P. L. Travers

Are Mary Poppins and Mr. Banks the parents she always wanted?

B.A. Essay

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to explore how the author P. L. Travers used character traits from her mother and aunt to create a mother figure. This mother figure then appears in the character of Mary Poppins. The essay will also explore how Travers used her father to create Mr. Banks: a father that she always desired. With the application of psychoanalytic theory, particularly by employing Freudian terms like displacement, projection, sublimation and transference, a connection can be made between these individuals and the colorful characters of Travers's books. In order to establish these connections, five of the Mary Poppins books are reviewed. Many examples from these books show that some traits of the actual people in Travers's life are used in both a positive and negative way as parts of Travers's feelings and defense mechanisms. Since Travers had a difficult upbringing it is significant in this essay to demonstrate the connection she had with her parents. Travers's relationship with her mother was troubled and tangled. But regardless of that Travers felt inspired to use her relationship with her mother to create a new mother figure. While this difficult bond existed between Travers and her mother, the loss of her father at the age of seven is also a significant issue. Through her childhood she lacked a father figure and she was always in search of someone who could fill the fatherless void in her heart. In the end she had to create this father figure herself. Travers did however have support from her Aunt Ellie which later turned out to be critical and inspirational for her writing career. It is also interesting that Travers projects herself into the books about Mary Poppins, endorsing her complicated relationships with her parents and aunt. Moreover, the essay sheds light upon why Travers makes Mary Poppins a governess by mirroring her own desires for a more orderly upbringing.
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1. Introduction

What would have been a child’s dream in the early 20th century? A new toy? A trip to the zoo? Or perhaps a flying, magical nanny? The last option certainly seems to be the most exciting one. The fantasy of a magical nanny was created by the author P. L. Travers. Travers wanted to create a character unlike any other. A character that swept in with the east wind and established order where there was chaos, using different and often questionable methods to do so. As a result, the character of Mary Poppins was born.

Mary Poppins represents something different, something dreamlike. She is able to create adventures for children in a blink of an eye even though it seems at times she may not be particularly enthusiastic herself. But what makes her so alluring despite her distant and even cold attitude? The answer is that it is her way of making order out of chaos and chaos out of order. It is her way of changing the world most people know and turning it upside down. The creation of such a character seems to be puzzling. How does one in the early twentieth century get the idea to create a woman who has all the power and all the control? Perhaps a powerful woman was not the aim of the author, P. L. Travers. Perhaps she only wanted to make a character that could help her handle her difficult upbringing. In a similar way there is another character in the Mary Poppins books that shows how Travers’s childhood memories had an impact on her writing. That character is Mr. Banks, the busy patriarch of the Banks family.

The author P. L. Travers, otherwise known as Helen Lyndon Goff, was born on 9 August 1899 in Maryborough, Australia. She is mostly known for her books about the magical nanny Mary Poppins but she also wrote poetry and other literary works. Like many authors before and after her time, Travers used a number of her personal experiences to create the character of Mary Poppins and Mr. Banks. For example, her parents had a strong influence on her writing. Her father, Travers Robert Goff, was an alcoholic and died at an early age of forty-three. Her mother, Margaret Goff, had a hard time accepting his death and attempted suicide. Travers also had a strong role model in her aunt Ellie, who became a second mother to her. These persons and events had a major impact on Travers which can be seen in her stories about Mary Poppins.
Five books by Travers about Mary Poppins will be used to demonstrate autobiographical elements from Travers’s life. These books are *Mary Poppins* (1934), *Mary Poppins Comes Back* (1935), *Mary Poppins Opens the Door* (1943), *Mary Poppins in the Park* (1952) and *Mary Poppins and the House Next Door* (1989). By psycho-analyzing Travers’s life and using examples from these books it will be demonstrated that the character of Mary Poppins represents the mother figure she never had and how Mr. Banks represents the father she always wanted.

The first chapter of this essay explores Travers's mother and how she can be connected to the creation of the character of Mary Poppins. Examples from the Mary Poppins books and Travers’s experiences with her mother will be used as well as Freudian analysis, principally the theory of displacement. The same method but this time with sublimation will be used in the second chapter on Travers's aunt, Ellie. The third chapter moves on to the role of the governess and why Travers chose that role for her mother figure. The concept of transference will be used to establish the connection between Travers's mother and aunt, and the governess. The last chapter is about Travers’s father and how her lack of a father figure affected her. It will demonstrate with the theory of sublimation how Mr. Banks is the father she wished she had.
2. The Real Mother: Margaret Goff

To be a good mother requires some different qualities. Most would say that it includes being caring, attentive, warm and supportive. As a mother Margaret Goff did not have these qualities and this deficit made an impact on Travers for life. Travers wished for a different kind of mother. She wished for a mother who could sit down and talk to her and she imagined that it would be great if there “was another mother in the house, someone as nice and sweet smelling as her, but funny too” (Lawson 142). Travers never got her wish fulfilled.

