, 21-22.

Rudyard Kipling, 'They', *Scribner's Magazine*, 36 (August 1904), 129-39 (p. 130).

Rudyard Kipling, 'They', in *Traffics and Discoveries* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1904), pp. 303-35 (p. 305).

Kipling, *They*, p. 11.

Other notable Edwardian ghost-story authors include E. F. Benson, Walter de la Mare, Arthur Machen, E. Nesbit, Algernon Blackwood and Oliver Onions.

Examples include utopian novels such as Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* (1887), Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett's *New Amazonia: A Foretaste of the Future* (1889) and J. McCullough's *Golf in the Year 2000* (1892), and satirical works such as Max Beerbohm's 'Enoch Soames: A Memory of the Eighteen-Nineties' (1916).

Harold Orel, *A Kipling Chronology* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1990), p. 52.

See Jed Etsy, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 2004), pp. 56-61 and Ayako Yoshino, *Pageant Fever: Local History and Consumerism in Edwardian England* (Tokyo: Waseda University Press, 2011), pp. 2-3.

Charlotte Moberly [Elizabeth Morison] and Eleanor Jourdain [Frances Lamont], *An Adventure* (London: Macmillan, 1911).

Andrew Lycett, *Rudyard Kipling* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999), p. 453.

Philippa Pearce, *Tom's Midnight Garden* (London: Puffin, [1958] 1976), p. 164.

Helen Gardner, *The Composition of Four Quartets* (New York: OUP, 1978), p. 39.

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- 35 Kipling, *They*, pp. 11-12.
 36 T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, [1943] 2001).
 37 Lycett, p. 497.
 38 Kipling, *They*, p. vi.
 39 Ibid.
 40 Half a century after 'Burnt Norton' was published, the poem's structure, along with its lines about a dried pool 'filled with water out of sunlight' (l. 45), would inform yet another text that begins with a trespass in the grounds of a manor house, Diana Wynne Jones's fantasy *Bildungsroman*, *Fire and Hemlock* (1985). The author later noted that 'Burnt Norton' had provided her with 'a story divided into four parts and featuring a string quartet' as well as 'the setting and atmosphere for the funeral Polly gatecrashes in Hunsdon House' in the book's opening scene. Diana Wynne Jones, 'The Heroic Ideal—A Personal Odyssey', *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 13 (1989), 129-140 (p. 138).
 41 Alan Powers, 'Obituary: Peter Boston', *Independent*, 1 December 1999. Accessed from <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/obituary-peter-boston-1124303.html>.
 42 Lucy M. Boston, *The Children of Green Knowe* (London: Puffin, [1954] 1994), p. 58.
 43 Ibid., p. 18.
 44 Ibid., pp. 33-34.
 45 Ibid., p. 54.
 46 Ibid., pp. 81-84.
 47 Butler, Catherine. 'The Green Knowe Books – a Patchwork of Genres', *Lucy Boston: An Artist in Everything She Did*, ed. by Victor Watson (Hemingford Grey: Oldknow Books, 2021), pp. 37-52.
 48 Lucy M. Boston, *The Chimneys of Green Knowe* (London: Faber, 1964), p. 21.
 49 Boston, *Children*, pp. 67-68.
 50 Boston, *Chimneys*, pp. 182.
 51 Robert Lloyd Parry, 'Introduction', in Lucy M. Boston, *Curfew & Other Eerie Tales* (Dublin: The Swan River Press, 2011), v-xviii (pp. v-vii).
 52 Lucy M. Boston, *The Stones of Green Knowe* (London: Puffin, 1979), pp. 120-21.