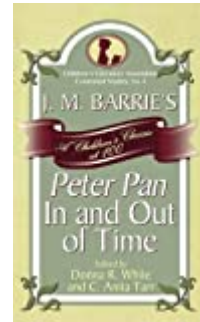


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Peter Pan: Then and Now

J. M. Barrie's Peter Pan, In and Out of Time: A Children's Classic at 100 is a great contribution not only to the field of children's literature, but also to our understanding of how we relate to children. In 1904, when *Peter Pan* was first performed, children's literature was still in its infancy. Today the availability and popularity of children's literature make us forget that the concepts of childhood and literature for children are relatively recent. The creation of a children's bestsellers category by the *New York Times* and the Harry Potter phenomenon are proofs that children literature and criticism about it have come of age. The collected essays in *J. M. Barrie's Peter Pan, In and Out of Time* explore, among other things, the complexity of Barrie's *oeuvre*, our fascination with it, and its enduring impact on the world of letters. As Donna R. White and Anita Tarr point out, "Neverland is never just one idea, just as Peter Pan is never just one boy or girl, but betwixt and between, and just as Peter Pan is not only one play for children but also for adults" (p. viii). Not surprisingly, the overarching thematic thread that runs through *Peter Pan, In and out of Time* is that of liminality. It is noteworthy that Barrie wrote at a time when Victorian/Edwardian society was in great flux—a flux arguably

reflected in the hybrid nature and liminality of Peter Pan. The authors of the collection employ and deploy current literary theories and critical tools to stress not only the "timelessness" of Barrie's most popular work, *Peter Pan*, but also the "timeliness" of this collection of essays. The book is divided into four parts: "In His Own Time," "In and Out of Time—*Peter Pan* in America," "Timelessness and Timeliness of *Peter Pan*," and "Women's Time."

The first part, comprising of five essays, historically contextualizes *Peter Pan* (play and novel). In "Child-Hating: *Peter Pan* in the Context of Victorian Hatred," Karen Coats takes James Kincaid to task, and challenges the reader to "unpack and perhaps deconstruct Kincaid's notion of the inevitability of the desirability of the child" (p. 9). She argues, convincingly, that contrary to popular belief, Victorian/Edwardian society was no model of "decorum, civility, and philanthropy," but rather a society in which "misanthropy, imperialism, and outright hatred of otherness" were commonplace (p. 4). Coats's argument that humans are predisposed to hating children may seem far-fetched, and one wonders why Barrie would want Peter Pan to remain a child (or why Pe-

ter would want to remain a child) if Victorian/Edwardian society was full of hatred of children. Perhaps, as Coats argues, the quintessential Victorian male in the character of Mr. Darling is abhorrent enough for Peter not to aspire to become one. Paul Fox, in "The Time of His Life: Peter Pan and the Decadent Nineties," provides an answer to this query when he argues that the boy who refuses to grow up is the embodiment of art in the sense that he keeps re-creating himself in a bid to defeat time. Hence, our preoccupation with time is dealt with in the very term "Neverland." Drawing on the works of Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater, Fox opines that, by living in the moment and "forgetting the past," Peter is the *fin-de-si cle* artist/e par excellence, as he exemplifies the decadent aesthetics of the 1890s—"the grammar of time" (p. 24). If time itself can be "defeated," he argues, so too can the notion of growing up. While critics have argued that Peter's loss of memory is "the worse curse of Neverland," and that "without memory there is no real life," Fox points out that Peter is unhappy when he has to recall the past. These observations, in my estimation, should have led to a robust discussion of Peter's identity and his relationship to the past and history.