By looking into the relationship Travers had with her mother it is possible to connect certain attributes her mother had with the character of Mary Poppins. Examples from the books will show how despite their difficult relationship, Travers used her mother as an inspiration.

2.1 A Difficult Mother and Daughter Relationship

It seems fitting to know a little more about Margaret Goff before her connection to Mary Poppins is revealed. Margaret did not have an easy upbringing and came from a Scottish family. After the death of her father she was torn between her mother and grandfather. In the end she lived with her grandfather until he died. After his death she lived with her aunt Helen, whom she called aunt Ellie (Lawson 21).

On November 9th in 1889 Margaret married Travers Robert Goff, a banker at the time. Nine months later Travers was born. She was named Helen Lyndon Goff, after her maternal great-grandmother and her great aunt. She was always called Lyndon, which was an Irish name, by her family (Lawson 23).

As a mother, Margaret was very caught up in her own self-importance but she also “taught her children self-sufficiency and subservience” (Lawson 26). This cold attitude toward the children must have had an effect on them. They did not get the warm parenting environment that they yearned for and needed. Then it got worse when Travers Goff passed away, leaving Margaret alone with three children to take care of. She did not find the strength to take care of the children on her own. As a result, Margaret became desperate and even attempted suicide:
One night when Lyndon was about eleven, her mother turned in anguish from her children and rushed from the house threatening to drown herself in the creek. She had not recovered from her husband’s death and knew no one well enough to share the pain. (Lawson 53)

Travers alone with her two sisters waited for what was to come. Her mother returned soaking wet and what an impact that must have had on the girls. But because she was not successful in her attempt or perhaps because she did not want to kill herself in the first place, Margaret did not try anything like this again and tried to be supportive for the girls.

Despite Travers’s difficult relationship to her mother she dedicated her first book about Mary Poppins, published in 1934, to Margaret. This demonstrates that regardless of how Margaret behaved towards her daughter, Travers was fond of her and took her was deeply affected by her death.

2.2 Is Mary Poppins a Part of Travers’s Defense Mechanisms?
In order to explain how Travers connects her mother to the creation of Mary Poppins, examples will be used from Freudian analysis, mainly the idea about displacement. This term will be better explained as the chapter progresses. Because of the difficult relationship that Travers and her mother had, Travers created Mary Poppins as a function of her defense mechanism, in order to combat the anxiety she felt towards her mother. The idea of defense mechanisms comes from Freud and can be defined like this:

In order to deal with conflict and problems in life, Freud stated that the ego employs a range of defense mechanisms. Defense mechanisms operate at an unconscious level and help ward off unpleasant feelings (i.e. anxiety) or make good things feel better for the individual. (McLeod Defense Mechanisms)

The idea of defense mechanisms can also be explained as such that on an unconscious level they protect the individual from painful emotions, ideas and drives. Vaillant uses five ways to describe defense mechanisms. Firstly, that those
defenses are a major means of managing instinct and affect. Secondly, that they are unconscious. Thirdly, they are discrete (from one another). Fourthly, although often the hallmarks of major psychiatric syndromes, defenses are dynamic and reversible. And finally that they can be adaptive as well as pathological (Vaillant 3-4).

There are different kinds of defense mechanisms that people have, for example projection, denial, sublimation, repression and displacement. These mechanisms can work together or separately. In Travers's case, it can be said that displacement, sublimation and even projection are part of her defense mechanisms.

First, we should look at displacement. Displacement means that a person satisfies an impulse with a substitute object. So Travers does not have very warm feelings towards her mother, and this results in her creating a character or an object in a story that replaces her mother. By creating this other mother figure, Travers sets out to use different qualities from her mother, and merges them together in the character of Mary Poppins.

In the first book about Mary Poppins, *Mary Poppins*, there are several examples that indicate that Travers had used her mother's characteristics to create Mary Poppins. For example when Mary Poppins and the Banks children, Jane and Michael, visit Mr. Wigg. Mr. Wigg is Mary Poppins's uncle and it is his birthday when they go to visit him. Because it is his birthday, he is floating in the air laughing and happy. Soon the children join him up in the air and Mary Poppins flies after them. At the end of the day Mary Poppins wants to go home and demands that the children come down. Here Mary Poppins literally pulls the children back to reality.

