

Broken Fragments of Immortality: Why People Will Always Love Peter Pan

Elbow-deep into my research, I asked my fifty-four year old mother why she liked Peter Pan. She was visiting for the weekend, and while discussing my project had expressed her deep sentiments for Peter Pan. I was curious. I simply asked what it was about the story, and about the boy himself, that she found so appealing. She told me that she hadn't wanted to grow up as a child, that Neverland had been so full of adventure and possibility. Frowning slightly, she said, "You know, I just *was* Peter Pan."

Chances are that many people, of varying ages, will answer similarly when asked about their feelings for Peter Pan. The boy who wouldn't grow up has a firm grasp on the hearts and minds of generations of people across the globe who, being human, would give anything to stop time from steamrolling ahead, even if just for a few days. What is so fascinating about this phenomenon is that the story, the play, the movies, and the boy himself are inherently tragic, riddled with dilemmas and life-altering decisions. Peter is a "betwixt and between," as author J. M. Barrie called him, part boy, part bird, part specter (Wiggins 95).

Indeed, Peter Pan was not simply a character inked into being, living only on the page. He first came into existence via the childhood games of Barrie and the five Llewelyn Davies boys with whom Barrie had a strong personal relationship, becoming their main caregiver after their parents died. Peter is named for the third son, Peter, and based loosely on the fourth, Michael (Tatar lxxxiv). Barrie's most famous and most complex character would appear in several of his books and all versions of the play (he changed it every time it was produced), each time a little bit different. Barrie was never done with Peter Pan, never fully satisfied with his subsequent incarnations.

The first time Barrie wrote about Peter Pan was in his book *The Little White Bird*. A third of this book is dedicated to the origins of the same Peter Pan who later reappears in his play and novel. Barrie explains that all children start as birds that must adjust to their human forms and forget that they once knew how to fly. Baby Peter is an exception. At only a few days old, he flies out of his nursery window to the Kensington Gardens, where he eventually realizes that he is no longer a bird. He learns to cope with this reality, living amongst the birds and the fairies as an outsider, finding ways to be useful to them and enjoying his formative playtime in the Gardens. He goes back home once to check on his mother, and finds her mourning his absence with the window open in case he returns. Not quite ready to settle down, he swears to return after fulfilling his desire for a few more adventures. But when he comes back a second time, the window is barred, and there is another little boy in his bed. Beside himself, Peter returns to the Kensington Gardens, doomed to live as a betwixt and between forever, sailing around in a bird's nest and trying his best to be like a real boy (Barrie *White Bird*).

Even without knowing Peter's origins, there is plenty in the better-known versions to elicit a darker reaction to Peter Pan's plight than the one the majority of people seem to have. Peter is self-centered and cocky; ruler of his kingdom, he exhibits total control over those around him, as well as extreme memory loss. He promptly forgets Wendy and the Darling boys as they are flying to Neverland, and at the end forgets Tinker Bell, the Lost Boys, and even his nemesis, Captain Hook. "I forget them after I kill them," he tells Wendy when she is shocked to realize he's forgotten Hook (Barrie *Afterthought* 26). Wracked with nightmares, easily brought to tears, easily succumbing to violence and murder, Peter is not all joy and fun.

Why then, are general reactions to *Peter Pan* so pleasant and lighthearted? Is it because the majority of people have not read the play, whose stage directions are chock full of character

development pointing to Peter's darker sides, or the novelized version (*Peter and Wendy*) which shares many of the same details? Why is it that, even though the Disney film (arguably the most accessible/well known version) features a jealous, murderous Tinker Bell, ignorant Lost Boys, a whining Wendy, a pathetic Hook, and a selfish Peter, children respond positively to the film, recreating their own backyard Neverlands? There are many theories, but some of the strongest and most compelling are provided by modern psychologists, who have explored the psychological implications of fairy tales, Peter Pan, and the use of gender roles within these stories.

Sheldon Cashdan, psychologist and author of *The Witch Must Die: How Fairy Tales Shape Our Lives*, puts forth one such explanation for the popularity of *Peter Pan*. Although he never once mentions *Peter Pan* (presumably because of the number of psychological works already done on the subject, or perhaps due to the complexity of the psychological themes of the story), Cashdan's thesis and delineation of what constitutes a fairy tale are 100% applicable to *Peter Pan*. Cashdan's argument is that the reason people respond so strongly to fairy tales, both as children and as adults, is because they play a crucial role in the development of the self. According to Cashdan, children vicariously experience fairy tales as a battle between different aspects of their own psyche.

