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Connecting with the Other: Empathy in Tom's Midnight Garden

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Abstract

This paper examines the theme of empathy in Philippa Pearce's novel Tom's Midnight Garden. It argues that Tom's empathy is an important factor in his growing up, in constructing his identity and in shaping his relational self through reaching out to the 'other', Hatty. Tom is able to empathize with Hatty although she is from a much older generation and from a world that is very different from his own when he breaks the boundaries of time, gender and age. Tom comprehends the significance of a non-linear time and applies it to his relationship with Hatty in the same way as gender and age differences between both of them are neutralized. To explore this empathy between Tom and the 'other', this paper analyzes how Tom is capable of acquiring and nurturing this emotional capacity to construct a meaningful continuity with the past—a time not his own—and with the 'other' who is initially a stranger and a mystery to him.

Key Words: children's literature, empathy in literature, otherness, philippa pearce, relational self, tom's midnight garden

Connecting with the 'Other': Empathy in *Tom's Midnight Garden*

Like many of children's books, Philippa Pearce's novel *Tom's Midnight Garden* deals with the transition from childhood to adulthood. However, what is unique and particular to Tom's growing up experience is the way empathy is dealt with as one of the major factors in Tom's growing up and his transformation by the end of the novel. Tom's relationship with Hatty has enabled him to understand himself, reach out to the 'other' and construct a relational identity, more secure and confident in its relation to the 'other'. This paper will argue that empathy is at the heart of Tom's transformation; without empathy, Tom would not have been able to grow up emotionally and intellectually.

Scholars and critics have been interested in *Tom's Midnight Garden* since it was published in 1958. The novel was received with a large critical acclaim. Quoted in Natov and DeLuca (1985), Pearce claims: "I had never thought of *Tom's Midnight Garden* as a fantasy" (p. 78), however, some critics would have us believe that *Tom's Midnight Garden* is a fantasy time-slip narrative. Critics have explored many themes of the novel but empathy and Tom's relational self were not part of their focus. The metaphor of the garden has captured the interest of many scholars. Neil Philip (1982) interpreted the garden as the Garden of Eden; and Beck (2003) explored the garden as an escape and a "sanctuary" and a "retreat from the modern world" (p. 267). Other critics compared *Tom's Midnight Garden* to other well-established classics of children's literature such as *Peter Pan* by the Scottish novelist and playwright J. M. Barrie. For instance, Carpenter (1985) claims that: "The story's conclusion describes Tom's acceptance of what Peter Pan can never accept: that time must be allowed to pass, and growth and even old age must be accepted as necessary and even desirable facets of human existence" (p. 220). Even though the parallel that Carpenter draws is interesting, yet it does not do justice to *Tom's Midnight Garden* for it does not examine Pearce's novel on its own terms and for its own worth. Such comparisons do not help much in understanding the complexity of Tom's growing up experience. Instead of trying to understand the nature of Tom's maturation, Carpenter rather assimilates it to other familiar experiences in other children's books.

The writer Johnston (2007) compares *Tom's Midnight Garden* to another classic popular with children, *Rip Van Winkle*. She claims: "*Tom's Midnight Garden* is the 1950s *Rip van Winkle* (in reverse) and must have been the first 'time-wrap' story I ever read... It is an ambitious book for children, with speculations about the nature of time and references to the *Book of Revelation*" (p. 27). Even though such comparisons clearly elevate *Tom's Midnight Garden* to a high status among the classics, yet they exemplify how many critics overlooked the vision about identity formation that Pearce is portraying in her novel. By assimilating *Tom's Midnight Garden* to plots and themes of well-established classics like *Peter Pan* and *Rip Van Winkle*, critics demonstrate the complexity and novelty of what Pearce's novel portrays. Evidently, *Tom's Midnight Garden* poses a real controversy to the critics. When the novel is not compared to another classic, it is criticized for being an escape to the past. Montgomery (2009) writes that the novel is often criticized for being "nostalgic and conservative, extolling the virtues of the past over those of the present and over-romanticising the rites, rituals and hierarchies of Victorian England which it positions as a lost golden age" (p. 204). Montgomery further explains that: "scholarly interest in *Tom's Midnight Garden* has centered on the themes of loss and sense of 'things slipping away' and critics have analysed the ways in which the ravages of time are central to the book and give it its elegiac tone" (p. 204). Natov (2009) analyzes