In a similar way Travers's mother was realistic while Travers herself was the one flying about with her imagination as child. Her mother however would sometimes take part in her imaginative games, like for example when Travers was playing a hen and laying eggs (Grilli 32-33). But after her husband's death it appears that Margaret had no interest in playing more games with her children. Travers was forced to grow up and take care of her sisters.

Another trait Mary Poppins has from Travers's mother is discretion. At the end of the first chapter in the first three books, Travers stresses the fact that Mary Poppins never reveals anything:
“But nobody ever knew what Mary Poppins felt about it, for Mary Poppins never told anything.” *Mary Poppins* 21

“But what Mary Poppins thought about it nobody ever knew, for she kept her thoughts to herself and never told anyone anything.” *Comes Back* 161

“But what Mary Poppins hoped, none of them knew. For Mary Poppins, as everyone knows, never told anyone anything.” *Opens the Door* 355

By stressing this in the first chapters of the books, Travers is reflecting how she never got any information from her mother. Travers was frustrated at her mother for doing this and by making Mary Poppins behave in the same manner she is able to let her frustration show through which fits with Freud’s idea of displacement.

In the fourth book however, *Mary Poppins in the Park*, Mary Poppins almost explains to the children which children belong in a story. “It seemed to tremble on her lips. The words were on the tip of her tongue. And then – she changed her mind. Perhaps she remembered that Mary Poppins never told anyone anything” *In the Park* 612. Travers as a young girl had a vivid imagination and was always seeking answers for various questions. She did not get them from her mother or father which made her irritated all the way into her adulthood. And this is exactly how the reader feels when reading about Mary Poppins. Mary Poppins never gives any explanations for the wild adventures happening around her. In fact, she mostly acts as if they never happened at all.

A final example on how Travers pictures her relationship with her mother is when Travers projects herself onto the character of Jane in the book *Mary Poppins Comes Back*. Projection is another defense mechanism involving individuals attributing their own unacceptable thoughts, feeling and motives to another person or in this case a character in a story.

A whole chapter demonstrates how Travers felt towards her mother as a child. Jane can be seen here as Travers and Mary Poppins as Travers’s’s mother. The first indication that Travers uses Jane as a childlike mirror image of herself is when Jane wakes up and wants to be a bird laying eggs. Mary Poppins interrupts her and Jane becomes very cross with her. Mary Poppins also repeats that Jane is the eldest
and therefore needs to do everything first and be a role model for her siblings. Jane’s frustration with this is clear: “But I don’t want to be the eldest. Why can’t Michael be the eldest sometimes? ‘Because you were born first – see?’ ‘Well, I didn’t ask to be. I’m tired of being born first. I wanted to think’” (Comes Back 183). Travers was very tired of being the eldest. She had all the responsibility but none of the fun. She needed to take care of her sisters and therefore did not have much time to make up stories and adventures.

Jane misbehaves and does not want to go to a party with Mary Poppins and her siblings. She stays at home, ending up breaking the Royal Doulton Bowl which stood on the mantelpiece. The boys on the bowl come to life and fool her into stepping inside the bowl. She gets trapped in the bowl and it is not until Mary Poppins saves her that she realizes how much she cares for Mary Poppins and her family. “‘It couldn’t have been I who was cross,’ she said to herself. ‘It must have been somebody else.’ And she sat there wondering who the Somebody was” (Comes Back 198). When Jane realizes that she is in fact very fond of her family it reflects Travers’s difficult relationship with her mother. Like most children she loved her mother and perhaps she was forced to be ambiguous about her feelings to her. On the one hand her mother made her grow up very fast. On the other hand, Travers was a young child who had to rely on her unstable mother. So Jane uses ‘Somebody’ as an excuse for her behavior because in fact she did not want to act this way. This is probably how Travers felt when she was forced to be an adult and a child at the same time. By projecting herself in Jane, Travers can express her feelings and frustrations that she felt as child in a brilliant way.
3. Aunt Ellie

Now that a connection has been made between Travers’s mother and Mary Poppins, a closer look will be taken at the relationship Travers had with her aunt Ellie. Aunt Ellie was a second mother to Travers. She was in many ways like Margaret but it can be said that aunt Ellie was more reliable and a safe haven for Travers. This was the result of aunt Ellie learning early in her life “how to become the matriarch and mothering nanny of the family” (Lawson 19). By looking closer at aunt Ellie in addition to examples from the books, it can be seen that aunt Ellie was one of Travers’s biggest inspirations for Mary Poppins. Furthermore, by looking at Freud’s idea of sublimation it can be seen how Travers used aunt Ellie to represent her idea of a good mother figure.

