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Searching for Neverland

J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* is not just a children's tale. He is a mystical being living in an even more magical place. Peter Pan embodies the essence of childhood memories providing comfort for all ages. Barrie's novel is not superficial in its meaning; the story parallels Barrie's personal life and emotions. The imagery and symbolism truly make Neverland and its inhabitants timeless. But most evident in the story is the child who never grows up and who embodies a tragic character.

James Matthew Barrie entered the world on May 9, 1860 in Scotland as the ninth of ten children to Margaret and David Barrie. As a child, Barrie loved entertaining people, created plays, and acted them out with his siblings. He heard many adventure tales from his mother including ones with pirates. Tragedy struck early for Barrie that would forever have an impact on his adult life. David, Barrie's brother and mother's favorite, died in a skating accident at fourteen. His mother would never fully recover from her son's death but found solace in the fact that her son "would remain a boy forever, never to grow up and leave her" (Liukkonen & Pesonen, 2008). This traumatic event resonated with J.M. Barrie and mirrors Barrie's famous work, *Peter Pan*.

He attended the University in Edinburgh and heavily drew inspiration from the theatre. Barrie received his M.A. in 1882 from the University, and worked as a journalist for a while and then found fame with his dramatic novel *The Little Minister*. After this period, he began writing mostly for the theatre. His marriage to actress Mary Ansell, whom he met while she starred in one of his plays, in 1894 did not last and during his final years with his wife formed a close relationship with the Llewellyn Davies family whom he met when strolling through Kensington Gardens. He grew closer to their five sons, George, John, Peter, Michael, and Nicholas. Barrie became integrated into their lives even more when Arthur Davies died and then when Sylvia died he became their unofficial guardian. Some say Barrie acted more like a sixth sibling than a parent (Liukkonen & Pesonen, 2008). Grief would eventually befall Barrie again as two of the Davies boys (Michael and Peter) committed suicide and a third, George, died in WWI. James Barrie died on June 19, 1937 from pneumonia. One of Barrie's last wishes was for the copyright of Peter Pan to go to the Great Ormond Street Hospital for Sick Children in London, England, which allowed Disney to adapt the story into an animated film (Liukkonen & Pesonen, 2008).

Barrie writes both sentimentally and emotionally. He suffered a great tragedy, which shaped his adult life. He admitted the inspiration for Peter Pan evolved from smashing all of the Davies boys together and their adventures and stories. One cannot escape the certainty that Barrie was essentially still a child living in an adult body (Allen, 2012). The psychological aspect of losing his brother and then attempting to live as his brother by wearing his clothes and speaking in the same manner as him, caused Barrie to suffer in development. His marriage to Mary fell apart partly because of his psychological issues. Some say his marriage was not a "real marriage" and that he was impotent. He told his wife "boys can't love" (Allen, 2012). However,

his writing appeals to many generations of audiences as they try to escape reality much like Barrie (Liukkonen & Pesonen, 2008).

A tragic character invokes sympathy and pity in the audience and these stories often have these tragic characters as doomed or flawed in some way, unable to achieve their goals. On the surface Barrie's character, Peter Pan, embodies all that is innocent in a child: daring and adventurous (Boulton, 2006). However, he also encompasses a darker side. Barrie's Pan is cocky and selfish. His complexities as a character relate to his psychological need to remain a boy forever. Peter has virtues but his weaknesses are more apparent. Peter is entirely self-centered. He sees the characters around him as solely extensions of himself (Boulton, 2006). Peter makes a conscious decision to remain in Neverland while everyone else chooses to leave. He is aware that he is missing something but cannot figure out what he is missing. Barrie writes in Peter and Wendy, "Stars are beautiful, but they may not take an active part in anything, they must just look on for ever. It is a punishment put on them for something they did so long ago that no star now knows what it was. So the older ones have become glassy-eyed and seldom speak [...] but the little ones still wonder" (Barrie, 35). The quote uses the stars as a metaphor for Peter. Because he is a boy never growing up, he loses the conscious thoughts of growing older. The "little ones" can also be a metaphor for the Darling children. Subconsciously his actions reveal steps toward adulthood.

At the beginning when Peter enters the nursery looking for his shadow, he is filled with happiness at finding his shadow but when the shadow refuses to stick, he begins crying. Wendy inquires about his crying, asking if his outburst is because he has no mother to which he replies, "I wasn't crying about mothers. I was crying because I can't get my shadow to stick on. Anyway, I wasn't crying." He is projecting a mother figure onto his shadow and his attachment is obvious

(C, 2007). Peter's desire for a mother is a theme throughout Barrie's Pan Stories. Generation after generation of girls leave, their home for Neverland to be Peter's mother. Wendy is an extension of this desire. Peter and Wendy are make-believe parents to the Lost Boys, Michael and John. Peter is happy with this but only if it is truly pretend. When asked by Wendy what his feelings toward her are, he responds "those of a devoted son, Wendy" (Barrie, 79). He cannot fathom why Wendy, Tiger Lilly, and Tink act strange toward him. Jealousy and love elude him. These emotions develop with age and because Peter is stuck as a child, these feelings will forever be a mystery.