The way fairy tales resolve these struggles is by offering children a stage upon which they can play out inner conflicts. Children, in listening to a fairy tale, unconsciously project parts of themselves into various characters in the story, using them as psychological repositories for competing elements in the self. The evil queen in *Snow White*, for example, embodies narcissism, and the young princess, with whom readers identify, embodies parts of the child struggling to overcome this tendency. Vanquishing the queen represents a triumph of positive forces in the self over vain impulses... fairy tales give children a way of resolving tensions that affect the way they feel about themselves. (15)

Cashdan thus explains why fairy tales are so important, and why, in reference to the title of his book, the witch must always die: the child has to know that good overcomes evil, or the good parts of the self are strong enough to beat out the bad parts. Cashdan's argument takes the role of fairy tales a step further, however. There is a link between the self and the mother figure: the development of self is born out of the child's relationship to his or her mother. He explains that infants have difficulty grasping that their mother, the source of all life and sustenance, is not perfect. At best, the mother is not always able to feed them or hold them instantly. Thus, the child splits the mother in two, the good mother and the bad mother, and it is this split that becomes the basis for the dueling parts of the self later experienced in fairy tales.

Over time the two maternal representations... are psychologically 'metabolized' and become transformed into good and bad parts of the child's developing sense of self. Much of this comes about through language, and the increasing appearance of 'I' in the child's vocabulary. As children mature, they stop referring to themselves in the third person ('Susie go potty') and begin to refer to themselves in the first (*I go potty*). Maternal directives...are increasingly replaced by self-directives...As a result, the internalized good mother comes to be experienced less as an inner figure and more as a part of the self (the "good me"), while the bad mother is experienced as a negative part of the self (the "bad me")...By transforming splits in the self into an adventure that pits the forces of good against the forces of evil, not only do fairy tales help children with negative tendencies in the self, they pay homage to the pivotal role that mothers play in the genesis of the self. (27-28)

Cashdan's book demonstrates this theory via a multitude of fairy tales, all centered on the fact that the witch always dies. As Cashdan says, "fairy tales are about women and the important role they play in the child's emerging sense of self" (29). Although he speaks mainly to women and motherhood, he clarifies that there can be male witches as well. There can also be more than one incarnation both of the good self and the bad: a princess and a fairy godmother, a witch and a cruel father. What is most important is that the evil character is vanquished. Children have to feel that they are overcoming their negative, or sinful, thoughts and urges.

It is important to demonstrate how *Peter Pan* fits the fairy tale mold provided by Cashdan. To be considered a fairy tale, a story must have the following four elements: The Crossing (a clear departure from one world into another world), The Encounter (meeting the villain/witch), The Conquest (defeating/killing said villain), and The Celebration (a happy ending, typically with a party or wedding). In *Peter Pan*, leaving the Darling's nursery in London for Neverland fits the first element, the battles with Captain Hook and his pirates the second, the final battle scene on the pirate ship where Peter kills Hook the third, and the final scene in the nursery where Mr. and Mrs. Darling joyously greet their returned children and agree to adopt the Lost Boys the fourth.

Using Cashdan's lens, it is possible to link the child's vicarious exploration of self and the themes of the play/novel, which are namely abandonment, innocence, and youth. The difference here is that rather than just exploring "sins," *Peter Pan* explores psychological dilemmas that start in childhood but continue into adulthood. Barrie explores these themes from multiple perspectives. For instance, although one of the great fears that children harbor is abandonment by their parents or caretakers, in *Peter Pan* it is the children who abandon their parents. When we see the Darling parents after said abandonment, they are grief-stricken. Mrs. Darling sits by the window every night, but has given up hope that her children will return. Mr. Darling, blaming himself for the children's departure (for it was he who put Nana, the canine nursemaid, outside on that fateful night, leaving the children vulnerable to Peter's persuasion), takes to living in the dog kennel. It is, however, the fear of ultimate abandonment that spurs Wendy to gather her brothers and the Lost Boys and return home. Peter contradicts her belief that her mother will always leave the window open for her: "Wendy, you are wrong about mothers. I thought like you about the window, so I stayed away for moons and moons, and then I

flew back, but the window was barred, for my mother had forgotten all about me and there was another little boy sleeping in my bed” (Barrie *Peter Pan* 69).

Innocence is always difficult to define. The “innocence” seen in *Peter Pan* is no exception. Peter is a child with baby teeth, yet he kills pirates with seemingly no remorse. Wendy and her brothers are also children, considered innocent because of their age and inexperience with adult matters, but they too engage in murderous acts and never once consider the cruelty with which they abandon their parents. Barrie describes children in *Peter Pan* and Wendy as “gay and innocent and heartless,” implying that to be innocent means to lack a conscience (Barrie qtd. in Tatar 187).