3.1 A Second Mother

From an early age Travers was frequently sent to aunt Ellie when her mother or father went away (Lawson 24). Travers went to her aunt by train and she would like to think that “Ellie sent the train herself. It was her own carriage taking her to the haven of a fairy godmother” (Lawson 30). It appears that Travers was in a way fonder of aunt Ellie than her own mother. Seeing her as a fairy godmother might suggest that staying with aunt Ellie was more desirable despite aunt Ellie’s strict manners.

After Travers’s father died, Margaret moved to aunt Ellie. Aunt Ellie was generous to Margaret’s children. For example, she paid for their education and insisted that Travers went to a proper school (Lawson 56). Later on she also paid for Travers’s travels which enabled Travers to travel from Australia to England (Lawson 79). But aunt Ellie was also a complex woman:

She was the stabilizing force in young Travers’s life, the one who stepped in and set things right that had gone wrong. She was also a woman full of contradictions. At any moment, she could be harsh or loving, humble or proud, but regardless of her moods, she always had Travers’s best interests at heart. (Brody 34-35)
Therefore, aunt Ellie became a role model for Travers. Travers looked up to her but perhaps she was also forced to do so, because of her difficult relationship with her mother. By being a second mother to Travers, aunt Ellie had a tremendous effect on her. She not only gave Travers emotional support, but she also supported her financially, enabling her to become a writer. It is no surprise that when Travers created Mary Poppins, she used aunt Ellie as her biggest inspiration.

### 3.2 The Sublime Aunt Ellie

The relationship between Travers and aunt Ellie was different to the relationship which Travers had with her mother. So in the case of aunt Ellie it can be said that Travers wanted to honor aunt Ellie in Mary Poppins, using aunt Ellie’s most distinctive qualities. Instead of using the idea of displacement the term sublimation better fits Travers’s feelings towards aunt Ellie.

This is because displacement and projection are “employed unconsciously by the mental ego to ward off or transform thoughts or feelings that are threatening to it” (Washburn 135). However, they are not just defensive. “They can also be coping mechanisms that are genuinely adaptive and, in some cases, at least partially independent of their initial defensive purpose” (Washburn 136). This means that defense mechanisms can also be positive, and this applies to sublimation. The definition of sublimation is similar to displacement. However, the difference is that with sublimation we “manage to displace our emotions into a constructive rather than destructive activity” (McLeod Defense Mechanisms).

Examples from the books show that aunt Ellie vividly comes to life through Mary Poppins, not only in her sayings but also in her appearance. In the first book, *Mary Poppins*, the reader is introduced to Mary Poppins for the first time. Straight away aunt Ellie’s characteristics are seen “Then, with a long, loud sniff that seemed to indicate that she had made up her mind, she said: ‘I’ll take the position’” (*Mary Poppins* 17). Travers took Mary Poppins’s sniffing from aunt Ellie, who used to sniff and put her nose in the air. Mary Poppins sniffs regularly throughout all the books.

Mary Poppins also uses a phrase that aunt Ellie used on Travers and her sisters. She would tell them to go “‘Spit-spot into bed’” (*Mary Poppins* 19). Mary Poppins uses this phrase practically every time she is putting the Banks children to bed. By using this phrase from aunt Ellie, Travers has made her aunt immortalized
through her books. This shows how much she looked up to her aunt Ellie and how important she was for her upbringing.

Moreover, Mary Poppins does not just use aunt Ellie’s phrases but the two women also behave in a similar manner and own the same objects. Lawson says:

Ellie, a spinster who lived with her two little dogs in Sydney, was a martinet, carried a carpetbag and when children came to stay, she gave them lessons in etiquette, suffered no nonsense and instructed them to “Spit spot into bed!” (Lawson “8 Things You Didn’t Know”)

The magical carpet bag is one of Mary Poppins’s trademarks. The carpet bag seems to be empty when Jane and Michael look into it, but when Mary Poppins needs something, everything she desires is at hand:

And with that she took out from the empty bag a starched white apron and tied it round her waist. Next she unpacked a large cake of Sunlight Soap, a toothbrush, a packet of hairpins, a bottle of scent, a small folding armchair and a box of throat lozenges. Jane and Michael stared. (Mary Poppins 18)

The carpet bag represents one of Mary Poppins’s mysteries turning her into a magical being for whom all is possible. Perhaps when Travers was a child she found her aunt Ellie’s bag a magical thing. She was probably not allowed to touch it or look into it, and with her vivid imagination she could imagine all the things that lay in it.

