

Fountains of Youth: Wendy Darling, Winnie Foster, and Bella Swan

In his first incarnation in J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*, when Peter Pan decides he never wants to grow up and flies out of his nursery window, he alights on an island in the Serpentine River that turns out to be a kind of fountain of life, where the wise old crow Solomon receives requests from mothers who want babies, and sends out birds-who-will-be-babies to fulfill those requests. In later incarnations, Peter tempts Wendy Darling to join him in eternal youth, promising she can be both child and mother forever, but eventually loses her to the call of home and family and a normal life. In Natalie Babbitt's *Tuck Everlasting*, when Winnie Foster is only ten years old, Jesse Tuck—who is either seventeen or 104, depending on how you look at it—invites her to drink from another fountain of life and join him in eternal youth. To the disappointment of many readers, Winnie too chooses a normal life, as we learn from the tombstone that identifies her as wife and mother. In Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* saga, Edward Cullen's blood is the fountain of life for Bella Swan, who, despite his misgivings, chooses to join her immortal beloved in eternal youth, in a memorable scene that also ends in her entrance into motherhood.

My talk will consider the varying significations of eternal youth and fountains of life in these three widely acclaimed narratives. I will contend that the critique of Romantic conceptualizations of childhood embedded in the hint of tragedy in Peter's eternal childhood comes to the fore in the decision of Winnie Foster to reject the offer of a drink from the fountain of life from her own Peter-like would-be suitor. I will explore the ways in which the *Twilight* saga both echoes the gendered pattern of the previous eternal-boy-tempts-mortal-girl narratives *and* reverses the outcome of that drama. I will speculate about the interesting trajectory towards motherhood for Wendy, Winnie, and Bella. Finally, I will suggest that in *Twilight*'s echo and reversal, something of great value gets lost: an awareness that the desire for eternal youth(s) amounts to preferring dead children over live ones who will inevitably grow and leave childhood behind.