Tom's growing up experience, but falls short of elaborating on his relational self. No critic has discussed Tom's relational identity and examined the importance of empathy in shaping his identity as a child and a future adult. This paper aims to fill in this gap and propose a new reading to the novel to demonstrate how Pearce is not much interested in writing a conventional time-slip narrative as much as portraying her vision of Tom's emotional and intellectual growing up. Pearce's domain is not the past or the fantastic, but the real here and now.

Before starting to explore Tom's self in dialogue and the role empathy plays in his growing up and in shaping his relational identity, it is illuminating to lay out the definition of empathy and the theoretical ground for this paper. This paper assumes that empathy is affective as well as cognitive. The empathy that Tom has felt toward Hatty, as this paper argues, contributes to his emotional as well as his cognitive and intellectual growth. Only those with 'sympathetic capabilities' can imaginatively relate and vicariously live the emotions, ideas, opinions and experiences of the 'other' (diZerega, 1995, p. 250). This extension of the self into other selves requires predisposition, choice and responsibility. Without being ready to open and connect with the 'other', this empathetic bond would not be possible. Empathy requires a certain responsibility of action; it does not leave one indifferent to the feelings of the 'other'. Empathy is not just about identifying with the 'other', but it also calls for action upon one's and the other's situation. The ability to be empathetic may not be innate, and if it is, it has to be nurtured. As explained by diZerega (1995), the "predisposition to sympathize can therefore be cultivated and strengthened" (p. 250). Tom's journey is a journey of cultivating and strengthening such predispositions to relate to and care about the 'other'.

Jordan (2001) explains how the model of a relational self differs from the traditional theories of psychological development. Such traditional theories "emphasize movement toward autonomy, separation, and self-sufficiency... Most psychodynamic psychological theories suggest that people grow from dependence to independence, that mature functioning is characterized by the capacity for logical, abstract thought, autonomous thinking, and separation of thought from emotion (p. 92). In contrast to these traditional theories of psychological development, Jordan explains that:

Relational-cultural theory suggests that the primary source of suffering for most people is the experience of isolation and that healing occurs in growth-fostering connection. This model is built on an understanding of people that emphasizes a primary movement toward and yearning for connection in people's lives (p. 95).

In this model of a self in relation, or in dialogue, there is little emphasis on independence, self-sufficiency or autonomy. Instead, the values which are highlighted are relationships, connecting with the one self and the 'other' and mutual empathy. Jordan suggests that the primary source of suffering for most people is the experience of isolation and explains that healing occurs by "bring[ing] people back into healing connection, where they begin to reconnect with themselves and bring themselves more fully into relationship with others (p. 97). Healing takes place in a context of mutuality and connection, with a growing dual-consciousness—consciousness about the self and the 'other' outside the self. In his journey in the novel, Tom goes from 'Exile' as the first chapter indicates to a more complete Tom Long who is

in control of his own narrative that he shares with his brother in the course of the novel and with Mrs. Bartholomew in the closing chapter of the novel, 'A Tale for Tom Long.' The close intimate mutuality at the end is in sharp contrast to Tom's sense of loneliness and isolation in the opening chapters of the novel. Naess (2001) explains: "there are no completely separable objects, therefore no separable ego or medium or organism... Within such a field, any concrete content can only be related one-to-one to an indivisible structure, a constellation of factors" (p. 57). Macy (2010) confirms that "to be a person... is to participate, at every level of our being, in a reality wider than that enclosed by our skin or identified with our name" (p. 184). The relational self is not just in connection with itself, but with the 'other' with "indivisible structure" and with "constellation". In its relationship with other elements outside the self, the relationship between the self and such cosmic elements is almost elevated to a mystical experience. The critics who have interpreted *Tom's Midnight Garden* as a time shift narrative have overlooked the fact that this technique of time-shift is used by Pearce to explore the theme of a self maturing in a dialogue with other selves. Cosslett (2002) describes the pattern of Time-shift novels:

[A] deracinated child comes to stay in a new locality; a special place, often in a conjunction with a special object, provides access to the past; an empathetic bond is formed with a child in the past, a connection is made between the past experience and the memory of someone still living; names, inscriptions..." (p. 244).