Another example for the similar behavior between Mary Poppins and aunt Ellie is when Mary Poppins goes Christmas shopping with the Banks children. Mary Poppins has a pair of new fur lined gloves and she is always buying something new and admiring herself in the mirror. When she gives her new gloves to Maia, one of the stars from the sky, she is showing tremendous generosity. In the same way aunt Ellie was very generous to Travers and her sisters, buying them gifts and paying for schools and travel. It is a little example like this that demonstrates how aunt Ellie was strict but at the same time very generous.
These examples demonstrate that Travers wanted to draw out her aunt’s qualities that were precious to her. They are more apparent than those of her mother, and this shows how Travers wanted to display her emotions about aunt Ellie in a positive way. This fits to the idea of sublimation and how Travers elevated her aunt to a higher standing.

In addition in wanting to make her aunt stand out, Travers also wrote a chapter including her in the role of Michael and aunt Ellie being Mary Poppins. Again Travers is projecting herself but this time she is expressing her relationship with her aunt. In this particular chapter, aunt Ellie’s attitude towards children’s behavior is made quite clear when Michael decides one day to misbehave. He is happy doing naughty things, such as kicking the housemaid Ellen and the cook Mrs. Brill. Michael is even naughty to Mary Poppins. Then when they are all walking together outside they find a compass which belongs to Mary Poppins. They go North, South, East and West, meeting curious, talking animals on their travels. After this adventure Michael becomes even naughtier and Mary Poppins warns him that “You’ve got something coming to you!” (Mary Poppins 71). And that is exactly what happens when Michael is getting ready for bed. He finds the compass and quickly calls out all the cardinal directions. He is in for a nasty surprise when all the animals return to his room and they do not look happy. He feels as if they are suffocating him and he calls out for Mary Poppins to save him. After she saves him he does not feel naughty anymore.

This naughty episode with Michael reveals that children should behave or else they will be punished. Beautiful furry animals that were once friendly become hostile and cruel. And that was a lesson that Travers learned from her aunt Ellie. Aunt Ellie was very strict concerning behavior and would not tolerate any naughtiness. By projecting herself into Michael, Travers makes the point come across very vividly, portraying how her relationship with aunt Ellie was and how it helped her with her writing career and life. And perhaps Travers is also making another point, that if children do as their parents say everything will be in order. This kind of order Travers lacked from her mother and father, but her aunt provided it.


4. The Governess

The connections her mother and aunt Ellie had with Mary Poppins have been established but that leaves the question of why Travers wanted to make her mother figure a governess. It was actually a very clever idea by Travers to make Mary Poppins a governess. In the role of governess, Mary Poppins is able to be unusually independent for her era, whilst at the same time being represented as a motherly figure. By merging together different qualities from her mother and aunt Ellie in a governess, Travers was able to create a character that had different responsibilities to those that an actual mother had. Because Mary Poppins is not the mother of the Banks children she can allow herself different things despite being responsible for their upbringing. Travers had found the perfect setting, or rather occupation, to bring the mother she wanted to life.

4.1 The Role of the Governess

To understand why Travers made Mary Poppins a governess, it is helpful to take a quick look at what being a governess entailed. In the early twentieth century it became more popular among middle class people to take on a governess for their children, and before that only the upper classes were able to pay for such a luxury.

To be a governess was thought to be suitable work for single middle class women. It gave them a certain amount of independence and gave them a status as a lady. Even though governesses had to work for money, their work took place in a private sphere and was therefore acceptable as a profession for a single woman. The main duty of the governess was to look after children of both sexes and to instruct girls in their role as young ladies (Holloway 38).

Since the role of the governess was to take care of the children, her status within the household became complicated. The closeness to the family separated her from other servants of the household (Grilli 121). She was therefore often torn between family members and servants, not belonging with anyone else but the children. It was therefore hard to place the governess in the social order of things:
In addition to low pay was the indignity of being too low in status to be part of the family and too high to participate in servant life. Consequently, the governess lived in lonely isolation, taking meals with the children and often undertaking other domestic work such as mending and nursing. (Holloway 39)