And youth? Barrie presents childish parents who bicker over shadows and a father who is less cooperative and mature than his young children, and Wendy, a miniature woman struggling with her budding sexuality and desire for responsibility and control. Even Peter refers to himself saying, “I’m youth, I’m joy, I’m a little bird that has broken out of the egg,” before killing Hook and ultimately forgetting about everyone around him except for “mother” Wendy (Barrie *Peter Pan* 84). Peter, the symbol for never growing up, for childhood, youth and innocence, is perhaps the least innocent, oldest soul of all. He is immortal: stuck in a shape-shifting Neverland where he will forever play, and forever forget any true love and joy he ever experiences. It is no wonder that children enjoy *Peter Pan*; it must provide comfort with its ambiguity. Maybe children find it reassuring to see that other children are confused about their roles in relation to everyone around them. What is even more interesting to note about *Peter Pan*, is that Wendy herself is experiencing this psychological role play within the story: she goes to Neverland and has the choice to remain there forever, a child playing at being a mother, or return home, and grow up to be a real mother.

Yet, something is still missing. If *Peter Pan* is truly a fairy tale, then who is the witch? With which character(s) do we assign the good self and with which character(s) do we assign the bad? There is no witch in *Peter Pan*; indeed the only character who dies is Captain Hook, who lacks the usual witch elements (one-dimensionally evil, bloodthirsty, vengeful for no justifiable reason). At points, it is in fact easier to relate to Captain Hook than to Peter, which has more to do with the question of the protagonist than anything else (is it asexual Peter, or little mother Wendy?). *Peter Pan* is, in keeping with its multifaceted genesis and legacy, more complicated than the typical fairy tale. Due to Barrie's personal life and the social norms of the time period, there is another psychological layer woven into Peter Pan: first, the mother/daughter relationship as represented by Wendy and Mrs. Darling, and the boy who won't grow up syndrome/arrested development embodied by Peter.

Barrie's own childhood and relationship with his mother are worth noting, for they play a pivotal role in the origins of Peter Pan. When Barrie was six, his 13-year-old brother, David, died. His mother never recovered from this, and young Barrie, in an attempt to cheer her up and earn her love and attention, mimicked David's behavior as best he could: "At first, they say, I was often jealous...but that did not last; its place was taken by an intense desire...to become so like him that even my mother should not see the difference" (Barrie *Margaret Ogilvy* 234). Barrie's biography of his mother details how his childhood was devoted to his attempts to keep parts of David alive for her and to make her happy as best he could: "I have been told that my anxiety to brighten her gave my face a strained look" (232). In this way, Barrie experienced a form of arrested development; he sought his mother's love and affection by pretending to be his dead brother. Though his mother loved him surely, at least according to the accounts in the biography, he confesses that:

I had not made her forget the bit of her that was dead; in those nine and twenty years he was not removed one day farther from her. Many a time she fell asleep speaking to him...and then said slowly, "My David's dead!"...When I became a man and he was still a boy of thirteen, I wrote a little paper called "Dead this Twenty Years"...and it is the only thing I have written that she never spoke about. (235-236)

From this dark insight into Barrie's early life, it is understandable to see where the tortured aspects of *Peter Pan* come from, particularly the idea of the "eternal boy," or puer aeternus, for which Peter Pan has become the chief symbol. Part of Barrie never grew up, which explains why he spent his adult life playing pretend with young boys, and writing plays about growing up, or, one could argue, not growing up. Indeed, understanding his life sheds light on his ambiguous treatment of adulthood: his characters raise questions about what precisely being an adult, and a child for that matter, means.

The late 19th century and beginning of the 20th century showed a heavy literary emphasis on young girls. Lewis Carroll's Alice is a famous example, but Barrie himself actually wrote primarily about young girls. *Peter Pan* was one of his exceptions, unless you consider Wendy the main character. Christine Roth sheds light on the Edwardian girl phenomenon in her essay on the subject. She discusses the fascination in that era with the daughter/mother duality, and the idea of innocence and maturity: "the two identities are incompatible, so they emerge in turns—a duality that most often punishes girls for becoming women by forcing them into painful masquerade and self-deception" (Roth 52). Roth explains that this Edwardian daughter/mother theme creates a double standard: the mother represents the girl or daughter's loss of innocence and childhood, and the daughter represents the mother's lost allure, whereas boys are allowed to be boys, and men are still allowed to act like boys. In relation to Peter Pan, "the girl figures remain incarnations of two extremes between which Barrie constantly negotiates Peter's boy/man image" (Roth 64). Wendy's struggle between not wanting to grow up and embracing

her adult life manifest in this bizarre child/mother figure, which fits nicely with Roth's idea of the juxtaposition of Wendy and Peter.