An "empathetic bond" characterizes time-slip narratives, but this bond is also part of Pearce's vision of maturation; and key in her understanding of a need for a relational self in order to mature and grow up. Pearce has utilized this technique usually associated with fantastic narratives to comment on an everyday reality—the reality of growing up. In Pearce's vision, the self is "deracinated" if it is not part of a web of connections and relations with the 'other' and with "indivisible structure" and "constellation". In the time-shift technique of imaginary narratives, Pearce has found the possibility to deal with the more serious concept of developing a more mature relational identity.

A close scrutiny of the turn of events in Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden* (2008) reveals Tom's journey of maturation toward the formation of his relational self. The novel starts by Tom in "Exile". He "allowed himself to weep tears, they were tears of anger. He looked his good-bye at the garden, and raged that he had to leave it—leave it and Peter" (p. 1). Tom is banished from his home in order not to contract his brother's measles. He has to leave home to stay in the "poky" flat of his uncle Alan and aunt Gwen that "he did not much like...and he did not want to like" (p.3). In his new home, Tom is not just "cranky", but he found himself lonely and deprived of the very things he likes. Tom's entrapment in his loneliness is highlighted the moment he walked into his new room. He screamed "but there are bars across the bottom of the window! he burst out. This is a nursery! I'm not a baby" (p. 6). Tom is isolated and locked in a room and a house which are not his own. Tom's trauma is his isolation from his brother Peter and his home, and his disconnection from the people he is living with now. He is intellectually disconnected from the world he finds himself in. The house has an "empty—cold—dead heart" (p. 5), and "the books were school stories for girls, from Aunt Gwen's own childhood" (p. 7). Tom could not relate to such a world. He would tell his brother about his pain and his frustration.

He would tell Peter how miserably dull it was here, even at night: nothing to do, nowhere to go, no body—to speak of—to do things with. 'It's the worst hole I've ever been in' he wrote, in imagination. 'I'd do anything to get out of it, Peter—to be somewhere else—anywhere.' It seemed to him that his longing to be free swelled up in him and in the room, until it should surely be large enough to burst the walls and set him free indeed" (p. 13-14).

In his new home, Tom is restless and on the edge. He "had never suffered from sleeplessness before in his life," (p. 10). He tells his uncle Alan "I don't sleep!" Tom is uneasy, disturbed and restless. He 'became two persons and one of him would not go to sleep but selfishly insisted on keeping the other awake" (p. 10). Tom's loneliness and isolation are traumatic. Confused and entrapped in this small room, Tom is in discord with himself, he could not connect to the house, or to his aunt and uncle, and himself. He is far from being an integrated fuller self.

In such a disconnected and disjointed world, the only healing connection that became possible to Tom is his relationship with Hatty. Through his identification with her feelings of pain and loss, he begins not only to reconnect with another individual but to bring himself to a fuller and more complete Tom. Very early in his first encounter with Hatty, Tom is able to feel for her and identify with her pain. When he sees Hatty's pain, and hears her cry for the loss of her home, mother and father, Tom immediately identifies with her. Hatty's pain and loss remind him of his own, and in her narrative, he finds a reflection of his traumatic loneliness. He understands that he is not alone in his suffering and pain, he can see a deeper pain, and understands what it means to be cut off from the people she loves and to live as a stranger in a place she calls home. When Tom sees Hatty "in a black dress, black stockings, black shoes" with her ribbon "undone and her loose hair fell forward over her face, and her hands... up to her face... hiding it... sobbing into her hands," Tom is overwhelmed (p. 96). He questions and wonders: "Doesn't Hatty's mother know? Why doesn't Hatty's father come? He crouched and covered his face with his hands, crying out at his own powerlessness" (p. 95). We are told that "Tom had never seen a grief like this." Tom's initial reaction reveals the amount of pain he felt for Hatty, but also his unreadiness yet to assume any moral responsibility toward such pain. Overwhelmed, perplexed and perhaps lacking the experience to handle such pain, Tom "was going to tiptoe away" (p. 96), and walk away as if he never saw anything. However, the bond between both is already settled and there is "something in the child's loneliness and littleness that made him change his mind. Tom could not pretend that Hatty's pain and loss did not touch him deeply; he rather felt the need to act upon the suffering he saw and the empathy he felt, "he could not say this was none of his business" (p. 96). Simply, he could not remain cold and indifferent to Hatty. Feeling and identifying with the 'other' entail action and ethical responsibility.