The different ranking between the servants can be seen in the Mary Poppins books when Mary Poppins shows her discontent against the cook Mrs. Brill and the housemaid Ellen. Mary Poppins is very sure of herself and feels superior to them both. But Mrs. Brill and Ellen are also not very fond of Mary Poppins. “A heart of stone, that’s what that girl had and no mistake, or my name’s not Clara Brill. Always keeping herself to herself, too, and not even a lace handkerchief or a hatpin to remember her by” (Mary Poppins 135). Here Mrs. Brill is very dissatisfied with the fact that Mary Poppins hardly interacted with her. She did not even give her a present when she left, displaying the gap between Mary Poppins and the other servants in the Bank household. What is more, Mary Poppins seems to be responsible for this gap. After Mary Poppins returns for the second time her superiority is once again demonstrated when Mrs. Brill manages to set fire to the kitchen and Ellen hurts her leg. The two of them do not seem qualified to handle their jobs properly. So Mary Poppins sweeps in on a kite perfect in her role as the governess making everything orderly once again.

Furthermore, the governess’s main role as the children’s care giver was to establish order and discipline. A regular routine was very important and gave the governess the opportunity to distance herself from the children. We see the routine of the governess very clearly in Mary Poppins when she wakes up the children, gives them breakfast, puts them to bed and so on. She does this in a strict manner, not allowing the children to misbehave or argue with her. It rarely happens in the books that Jane and Michael determinedly disobey her.

The role of the governess was also to teach and for many middle-class families this was the only way for their children to get education (Jordan 68). This side of Mary Poppins we don’t see often in the books. There is never a scene where she is actually teaching the children. This might be connected to the fact that Travers never got any answers or information that she craved from her parents.
She was supposed to figure things out for herself and that is mirrored in the fact that Michael and Jane also never get any answers.

It is also interesting to note that the talents that the governess should have are very masculine in nature. Discipline, independence, order, respect from children and even teaching are attributes more connected to men at the time then women. This masculine nature of the governess could be one of the reasons that Travers chose to make Mary Poppins a governess. Otherwise Mary Poppins would not been able to answer Mr. and Mrs. Banks in a rough manner or take care of the children in her own way. These masculine attributes could also represent Travers's desire for an orderly life which she herself never had.

It seems, therefore, that Mary Poppins follows most of the rules of the job, and fulfills most of the roles that a governess should. She maintains strict discipline, distinguishes herself from other household servants and keeps emotional distance from the children. Her role should also involve teaching them but that is rare in the books. Her teaching is perhaps more involved in giving them life lessons through the adventures than formal teaching in the nursery. With all these qualities the governess Mary Poppins becomes the best way for Travers to create a mother figure.

4.2 The Governess Replacing the Mother?
Travers’s lack of a strong mother figure enabled her to combine her mother and aunt Ellie into one character. By using the governess she created a mother that she herself desired, a mother who produced a safe environment where the children could be children. This was lacking in Travers’s life after the death of her father.

Travers was in fact writing about an idealized family life that she never knew or had (The Secret Life of Mary Poppins). Because Mary Poppins replaces Mrs. Banks in a way as a mother she automatically becomes a mother figure to the Banks children. Therefore, it is easy for Travers to mirror her own yearnings through the Banks children, which she often does as can been seen when Jane and Michael misbehave. With those occasions, as has been previously mentioned, she has projected herself in the roles of Jane and Michael, displaying how she feels towards her mother and aunt Ellie.
A governess like Mary Poppins would never replace a mother but she had duties that the mother could avoid. By letting the governess take care of the children, the mother would have had more free time for her herself and other duties in the household. By putting the pressure of bringing up the children into the hands of the governess she was in a way escaping from the responsibility of disciplining her children. However, the mother was still in charge and decided who was qualified to bring up the children.

It is possible to imagine that Travers wanted Mary Poppins to be a governess because she did not find in her mother and aunt the motherly affection she needed. Perhaps she was more excited about the idea of creating a governess then a mother because the role of the governess fitted her earlier life better. After all, her mother and aunt were more like governesses in manner than mothers. That can explain why Mary Poppins took on the role of the governess.

To understand better why Travers used her mother and aunt Ellie in creating the governess Mary Poppins the term transference can be used:

Transference is a concept that refers to our natural tendency to respond to certain situations in unique, predetermined ways—predetermined by much earlier, formative experiences usually within the context of the primary attachment relationship. These patterns, deeply ingrained, arise sometimes unexpectedly and unhelpfully—in psychoanalysis, we would say that old reactions constitute the core of a person’s problem, and that he or she needs to understand them well in order to be able to make more useful choices. Transference is what is transferred to new situations from previous situations. (“Contributions of Psychoanalysis”) In other words, Travers redirects her feelings about these two women onto Mary Poppins. This connection from displacement and sublimation to transference might seem peculiar in relation to a character in book. Usually this connection is made from person to person. But considering the strong characteristics of Travers’s mother and aunt in Mary Poppins, especially the aunt, it is not all that impossible to imagine that Travers was transferring her feelings and experiences over to Mary Poppins. Travers has never really explained how and why she created
Mary Poppins, stating that she just came out of the blue. That is hard to imagine since our past and childhood has of course tremendous effects on our adult life. And Mary Poppins has too much in common with the two women for this connection to be ignored.
5. Travers’s Lack of a Father Figure

