

Drawing from Imagination; or, Sara Crewe in Early to Modern Illustrations of *A Little Princess*

ENL 177: Study of Frances Hodgson Burnett

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In *A Little Princess*, the "odd-looking little girl" who moves onto the gloomy, wintry streets of London is so full of interiority that it spills into her environment: she transforms the dusty attic into a pretend-tea party, chants a bedtime story to the tired scullery-maid on the other side of the door, and charms her doll into a living, breathing being. Sara Crewe follows the footsteps of storyteller and illustrator, bringing to life other children's imaginations to discover the profound powers of pretend and play—the escapist ideal in a less-than-ideal climate. Sara's story grows from a place of wishing and "Magic"; it is important that illustrations of Sara also emphasize that wonder, empathy, and kindness within. But to actually illustrate that interiority of character, Sara's world needs to appear as an extension of her mind—her subjectivity can only subtly appear in her physicality, so the rest must appear around her, and the reader must be invited to see Sara's world not as we understand it really is from the text, but as Sara tells it in her words. Such illustrations of Sara Crewe transcend physicality when painted to represent the little girl's interiority: subtleties in facial expression, vivacity of colors on, implied body movements and size are all hands that mold Sara into the more complex child that she—and all children—are at the heart of Burnett's novel, beyond a simple, wide-eyed and "old-looking little girl."

To begin, Reginald Bathurst Birch fathered the earliest illustrations of Sara in 1888; in his rather realistic and background-focused wood-block prints, Birch creates a Sara with little depth of character, but emphasizes somewhat the dreariness of her place, her smallness and brokenness, and the unfiltered stoicism of a little girl hardened by and disengaged from her time. This is the illustrator's interpretation of Sara's sorrow: leaving little room for the imagination, Birch creates illustrations "by definition," translating the underlying grimness of Burnett's words into images that prefer an adult audience. Birch's illustrations were first published with Burnett's

short story, "Sara Crewe; or, What Happened at Miss Minchin's"—the source from which *A Little Princess* would evolve into a children's novel. The frontispiece for the book-form of the story (published in 1891) draws Sara in the middle of the dark attic, curled on a stool with her doll laying limply in her arms and her face buried into her body (fig. 1). The written scene is reprinted almost identically in *A Little Princess*—at the news of her father's death, Sara recedes into a lost child state, not crying but falling quietly into despair. But, the short story does not yet have Becky, the unassuming scullery-maid whom Sara befriends before and during her misfortune at Miss Minchin's; her absence (and all others') is felt here as Sara sits alone in the attic, without Becky's warm words of comfort, "Whats'ever 'appens to you... you'd be a princess all the same" (Burnett 70 [2002]). "Sara Crewe" writes Sara as very much alone in her plights: Sara plays and pretends primarily out of a need to cope with a jarring loneliness because she is, as the reader understands from the frontispiece, completely on her own.



Fig. 1. Reginald Bathurst Birch, wood-block print from *Sara Crewe; or, What Happened at Miss Minchin's*, 1891; frontispiece, "She laid her doll, Emily, across her knees, and put her face down upon her, and her arms around her, and sat there, not saying one word, not making one sound."

This dusty, solemn image is the reader's first introduction to Sara and, consequently, to the contents of the short story that follows. The crumpled, deflated figure, surrounded by desolate disarray and illuminated only by a skylight gridded like prison bars, creates an uncharacteristically somber mood for a children's story. Birch's illustration sets a foreboding tone, a feeling that the warm accounts of Sara and her father are only temporary facades on the true ache of Burnett's story. And this rings true very quickly: Burnett's original short story reads

darker than her later novel, consistently portraying Sara as a grieving, contrary little girl with unbound and unrelenting loneliness. Besides, in these first illustrations, the short story is only made darker and less amusing—less like a fairy tale—by Birch's style: "hatched" pen strokes which darken the surroundings, into which the black-haired and black-dressed little Sara easily disappears, or moody ink blots which darken Sara herself, emphasizing her "vulgarity" in the early edition (see fig. 2). Sara's smallness represents her ostracized place in the story, by contrast emphasizing the tenacity (or, more critically, the happy fortune) that allows her to escape it. Sara's original characterization, rooted in the dark realism of Burnett's first version of the story, thereby enhances the largeness of Sara's interiority, if only by forgetting to show it. Sara's "triumph" over poverty through pretend and play is made more real and consequential when the reader visually places Sara in a world not very different from the one off of the pages: a dingy, sorry little girl in a bigger, unforgiving world.



Fig. 2. Reginald Bathurst Birch, wood-block print from *Sara Crewe; or, What Happened at Miss Minchin's*, 1891; 15, "She slowly advanced into the parlor, clutching her doll."