Tom is very responsive to Hatty's pain. After he came to know the depth of her pain, he realized that a bit of gentleness will be like balm to her scars. "Tom knew—she had mistaken him for a cousin," and he knew that she is not a princess as she told him earlier, but he realized that there is no need to tell the orphan and "forlorn little Hatty" that he was not her cousin and confront her that she was never a princess. Tom realizes that Hatty needs her illusion more than he needs to know the truth. Hatty is too frail and too broken to deal with a needless confrontation. "Neither then nor ever after did he tease her with questions about her parents" (p.

97). Allowing Tom to share with her her personal and emotional space gave Tom the opportunity, as Wolf (1975) argues, "to connect in powerful ways... and to develop the potential for the full dimension of empathy, which is, after all, the capacity for being human" (p. 49).

In what has become known as the ghost scene, Tom develops a sort of dual-consciousness about one's own self and the other's self. Pearce is suggesting that the awareness of one self is dependent on some awareness about the other's self. As Natov (2009) explains: "developing consciousness... means learning to respect 'otherness', that there is more than one reality, that neither the self nor the other is, as Pearce metaphorically asserts, a 'ghost,' but rather that both are real" (p. 224). Immediately after the ghost scene, comes Tom's "Pursuit of Knowledge," a chapter where Tom is questioning his assumptions and convictions. Tom realizes that his reasoning "that if Hatty weren't a ghost, then perhaps that meant he was" is flawed. Therefore, he "shied away from that idea," (p. 108). The self and the 'other' are not mutually exclusive and one does not necessarily cancel out the 'other' in order to exist. Both can co-exist and share the same space in a comfortable inter-dependent relationship of mutuality and respect. When Hatty cries at Tom's attack: "You're a ghost, and I've proved it! You're dead and gone and ghost!" (p. 107), Tom started to doubt his own truth. Hatty's tears and emotions made her real for him. In the same way as he empathized with Hatty when he saw her lamenting the death of her family, Tom is able in this scene after his aggressive attack on Hatty to understand that she is real and alive as he is. "Tom was not sure of the truth after all, but only sure that Hatty was crying as he had never seen her cry since she had been a very little girl, wearing mourning-black and weeping her way along the sundial path—weeping for death so early" (p. 107). Tom's apology came very immediate: "He put his arm round her: 'All right then, Hatty! You're not a ghost—I take it all back—all of it. Only don't cry!'" (p. 107). This apology comes as a prelude to his more extensive apology at the end of the novel.