Leaving Mary Poppins behind it is now time to take a short look on Travers’s father and Mr. Banks. Margaret Goff and aunt Ellie had an impact on Travers as female role models for the character of Mary Poppins. In a similar way, Travers’s father was one of the main inspirations for Mr. Banks. Even though Travers Goff died when Travers was seven years old, he was always in her mind. Her mother never remarried and therefore she never had another male role model in her life until she was an adult. She was always seeking someone who could fill the void her father left in her heart. When Travers created Mr. Banks, she used some elements from her father which is evidence of his deep impact on her and her writing. The use of her father in Mary Poppins can be considered as an example of sublimation as in the case of aunt Ellie.

5.1 The Harsh Life of Travers Goff

Travers’s father, Travers Goff, was born in London 1863. He had Irish connections and considered himself an Irishman. In the year 1891 he moved to the colony of Queensland, Australia. By 1898 he had settled in Maryborough, Australia where he joined the Australian Joint Stock Bank (Lawson 16).

Goff was a bank manager and because of his drinking and the struggling Australian economy, he was demoted to bank clerk and transferred several times. His last transfer was in the year 1907 when his drinking was obvious to his family and his employers. He spent a day riding in the rain and became seriously ill with high temperature. On the third day of his illness he passed away and his cause of death was said to be epileptic seizure delirium (Lawson 45).

Goff’s character and behavior can be described as being very two dimensional. On one hand he was a dreamer, thinking and romanticizing about Ireland. On the other hand he was distant and could be harsh when he had been drinking (Lawson 27). He did not seem to be satisfied with his life and drinking was his way of handling it. He could barely make ends meet and felt the constant pressure to support his family (Brody 2-3).

He was also hard on Travers because, as she later described she “was never sure whether her father would respond to her mishaps with a joke or an explosion. But she knew he might do something worse: dismiss her with ridicule” (Lawson
This seems to be a peculiar behavior towards a child trying to please her parents. However, it did have the effect that Travers thought carefully about her writings, experimenting with poems until finally settling down with prose narrative. That could also have been the reason why she inserted so much of her father into Mr. Banks.

5.2 Travers Goff and Mr. Banks

With sublimation Travers uses the memory of her father in a constructive way in the creation of Mr. Banks. Even though Mr. Banks does not take a leading role in the stories, he has a meaningful role in the Mary Poppins books. The books start with him being unhappy and angry and end when he is happy and at ease with life. In the first book, Mary Poppins, he is the one indicating that the wind is changing. He is the first one to realize that something is about to change. But he also has no time to find a new nanny and leaves that issue to his wife. Like Lawson says “Mr. Banks is the patriarch of the family who is so obsessed with his working life that he doesn’t have much time for his children” (Lawson “8 Things You Didn’t Know”).

It is also made clear in the first book that Mr. Banks works in a bank making money. Therefore Mr. Banks has the same profession as Travers’s father. The connection here between the two men is clear. By making Mr. Banks mostly appear in the beginning and at the end of the books, Travers is connecting her own father to the story as a storyteller. Her own father used to tell her many stories and perhaps she is writing the books about Mary Poppins as if he were saying them. The connection Travers had with her father, despite her young age, seem to have evoked in her a longing to keep one of his most memorable qualities alive: storytelling.

Another characteristic that the two men have in common is Mr. Banks’s frustration at having to have to support his family, as can been seen in Mary Poppins Opens the Door. In the beginning of the book he is angry as usual and nothing seems to go his way. He repeatedly says what he would have done if he were not married. He feels as if he is not important to his family and that he is only there to pay the bills. This is exactly how Travers’s father felt. He thought he was not providing enough for his family and he was dreaming about traveling and Ireland. Instead of working harder for his family he embraced the bottle.
Similarly, Travers’s father was discreet like her mother. He wanted the girls to find out their own answers for their various questions. Travers was not satisfied when her parents did not provide her with an answer but she also depicts her father’s frustration in *Mary Poppins Opens the Door* “Mr. Banks looked at her angrily. What stupid children I’ve got, he thought. Can’t understand a figure of speech!” (420). As Travers said herself:

> It was clear from their general attitude that our parents had no very high opinion of our intelligence, but at the same time, apparently, they expected us to know everything. We were left, each on our desert (but by no means unfruitful) island, to work things out for ourselves. (qtd. in Grilli 34)

However the finest connection between Travers Goff and Mr. Banks is in *Mary Poppins and the House Next Door*. The story revolves around one theme: the house next door to the Banks being sold. And Mr. Banks along with the other neighbors is extremely dissatisfied with this. The house has been empty for years and Mr. Banks would like it to stay that way because he finds it is necessary “[T]hat people can fill it with their own ideas, the kind of neighbors they would like to have. We don’t want just anyone, you know” (*House Next Door* 728).

It also does not help that it is Miss Andrew who has bought the house. She used to be Mr. Banks’s governess when he was a little boy. “[S]he, of all people, was coming to live next door to him in a house that was full of his dreams” (*Mary Poppins and the House Next Door* 731). When Miss Andrew moves into the house, she brings with her a little boy, Luti, from the South Sea Islands. He is wearing old clothes from Mr. Banks and is supposed to work for Miss Andrew. Luti is not happy staying with Miss Andrew and finally he gets a call from his heart that he needs to go home.

The story ends in a happy way. Miss Andrew moves out, Luti returns home and Mr. Banks is happy again. “Mr. Banks was almost dancing with joy. He was thinking that now his astronomer would soon be in his old haunts again, his telescope turned to the sky” (*House Next Door* 758). Looking closer at the story, it does not seem unlikely that Mr. Banks and Travers’s father are both playing key roles.
The house next door could represent Ireland which was so important to Travers Goff. Going to Ireland was a dream hard to reach, and Miss Andrew and Luti could represent Travers's wife and children hindering the fulfilment of this dream. Travers Goff was only able to imagine what moving back to Ireland would have been like. By writing this story it is not impossible to believe that Travers herself was fully aware of his dreams and how bitter he was that he could not achieve them.

In a similar way, Mr. Banks imagines that an astronomer lives in the house, gazing at the stars. He himself wishes that he could be that astronomer, free from obligations towards his wife and children. The fantasy is crushed when Miss Andrew moves in, giving him no other choice but to stop imagining about his astronomer friend. The desires of the two men are therefore similar, mirroring each other in the sense that they both want to be able to be somewhere else even though it will never be possible.

The feelings Travers had for her father were a complicated mix of admiration and desire for a better father. Mr. Banks seems to be more on the positive side, and this indicates that it may be more appropriate to apply the theory of sublimation, rather than displacement, to Travers's projection of her father onto Mr. Banks. She was therefore able to use her defense mechanism in a more constructive way, creating an example of a father that she craved.
6. Conclusion

I believe that on an unconscious level Travers created Mary Poppins from the feelings she had towards her mother and aunt Ellie. The feelings she had for her mother were more negative, resulting in the phenomenon of displacement. Her more positive feelings for aunt Ellie resulted in sublimation meaning that Travers mixed together very different experiences from her life in creating Mary Poppins. This character creation was a part of Travers's defense mechanisms in handling her unresolved issues surrounding a lack of a mother figure. Without a strong mother figure in real life, Travers decided to make Mary Poppins a governess instead of a mother. The role of the governess was very different from that of an actual mother, meaning that Travers had found in the governess a way to express certain feelings that were buried deep in her mind. By mixing her mother and aunt Ellie in Mary Poppins, she created the mother figure that she had never had through transference.

Similarly, Travers created the father she had always wanted in Mr. Banks. She projected the positive qualities of her father onto Mr. Banks through sublimation, meaning that she used her defense mechanisms in a positive way. Travers wanted to raise her father to a higher and better level than he had in real life. It is actually very admirable that she was able to use him as an inspiration because she was so young when he died. That reinforces the fact that on an unconscious level she had unresolved issues with him. In creating Mr. Banks, she manages to make him represent the father she always wanted, a father without alcohol problems. In the first books about Mary Poppins, Mr. Banks does not have a very big role to play compared to Mary Poppins, but the last book seems to be only about her father. This might indicate that she waited until the very end to be at peace with the feelings she had for her father. Taken together it does appear, therefore, that Mary Poppins and Mr. Banks were the parents she had been looking for and she wanted to share that idea with the world. Yet, it is only Travers herself that knew whether she wanted Mary Poppins and Mr. Banks to be her actual parents.
Works Cited


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