Christine Roth reminds us in "Babes in Boy-Land: J. M. Barrie and the Edwardian Girl," that the celebration of the boy child in *Peter Pan* is a spillover from the Victorian cult of the girl child. She puts forward the argument that, in spite of the tendency to think of Barrie's work in terms of boyhood fantasies, "a cultural fascination with the bounds of girlhood drives the text" (p. 48). At the turn of the century, Roth argues, the little girl as chaste/innocent and sexual/worldly has already been established, and Barrie was an inheritor of that tradition. Roth, however, also distinguishes between the middle-class girl and the working-class girl: the latter is considered promiscuous and sexually available while the former epitomizes innocence and purity until she become a "girlish" wife and mother. Although Roth raises issues of class and race in *Peter and Wendy* (1911), she does not offer us any in-depth critique of these issues. For instance, Tinker Bell and Tiger Lily, the "eroticized" working-class woman and the "savage" Native-American princess respectively, should have received more critical attention. Besides, the biblical/proverbial "fall of man" is incorporated/re-enacted in *Peter and Wendy* and requires analysis, to wit: Wendy is the one who teaches Peter what a kiss is and exchanges one with him.

Like that of Christine Roth, Jill P. May's essay, "James Barrie's Pirates: *Peter Pan*'s Place in Pirate History and Lore," is an intertextual reading of *Peter Pan*. She links

Barrie's work to earlier pirate literature by writers such as Frederick Marryat, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Daniel Defoe, and points out the paradoxical role and position of the pirate who is both revered and feared. According to May, Stevenson read Barrie's earlier works and corresponded with him even though they never met. She stipulates that Stevenson was the main source for Barrie's characterization of Captain Hook and all his pirates. Even though May aptly asserts that *Peter Pan* plays on "popular contemporary adventure literature and the Victorian ideals of British colonialism" (p. 77), we need to ask, what is the legacy and impact of Barrie's *Peter Pan* on pirate and colonialist literatures?

Kayla McKinney Wiggins closes the section with "More Darkly down the Left Arm: The Duplicity of Fairyland in the Plays of J. M. Barrie," by addressing the "fairy lore" Barrie draws upon. Wiggins argues that Barrie, "in the guise of children's literature, explores such themes as death, sexuality, and the duplicity of existence" (p. 79). While Barrie did not begin this tradition, he nevertheless popularized it, drawing, as Wiggins argues, on the fairy lore and Celtic tradition of his Scottish background. Wiggins's discussion of *Peter Pan* (1904), *Dear Brutus* (1917), and *Mary Rose* (1920) shows Barrie's use of fairy lore to suggest themes and issues that are not confined to the world of children, again reminding us that children's literature in general, and *Peter Pan* in particular, are not just for children, and maybe children are not "just" for childhood. Wiggins's intervention is another intertextual reading of *Peter Pan*.

Part 2 has only two essays, one on racism/counter racism in *Peter Pan* and the other on the influence of Barrie's *Peter Pan* on Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* (1925). Structurally, one wonders why this section contains only two essays, given today's "racialized" world, as well as the past and present racial make-up of the United States. Clay Kinchen Smith, in "Problematising Piccaninnies, or How J. M. Barrie Uses Graphemes to Counter Racism in *Peter Pan*," is of the opinion that Barrie's language, which "defines the native Neverlanders in terms of excessiveness: Great Little Panther's excessive scalps, the tribe's excessive violence, Tiger Lily's excessive beauty and virginity" (p. 114), subverts and problematizes racial categories and stereotyping. Smith's use of Derrida's theory of graphemes to show this subversion is not that convincing because stereotypes are built around exaggeration and excesses. Arguably Smith has missed the opportunity to critique the racial stereotyping that was prevalent in Barrie's time. As Jill P. May points out in her essay above, *Peter Pan* is about coloniza-

tion, domination, and “stock characterization” (p. 77). Rosanna West Walker’s “The Birth of a Lost Boy: Traces of J. M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan* in Willa Cather’s *The Professor’s House*” maps Barrie’s influence on Cather’s *The Professor’s House*. Besides the fact that both authors apparently drew on their childhood, Walker demonstrates how Cather relied primarily on “motifs, imagery symbols, metaphors, and characters from *Peter Pan*” (p. 128). *The Professor’s House*, she argues, is not only a telling example of the influence of Barrie on early twentieth-century American fiction, but also that the concept of Neverland may have been influenced by the American frontier tradition.