The first edition of the novel *A Little Princess* (1905) would be published alongside Ethel Franklin Betts' comfortable watercolor illustrations, reimagining Sara's fairy worlds in delicate washes of color and subtly painted faces, shifting the focus from outward to inward reflection, and pulling the realism of the background to the foreground. In a happy contrast to Birch's serious reflections, Betts' art recalibrates to child eyes: her paintings—suitable artworks on their own—are driven by light and broad color spectrums, softened by the absence of harsh pen lines and thereby gentle on the eyes. The frontispiece of Betts' *A Little Princess* casts a fire's auburn

glow in the attic; Sara clutches her chest as the world around her begins to reflect her warmer dreams and stories, and the caption—"I am *not*—I am *not* dreaming!"—begins the blissful feelings of the first chapters in Sara's story, dulling the underlying seriousness that Birch sought to emphasize in "Sara Crewe" (fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Ethel Franklin Betts, watercolor painting from *A Little Princess*, 1905; frontispiece, "I am *not*—I am *not* dreaming!"

The airbrushed, subtle nature of Betts' painting appeals to the opaque, elusive nature of dreams. A pretend fairy world appears and a dream becomes reality in the warm and heartening manner of Burnett's words themselves. Departing from the muted realism of "Sara Crewe"'s attic

scene (in which Sara must remind herself, "There is nobody... nobody," besides her, Emily, and the absent "magician"), the magic in *A Little Princess* comes first from Sara's pretend play: a wish that is granted to her, the unequivocally good heroine of the story (*Sara Crewe*). Adopting the fairytale trope of physical transformation into a princess (because, in fairytales, one must already be a princess at heart), the 1905 *A Little Princess* textually distances itself from "Sara Crewe," reading more like a fantastical, magical children's story than a story about real and unconventional reality. "Suppose there was a bright fire in the grate....," Sara chants as she falls asleep, "suppose this was a beautiful soft bed, with fleecy blankets and large downy pillows. Suppose—suppose—" (Burnett 148 [2002]). In the morning, Sara's suppositions have come to life, elements drawn straight from Sara's imagination, fueled by her consumption of romantic fairytales and books. Betts illustrates these, livening and surrounding Sara with the bright colors of a natural fairy world; the paintings stray towards a more sophisticated and ideal reality, one that Sara invokes by dreaming of royal abundance and the surroundings that she, a princess—straight from a fairytale—deserves.

And yet, most of Betts' painted children have, similar to Birch, stoic and unexpressive faces. In the magic scene above, Burnett's Sara is "almost sob[ing]," "stagger[ing] to the books," and "burst[ing] into tears" (Burnett 150 [2002]). But in Betts' illustration, Sara is subdued, not so much holding in her emotions as she has none at all, looking more like her doll than a child. Similarly, in the same scene as Birch's frontispiece, Betts illustrates Sara with a stern, unfeeling look; she does not reflect the deflation and depression of Burnett's words, nor a response of mixed shock and sorrow for the sudden loss of a father (see fig. 4). Here, Sara is almost reminiscent of Birch's contrary-looking little Sara, appearing unimaginative and unempathetic;



and this apathy betrays the subtlety of Sara's childhood, the emotion and playfulness that underly her pretending, and the sorrow that shows itself when she is quite alone.



Fig. 4. Ethel Franklin Betts, watercolor painting from *A Little Princess*, 1905; 95, "She seldom cried. She did not cry now."

Though unbeknown to the little girl, Sara's humble beauty glows in Betts' plates: the comforting world in a child's mind peaks through graceful washes of colors, working still to embody Sara's temporary gloom in dark clothing and worn surroundings. But these illustrations lack the evocation of Sara's storytelling—"the power that Lavinia and certain other girls were most envious of"—and do not find the strength of Sara's interiority, which rests at the center of

Burnett's novel (Burnett 35 [2002]). They are charming pictures on their own, and in their own ways portray Sara's interiority in the brightness she accompanies to her scenes; but the little things that give Sara her humanity—her empathy, warmth and childishness—are sacrificed in that opacity.

Finally, the first picture-book adaptation of *A Little Princess*, illustrated by Barbara McClintock in 2000, is a warm requiem to Birch's petite Sara Crewe, but capitalizes on the cathartic effects of background and framing to bring Sara's inner-world out and onto full spreads of color and pen strokes. In the spirit of modern-day illustration, McClintock brings bright colors onto lavishly detailed spreads, surrounding the text with little people and decorated rooms; small sections of hatching and watercolors seem to combine the most effective parts of Birch and Betts' styles into one that livens the story, rather than subdues it. McClintock's first illustrations happily frame Sara as storyteller; the brightness of Sara's character is highlighted, and her uniqueness shines not only from her more generous clothing, but also by her movements and small, precious and cheery expressions (see fig. 5 and 6). In writing, McClintock tells, "One of the things Sara loved doing best was making up stories. When Sara told her stories, they became very real to her" (Burnett [2000]). Keeping in spirit with Betts and Burnett's novel edition of *A Little Princess*, McClintock paints Sara as a magical character from the beginning: Sara is the author of change in the story, using language as her magic to bring the children (and herself) back to life in, as Birch reminds us, an otherwise dreary and downcast place.