In his play *Alice-Sit-By-The-Fire*, Barrie further explores the mother/daughter duality, and the ambiguity of adulthood. 17-year-old Amy has been the woman of the house during her parents' absence for the past five years. Her parents return, and flirtatious, melodramatic mother Alice desperately seeks her children's affection. There is a mix-up that results in Amy believing her mother is having an affair with a young lieutenant, and Alice believing her daughter is involved with the same man. Much confusion ensues, resulting in mother and daughter reconciling. What is so interesting about this story is that the mother/daughter roles are switched, yet intrinsically linked. Alice is very much a child. When we first meet her, she admits to her husband that she still has not come of age, and that she will come of age with her daughter (she is in her early 40s). She flirts with all the young men at parties and balls, becomes childish and temperamental when she doesn't get her way, and manipulates her husband and children to get their approval and affection. Amy is a young woman, both naïve and sophisticated at the same time. "The Alice you have known is come to an end...It's summer done, autumn begun...My girl and I are like the little figures in the weather-house; when Amy comes out, Alice goes in" (Barrie *Alice* 138).

Alice and Amy parallel Mrs. Darling and Wendy. There must always be a clear differentiation between mother and daughter, despite the fact that both mother and daughter exhibit behaviors typical of their opposite role. Amy mothers her mother, Alice, which causes Alice to want to be a better mother. Wendy has to go off to Neverland and play mother to her own brothers to realize that she too needs a mother, and must go through the normal stages of development to live a more fulfilling life than her pretend version with Peter. In terms of "The

Witch Must Die” concept, children can learn a lot through experiencing these characters as they come to terms with their varying levels of womanhood.

Interestingly, it is not just children who grow up in Barrie’s works. Similar to Alice in *Alice-Sit-By-The-Fire*, Mrs. Darling has some growing up of her own to do, which occurs within the framework of the story. For example, in the beginning of the play she can see Peter, despite the fact that grownups typically cannot: it is she who first sees him at the window. Her capacity to believe in the unbelievable is what sets off the whole story and, in a way, lets him in. In this first act, she exhibits signs of childishness: her interactions with her husband, specifically the way she responds to his teasing and her guilty demeanor about admitting the truth, ring loud and clear of a little girl being chastised. At the end, however, she can no longer see Peter, which conveys that her experience with losing her children has forced her to grow up fully.

And Peter? Peter is in a way ageless, asexual, and almost inhuman. Yet, he represents a sort of very human arrested development. Indeed, there is a psychological syndrome named after him. Dr. Dan Kiley wrote a whole book on his experience with boys and men suffering from the “Peter Pan syndrome.” For children, Peter is the ultimate embodiment of not a sin, but a temptation. Through him, we learn and grow, and make the choice he didn’t make. He will be forever young, and we will grow up with some form of family and memory to keep us warm at night. Ann Yeoman puts it best:

As a figure for the autonomy of spirit and creative fantasy, Peter Pan belongs to the archetypal realm of possibility. As harbinger and agent of new experience, he must suffer the pain of transformation repeatedly but never finally; yet the conscious ego may undergo finite transformation as a result of his agency. Nor can Peter Pan be brought fully into life. His story, if it is to be told at all, must be our story, a tale of the continual struggle to realize and so incarnate something of our experience of transcendent reality that by its nature can initially be “only imagin’d.” (68)

So, after all is said and done, why do people like Peter Pan so much? Why, after 100 years, is he still just as popular and mythical as ever? The story is so simple and yet so complicated. The gender roles of exploring a father who acts like a child and a daughter who pretends very convincingly to be a mother, as well as the basic fairy tale elements of the story provide a psychological playground upon which children can form their own opinions of themselves, of the people around them, and the world. This playground is rife with danger and confusion, but perhaps that is why people like it so much. It is these stories that cause growth, that cause a person to come to terms with deeper truths whether they are pleasant or not. Maybe it is Peter's ambiguous, often sinister side that renders him so irresistible to children, and to adults who wistfully wish they still had the imagination that their children have. For this, Peter Pan is immortal.

Barrie wrote of the final time he managed to get 12-year-old Michael Llewelyn Davies to "believe" again for a moment in magic, in fairies, in the intangible: "for two minutes Michael was quivering in another world than ours. When he came to he gave me a smile that meant we understood each other...this episode is not in the play; so though I dedicate Peter Pan to you I keep the smile, with the few other broken fragments of immortality that have come my way" (qtd. in Yeoman 148). Above all else, I think human beings crave those moments. We want to believe in the unbelievable, and if/when we lose that childish ability to appreciate the fantastical aspects of life, we try to find it elsewhere: in substances, other people, stories, etc. Peter Pan elicits such strong reactions from people of all ages because it was stories like his that formed "fragments" of who we are.

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