The last chapters 'Apology' and 'A Tale for Tom Long' are the chapters of reconciliation par-excellence with one momentum "we are both real; Then and Now. It's as the angel said: Time No Longer" (p. 224). This scene is a confession and a celebration of a new truth, an epiphany and a revelation for Tom; and an expression of Pearce's vision about the significance of empathy in one's growing up. Tom confesses to Hatty that he accepts her reality as he accepts his own, and that both are alive together. Both can co-exist and share a common space. It is a moment when Tom celebrates his growing up into a new Tom; he is no longer the traumatic and angry child, he came a long way from where he started split and divided to a more integrated Tom in peace with himself and with the 'other'. This exchange between Tom and Hatty where both reconcile their different realities is tender and intimate; it reveals Pearce's vision of empathy and growing up. Through his empathy towards Hatty, Tom has reconciled young age and old age, the past and the present, and fantasy and reality in a very romantic vision of harmony and accord with empathy at the very center of this vision. Through this harmony Tom actualizes his self, the other's self -- his humanness and Hatty's. Tom has a new reasoning now: "Whichever way it is, she would be no more a ghost from the Past than I would be a ghost from the Future. We're neither of us ghosts... That settles that" (p. 171). Tom manages to create a space for himself and for the 'other'. Opposed to an atomistic view of the self, Pearce does not see the possibility of a self existing without the 'other'. The subject is actualized when it transcends its own limitations and engages emotionally and intellectually in relation to other subjects. In such a connection, Tom's individuality is not threatened or erased; it is rather

enhanced and asserted. Tom's individuality remains, in diZerega's (1995) terms, "real but no more separable from the world than a whirlpool is from water" (p. 248). Pearce embraces interdependent connections and mutual reciprocity between subjects. Gusdorf's (1980) understanding of the relationship between the self and the 'other' is illuminating. "The individual does not oppose himself to all others; he does not feel himself to exist outside of others, and still less against others, but very much with others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere..." (p. 29).

"It's as the angel said: Time No longer" (p. 224). This statement seems apocalyptic, however for Tom it is a vision of unity and reconciliation. For Tom, "the three words began to seem full of enormous possibilities" (p. 165). Time as we know it, in its segments, years and months, weeks and days, hours and minutes, is destroyed. Time is no longer a separating factor of past and present, isolating one from the other. Rather, it is an eternity of now, then and after, "the hours after the twelfth do not exist in ordinary Time; they are not bound by the laws of ordinary Time; they are not over in sixty ordinary minutes; they are endless" and therefore eternal (p. 180). Time is no longer a linear device, but a Wordsworthian eternal moment of recollection; a spot light that encompasses now and then and hereafter. This is the ultimate boundary that Tom needs to break between himself and the 'other'. "I'm a Victorian," says Mrs. Bartholomew, the older Hatty, but this does not keep her and Tom apart. A fluidity of movement is already established "so that [Tom] might be able... to step back into someone else's time, in the Past... he saw it all, suddenly and for the first time, from Hatty's point of view—she might step forward into my time, which would seem the future to her, although to me it seems the Present" (p. 171). Tom's new time connects and relates past, present and future, relates the real to the fantastic, opens up extraordinary spaces within the ordinary, and brings together the self and the 'other' regardless of how different and apart they are. It is an extraordinary transcendental time within everyday hours and minutes. Tom's response to his brother Peter's exclamation: "That's not Hatty: that's a grown-up woman!" (p. 195) illustrates how Tom does not understand time in a linear manner. Though initially confused and perplexed by his brother comment, Tom tells Mrs. Bartholomew when they meet at the end of the novel: "You were Hatty – you *are* Hatty! You are really *Hatty!*" (p. 217). Tom's understanding of Time differs from his brother's. It does not matter if the young Hatty is the old Mrs. Bartholomew, the only thing that matters is that she is Hatty and she will always be Hatty. Obviously, Tom's experience of transcending time is an experience typical and unique to Tom. Only Tom is able to overcome the limitations of time and create a connecting "empathetic bond" with the 'other', regardless of how different and remote the 'other' is from him. "Time No Longer" offers Tom endless possibilities of connections and relationships with the 'other.' Pearce is not nostalgic and the past is not an escape from the present reality. As Rustin (2009) argues, her "principal commitment... is not to the past as a preferred world, but to the need to remain connected to it, in memory and relationships" (p. 212).