Part 3 is the longest section in the book and consists of six essays. “The Pang of Stone Words” by Irene Hsiao focuses on the illiteracy of Peter in the world of print and on the function of a “compromised” narration, because “we cannot rely on reports of action to reveal Peter’s character, since his activities apparently do not affect his memory in a way that can be externalized in words” (p. 166). Even though Hsiao acknowledges the “inimitability and irrepresentability” of sound that characterize Peter and give him an identity, further discussion of the advantages of print culture and the benefits of orality could have given an edge to Peter’s marginality. Cathlena Martin and Laurie Taylor in “Playing in Neverland: *Peter Pan* Video Game Revisions” build on orality in *Peter Pan* and opine that grounding the latter in the world of orality makes allowances for female participation. Barrie’s story, they point out, originates in the oral tradition and therefore allows for revisions and adaptations characteristic of oral narrative conventions. This “retelling” of the story in the form of video games makes *Peter Pan* viable to children in today’s society, where plays are no longer the medium of entertainment. “Peter’s desire for stories,” they argue, “connects to video game-players because games offer stories to the player” and permit players to become characters (p. 178). While *Peter Pan* remains largely a “masculine narrativem” the authors stress the need for the video game industry to “address female players and provide innovative stories” (p. 190). They express optimism, however, that “by virtue of including Wendy as a substory, female characters will continue to evolve in the ever-evolving tale of *Peter Pan*” (p. 191).

Karen McGavock revisits Barrie’s thesis (that of never growing up, or being “untouchable”) in “The Riddle of His Being: An Exploration of Peter Pan’s Perpetually Altering State.” The flexibility of characters, according to McGavock, remains central to Barrie’s creation/art. In his “perpetually altering state, [Peter Pan] is in con-

stant flux, ‘betwixt and between,’ the symbol of process” (p. 196). The multiple origins of *Peter Pan*, the textual flexibility, and the gender bending in *Peter Pan* are proofs that Barrie refutes the idea of fixity. While McGavock’s interpretation is seductive, Peter Pan remains a boy despite his “perpetual altering state.” Peter’s liminality is further illustrated in “Getting Peter’s Goat: Hybridity, Androgyny, and Terror in *Peter Pan*” by Carrie Wasinger. The authro stresses that gender indeterminacy is unsettling especially to Victorians who were particular with distinctions. She deploys Judith Butler to show that not only is gender constructed “through repeated performance of certain behaviors” (p. 219), but also that gender performance happens in the text. Building upon Eve Sedgwick’s idea that gender indeterminacy shapes belief systems, she convincingly demonstrates that Peter Pan’s “hybridity,” with its potential for transgender, is progressive but frightening to Victorian and Edwardian audiences. However, Wasinger’s allusion to Barrie’s influences—Defoe, Marryat, R.M. (Robert Michael) Bal-lantyne, and Rider Haggard—should have again elicited more insight into the building and maintenance of the British empire through such texts, as well as Barrie’s. John Pennington’s “Peter Pan, Pullman, and Potter: Anxieties of Growing Up” deals with the legacy of *Peter Pan*. He singles out and discusses children’s authors J. K. Rowling and Philip Pullman and their indebtedness to Barrie, even though both Rowling and Pullman reject Barrie’s main concept of “never growing up.” Pennington stipulates that both Rowling and Pullman suffer from what he calls, in the words of Harold Bloom, the “anxiety of influence” whereby writers must “wrestle with their strong precursors, even to the death” (p. 241). He articulates how, even though both authors cannot avoid this influence (since children literature is by its nature, “formulaic”), they have found ways to be original and creative within the paradigm of the “innocence-experience dichotomy.” Even when Rowling expresses cynicism at the fact that characters in *Peter Pan* never have any “hormonal impulse,” Pennington argues that Wendy, John, Michael, and the Lost Boys do return to the “real” world, a pattern one finds in the Harry Potter series—a “return to reality and maturity” (p. 246). This movement between reality and the fantasy world is what drives Pullman’s work as well—this child-adult tension which is *Peter Pan*’s legacy. This “in-betweenness” receives a psychoanalytical perspective in “The Blot of Peter Pan.” David Rudd discusses the “impossibility of coherent subjectivity, indeed, of a coherent reality, uncontaminated by fantasy” in children’s literature (p. 264). In this sense reality is not possible without fantasy, the same way that fantasy