Fig 5. Barbara McClintock, watercolor, from *A Little Princess*, adapted and illustrated by Barbara McClintock, 2000; "One of the things Sara loved doing best was making up stories."



Fig 6. Barbara McClintock, watercolor, from *A Little Princess*, adapted and illustrated by Barbara McClintock, 2000; "She tried to leave, but Sara persuaded her to stay. She gave her cakes and tea and told her the rest of the story. It was the best evening Becky had ever had."

In this way, Sara is representative of both mother and child; she is nurturing, vibrant, expressive and moving—and it is movement especially in these illustrations which pulls the focus to Sara's force as an agent, something investigated earlier in Burnett's 1905 novel. For many of the characters, including herself, Sara's play and storytelling are actions that bring solace in darker times. In the novel scene depicted in Fig 6., Becky is physically and emotionally uplifted by Sara's generosity: "Something else had warmed and fed her, and the something else

was Sara" (Burnett, 43 [2002]). This explores a transfer and appropriation of magic: Sara's magic not only alleviates some of her own burdens (most notably, as before: loneliness), but it comforts and brings hope to those who suffer as much as, or more than, her. Although pretend and play do not themselves transform the landscape around her, they serve as temporary pockets of optimism, put in place until the real magic can happen—a magic twisted in Orientalism and fairytales, and one which, troubling as it is, is reserved only for Sara. Still, Sara brings a semblance of hope that grants children pseudo-agency: although none of them can realistically change the world, by pretending they can make it a little brighter and more comfortable for themselves until, as adults, they can be the ones enacting the magic. So, faithful to these characters' hopefulness and emotionality, McClintock's adaptation infuses Sara with the brightness and comfort that a child's imagination brings to her surroundings.

And even in glum scenes of hardship, McClintock's illustrations do not shy away from picturing Sara as a suffering child, one with subtle and sorrowful expressions that do not have to manifest into loud tantrums and crying fits to be evocative. During her first night in the attic, McClintock's Sara is hugging her doll tightly on a rickety bed, receding into a "hatched" darkness—reminiscent of Birch—donning dark clothes in a pure wash of black (fig. 7). Her pained expression, curled and closed pose, paired with the bareness of an old surrounding, evokes the quiet, simply sad emotion of a mourning child, no longer precious but neglected—another fairytale-like transformation. The subtle changes in "mournful Sara" alternatively bolster up the powers of "princess Sara" because she is made more human by them. While Birch's illustrations (as representative of the early "Sara Crewe") omit Sara's inner beauty; and Betts' paintings, though intrinsically beautiful, avoid the more vulnerable side of Sara; McClintock balances Sara's interiority, which teeters between budding emotional maturity and childish

thoughts and behaviors, likening Sara more to a real, complex child. McClintock's Sara becomes a figure that child readers admire and desire to be—inviting real "pretend" play—just like she is in the story. Bringing the character's interiority to life in colorful, animated spreads brings Burnett's story to life in the way one can imagine Sara would want it to: inspiring, imaginative, and "very real."



Fig 7. Barbara McClintock, watercolor, from *A Little Princess*, adapted and illustrated by Barbara McClintock, 2000; "Once she was alone in her attic room, Sara sat quietly. Memories of her father flooded her mind. One tear came, then another, and finally Sara cried as she'd never cried before."

Illustrations have recently begun to be understood as creating their own heritage,<sup>1</sup> born from the author's *as much as their illustrator's* original words and images, and becoming more like amalgamations of their predecessor images than pure representations of the author's first words. It is true that in *A Little Princess*, illustrators routinely return to the scene of little Sara's first night in the attic, donning a too-small black dress that so easily lets her slip away and disappear into the background. Illustrations, moreover, are shaped also by their surrounding context—not just the author's words, but the social, economic, and cultural contexts that surround the illustrator as they draw the scenes. McClintock's modern adaptation draws a more careful understanding of Sara as both a little girl and a human being, a sentiment—absent in Birch—that grows as interest in children's learning grows. Similarly, Betts' paintings are mixed with the naturalistic qualities of Art Nouveau and interior interests of Post-Impressionism, art movements circulating and overlapping at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> Still, the intentions of children's book illustrations are conceivably to represent the story and its intricate characters—to give life in a second form. Burnett's *Little Princess*, Sara, so prominent in writing but so easy to lose in busy and brighter backgrounds, has such a strong subjectivity that she demands to be heard—and seen—in more ways than just curved letters. Sara, the odd-looking little girl—never really odd-looking in pictures—is granted enough magic by her creators that she can transcend the page, spark a fire in the imagination, and brighten the world for herself, her friends, and her young readers, years into a future she could really only dream of.

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<sup>1</sup> A sentiment expressed in Elizabeth Lauer's article on her work archiving illustrations of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*; see Lauer 49.

<sup>2</sup> The beginnings and ends of art movements are unfixed and generally interpreted by art historians, but for a general, condensed timeline, see "Art History Timeline: Western Art Movements and Their Impact."

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