The 'other,' Hatty, is vital to Tom's self-realization because of the emotional bond that has developed between them: "the fear for Hatty remained greater than the fear for himself" (p. 133). Tom saw the garden through Hatty's eyes: "Hatty showed Tom many things he could not have seen for himself" (p. 74). In fact, the whole midnight garden would not have any significance without Hatty. Together they shared the carefree atmosphere of the garden, and together they climbed the trees, skated, and talked about plants and birds: "Tom could have done

nothing by himself; but when Hatty very nearly caught a fish, Tom's hand seemed one with hers in the catching" (p. 76). She opened his eyes to the nature of the garden: "You look and see nothing, and might think there wasn't a garden at all; but all the time, of course, there is, waiting for you" (p. 77). Toward the end of the novel, and as Mrs. Bartholomew, Hatty reminds him of the eternal truth of the garden. "...the garden is here. The garden will always be here, it will never change" (p. 220). Tom asks Hatty "to shoot at birds, but she refuse[s]," because she does not want to disturb the harmony of the garden. Instead, she "shot up into the air... and then screw up her eyes and watch the thin line of the arrow against the dazzling blue of the perpetual summer sky" (p. 84). Tom learns this lesson from Hatty, and later, as if not wanting to hurt the trees, tells her: "It's very wrong to carve things on trees... It's like leaving litter about" (p. 116). With Hatty, Tom learns to look deeper into things. "'This isn't big, for a river,' he said. 'And it looks shallow, and it has weeds in it,'" but Hatty reveals to him more than what he can see: "...The boys bathe in it only a little farther downstream, where there are pools, and they fish. It gets bigger as it flows downstream. It flows down the Castleford, and then it flows to Ely, and then it flows down and down into the sea, at last..." (p. 87). If we share with Pearce her symbolic understanding that, as Crouch (1977) writes, "rivers are emblems of life, moving on, changing, carrying people with them" (p. 99), then Tom is realizing that there is a truth to life beyond what he knows. Hatty "made this garden a kind of kingdom" (p. 81); she invites Tom to share with her the exalting and liberating experience of skating in the garden which becomes Tom's recurring dream. "In the end, it was Tom who slept first—slept and dreamt of skating to the world's end and the end of Time" (p. 177). Hatty gave meaning to the garden—a meaning that the garden is eternal. Without Hatty, "Tom felt among many strangers, and lonely. There was no Hatty, here and his secret fear was that there might be no Hatty anywhere" (p. 135), and perhaps no Tom at all. Tom's fear is that he is isolated and cut off again, and the mutual reciprocity that he developed with the 'other' is lost again. Tom's fear is for himself and for Hatty as well. He is not just in accord with himself and Hatty but with everything that is around him. Such a relationship with what lies outside him is key to his maturation and development. As Bryant (1997) clarifies, Pearce seems also to believe that "it is not only discourse that constructs the self, but also the people, and things to which the self relates" (p. 98). Tom discovers himself "not by turning inward, but by exploring the process of which [he] is a part" (p. 96). The self and the 'other' are not defined in a relation of tension and exclusion of each other but in a connection of mutual acknowledgement and validation of each other. Succinctly, diZerega (1995) concludes that "the most complete expression of individuality is a loving relationship with all beings" (p. 254).

Philippa Pearce in *Tom's Midnight Garden* has redefined the meaning of self and individuality. Tom's sense of individuality goes beyond himself to reach out to the 'other' and break the limitations of time and space. Tom's sense of self is not a separate and atomistic self, but rather a self in relation, in dialogue with the 'other'. Tom's self-awareness and his consciousness about the 'other' do not clash or exclude the 'other.' On the contrary, the empathetic emotional bond between him and Hatty has allowed him to free himself from the limitations imposed upon him and to gain a sense of agency. At the end of the novel, Tom is empowered; transformed and matured through such a journey, Tom is ready to go home again from his exile with a new capacity to understand himself and the 'other'.

To conclude, this paper attempted to examine Tom's relationship with the other and the importance of this relationship to Tom's growing up and emotional development. It

demonstrated how Tom had to overcome the limitations of one self, time and space to extend his empathy and understanding to Hatty in order to construct his relational and fuller self—a self that can coexist in the same space, and engage in a continuous dialogue with the other. With Hatty Tom became a new Tom; he discovered a new outlook on himself, the other, and his environment.

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