makes “reality bearable” (p. 276). Referring to Lacan, Rudd argues that we “are made consistent by the look [gaze] of the Other ... a position that we ourselves can never inhabit” (p. 266). Rudd contends, in psychoanalytical terms, that Peter’s dilemma, ambiguity (anxieties of growing up), and liminality have to do with his desire to be the phallus (which stands for a lack, not the penis), instead of possessing it, because he has not resolved the Oedipal. Peter’s desire to not grow up speaks to our own anxieties: whether to “align ourselves with Wendy rather than Peter, with the bard rather than the barred” (p. 277). Rudd’s argument encapsulates not only Peter’s ambivalent and problematic relationship with the adult world, but also with the nature of childhood and of children’s literature, as well as with issues of identity, marginality, the multifaceted nature of the human experience.

The last section of the book has only two essays, and again one cannot help but wonder why, given the fact that gender politics is so prevalent in Barrie’s work? Is it because some of the earlier essays in the book discuss gender issues? “Female Sexuality and Power in J. M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan*” opens this section and underscores Barrie’s pro-feminist stance, which, according to Joy Morse, is often overshadowed by his characterization of Mrs. Darling, a woman “in complete conformity with female passivity and submission” (p. 282). Barrie’s Mrs. Darling is characteristic of the late Victorian and early Edwardian society that saw female sexuality as dangerous and in need of control, because the woman’s “privilege of refusing” a man’s sexual advances was deemed to be emasculating. Morse asserts that, despite this characterization, Barrie’s “observation of his mother’s suffering as a Victorian wife and mother gave him a particular sympathy for the confinement of women within a culture of separate spheres” (p. 299). But the absence of any “rec-

ognizable rebellion in Mrs. Darling and many of Barrie’s other female characters” (Tiger Lily and Tinker Bell come to mind) makes his pro-feminist stance largely inefficient. The section/book ends with Emily Clark’s “The Female Figure in J. M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan: The Small and the Mighty*.” Clark’s essay refutes Morse’s argument that Barrie wrote to challenge Victorian and Edwardian attitude to gender; her deployment of Anne McClintock to make the connection among race, gender, and class should resonate with the informed reader. The female figure in *Peter Pan* is not an innocent creation, she argues, but in accordance with patriarchy, racial stereotypes that were at the heart of the nineteenth-century empire-building endeavor. Neverland with its native Tiger Lily and piccaninnies, Red Skins, and underclass woman (Tinker Bell) are the right recipe for the colonial enterprise and colonialist fiction of the Victorian age. Peter, the patriarch (even as a boy), exemplifies the white man’s burden; Clark’s essay makes this abundantly clear to the reader. Tiger Lily’s limited use of English sets her apart from both Wendy and Tinker Bell. The “intersection of race and gender,” Clark argues, “makes Tiger Lily minute in comparison to Peter, Wendy, and Tinker Bell” (p. 315). Clark’s essay probes Barrie’s uncritical acceptance of colonial and domestic trends, and women’s place within these spheres. *J. M. Barrie’s Peter Pan, In and Out of Time: A Children’s Classic at 100* is a seminal collection that adds to the growing scholarship on children’s literature and attests to the popularity of and growing interest in literature for children. It is a work that is informed by scholarship and research of which only experts are capable; but it is addressed to all, including those curious about literary criticism that focuses on children’s writing. Apart from instances where some expanded and inclusive approach could have been taken, the book is a great accomplishment and deserves praise.

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