As Peter enters into "adult", emotional situations, his subconscious and conscious battle for control. This battle happens as he almost dies on Marooner's rock. He is scared for a split second but then thinks, "to die will be an awfully big adventure" (Barrie, 138). He has no doubts regarding death or the fear that adults associate with the unknown. Another instance where he begins to develop adult emotions is at the end of the book as the Darling children return home. Peter flies ahead and shuts the window in hopes Wendy will realize her mother barred the window and return to Neverland. However, Mrs. Darling refuses to leave the window closed and eventually Peter relents. He wants Wendy yet he does not fight for her, showing his short attention span. While he is happily willing to never grow older, he still has complex emotions that can never fully develop because of his refusal to become a man. His relationships to others and his interactions with them are further proved with his surroundings.

Neverland is Peter's escape from reality. The Never Never Land is described by Barrie as snug and compact. The island resembles a child's mind so it differs from one child to the next. In John's Neverland, the lagoon had flamingoes flying over it but in Michaels, the lagoon flew over the flamingoes. When asked where Neverland is located Peter responds, "Second star to the right

and then straight on till morning". However, as they fly toward the place, Peter only says this as a way to impress the children and show his cleverness. Neverland is a heavenly world above Earth. Because the Neverland is a heavenly world, its time differs than the real world. Barrie describes Neverland having more moons and suns than Earth. This time difference is the reason for Peter's "memory lapses" and the Darling children's forgetfulness of their parents. As time progresses the children gradually lose their memories of the actual physical world. Barrie brilliantly acts as the narrator integrating himself into the story. He chooses which stories to reveal about the Darling's adventures. He even rolls a dice to decide which adventure to tell. This shows how much time has actually passed in Neverland. Another appealing feature of Neverland for Pan is the lack of grown-ups (C, 2007).

The only adults living in Neverland are the pirates on board the Jolly Roger. The pirates merely serve as a game for Peter. He enjoys toying with them, especially Hook. If a baby fell out of his bed and was not claimed in seven days, he went to Neverland. This is how the Lost Boys arrived in Neverland. As these boys seem to grow up, Peter takes a sick pleasure in trying to kill them off (Boulton, 2006). Adults are a hot button issue for Peter. He fails to remember his own mother even though he desires one. When women come to him in dreams, he shoots them but because Wendy is a child herself, Peter is fine with her as a mother figure. The Darling children become so enamored with their adventures that they even forget their own parents. Wendy is the only one who remembers her father and mother, while Michael and John believe Wendy and Peter are their parents. As Wendy begins telling stories of their parents, they gradually become aware of reality. After the children decide to leave Neverland with the Lost Boys, Peter becomes upset, breathing rapidly. Grown-ups spoil everything, Pan believes, and by doing this act, he is killing the grown-ups, so the saying goes (Barrie, 163). Barrie writes in Peter

and Wendy, “Stars are beautiful, but they may not take an active part in anything, they must just look on for ever. It is a punishment put on them for something they did so long ago that no star now knows what it was. So the older ones have become glassy-eyed and seldom speak [...] but the little ones still wonder.” (Barrie, 35). The quote uses the stars as a metaphor for Peter. Because he is a boy never growing up, he loses the conscious thoughts of growing older. The “little ones” can also be a metaphor for the Darling children. They have not been lost in the fantasy of Neverland; therefore, they retain the awareness of reality.

The story of Peter Pan is very familiar. I watched the Disney version and then the live action 2003 movie adaptation. As a sophomore in high school, I picked up the book Peter and Wendy (a gift I received many years before). The storyline drew me in like never before. Not only did I find the characters relatable and complex but also the scenery captivated me. Barrie created a stunning place of magical proportions. I envied Peter Pan for the simple reason that he lived in a fantasy world with no worries. I desired that escape, that place where anything could happen. With these thoughts, I first began writing. J.M Barrie’s world of Neverland was beautiful and the imagery Barrie constructed, truly inspired a fantastical world apart from reality.

Peter Pan made an appearance again during freshman year at Young Harris College as I left home for the first time. I sat in my dorm room homesick. After unpacking, I found my worn book of Peter and Wendy at the bottom of one of my boxes. Randomly flipping through the pages, I landed on one of the passages I highlighted years ago, “There could not have been a lovelier sight; but there was none to see it except a little boy who was staring in at the window. He had ecstasies innumerable that other children can never know; but he was looking through the window at the one joy from which he must be for ever barred.” The quote summarized everything I felt; I was no longer connected to my family or home. He could not connect with

humanity but he still very much felt adult human emotions even though he was stuck as child. It is not that he wanted to never grow up, he feared the idea. Childhood is envious. When you are a child, you have no cares, no worries. However, as an adult, responsibilities are overwhelming. Peter could not cope with these concepts, which is appealing, but a realization hit me as I reread those lines: it is okay to grow up.

While Peter Pan reads as a children's tale, its adult subtleties speak in the underlying tones. Peter Pan is stuck in a childhood realm never having to grow up or face adult emotions. Because he lacks essential growth developments, he transforms into a tragic character. He misses key relationship cues like jealousy and love. J.M Barrie succeeds in creating a psychological, eternally youthful child. Peter Pan embodies a tragic character because he never grows up. It is not simply that Pan does not want to become a man, he essentially fears adulthood. This is why Peter Pan is appealing to so many readers. The world J.M. Barrie creates is one of imagination and youthfulness. As a reader, you lose yourself in Neverland, experiencing adventures and fun. But, you also return to reality. Peter only understands fun; he never realizes what he is missing, which is the ultimate tragedy.

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