“Second to the Right and Straight on Till Morning”:
The Construction and Distortion of Fantasy
In J.M. Barrie's Peter Pan

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At the onset of the Darling children’s adventure to Neverland in J.M. Barrie’s classic, *Peter Pan*, Barrie writes, "‘second to the right and straight on till morning’. That, Peter had told Wendy, was the way to the Neverland; but even birds, carrying maps and consulting them at windy corners, could not have sighted it with these instructions. Peter, you see, just said anything that came to his head" (30). Fraught with mythos and directive enchantment but alluding to the impossibility of truly locating Neverland, these inaccurate directions epitomize the ironic narrative drama of *Peter Pan*; the text encourages the reader to desire Neverland and yet, simultaneously, it incites a distrust of the island and the fantasy that it promises. The inconsistency in these directions lands on the spatial ambivalence of Neverland that not only surfaces here but also resonates throughout the text of *Peter Pan*. Neverland is positioned as a child sanctuary through which the characters and readers of the novel can escape the inevitable struggle and disappointment that adulthood brings. However, after establishing Neverland as a utopian space that is separate from adulthood, the text problematizes the assumptions of child innocence and its projected decline in adulthood. The textual instability of *Peter Pan* surfaces as the conditions of child and adult are mirrored, echoed, distorted, and rejected, all through the movement between England and Neverland.

This thesis, therefore, conducts a literary and cultural analysis of *Peter Pan*, focused J.M. Barrie’s unstable formulation of Neverland as a space. As the text engages in a nuanced, and at times subversive, discussion of England and the child utopia, *Peter Pan* ambivalently questions the need for Neverland to exist. The devolution of Neverland’s fantasy happens in two parts. First, the text creates a demand for Neverland in the opening chapter, which it then immediately begins to undercut throughout the rest of the narrative. Once the text problematizes *Peter Pan’s* evocation of Neverland, it then moves to show how Neverland fails to fulfill the terms of its own
fantasy, becoming distorted and actually transforming into the inverse of that which it desires.

This thesis will therefore focus on the desire and wish fulfillment found within Peter Pan’s Neverland, arguing that the narrative undercutting found within the discourse around Neverland is intentionally posited within the text to complicate Edwardian English values.

Opening with the line, “All children, except one, grow, up” (1), the text of Peter Pan immediately concerns itself with the adult/child dichotomy. In its depiction of the anxiety about growing up, the novel sets up a series of contrasts between childhood and maturity that advocate for the preservation of the former. This begins in the opening paragraph of Peter Pan, which increases the anxiety of the growing up and becoming adult by qualifying childhood as precious, though fleeting, moment in one’s life, which directly establishes childhood as a stage in one’s life that must be saved. As Lacanian children’s critic Jacqueline Rose argues in her book The Case of Peter Pan or The Impossibility of Children’s Fiction, childhood is an extremely tenuous and evanescent position. Rose writes, “Childhood is always the moment before - once it is contaminated, it is lost” (87). Peter Pan subtly subscribes to this notion through the reader’s introduction to Wendy. Comparing a two-year-old Wendy to a plucked flower, Mrs. Darling sardonically asks, “Oh, why can’t you remain like this forever?” (1). This question’s effect on Wendy, “henceforth Wendy knew that she must grow up” (1), posit tones of melancholia and tragedy on the [assumed to be inevitable] loss of one’s youth, which focuses the conflict of Peter Pan toward the transition from childhood to adulthood.

The garden imagery utilized in the introduction to Wendy should not to be lost because it is this imagery, which alludes to Barrie’s subscription to the cult of childhood, that advocates for
the inherent purity of the child\(^1\). In *The Case of Peter Pan*, Rose argues that the correlation between the child and nature is one that necessarily fetishizes conceptions of childhood. She writes, “Childhood is therefore defined as something which exists outside the culture in which it is produced...the child reads off of from the land, the earth and the sky, its own truth and a nature which would otherwise perish” (44). The child represents purity in that it is seen as critically separated from modern society and its corruptive influences. The nature imagery, which Rose argues is a staple of children’s writing, strengthens this separation between childhood and society. Nature is something that is must be removed from modern society.

Rather than being seen as *uninfluenced* by modern life, the evocation of natural imagery when referring to the child positions childhood as *opposed* to civilization. Therefore, when Mrs. Darling questions why Wendy cannot remain like a freshly plucked flower, she is not asking why Wendy cannot remain young; she is asking why Wendy cannot remain pure and innocent. This subtle shift in the question’s meaning profoundly shapes the terms of Neverland’s fantasy. Neverland becomes not merely a place of youth but a dynamic rejection of society’s childhood effacing influences.

Though this subscription to the cult of childhood is only minimally alluded to here in the opening paragraph by the use of natural imagery, Barrie’s fetishization of childhood becomes readily apparent when comparing Wendy’s introduction to the characterization of Mrs. Darling. Through her descriptions, Mrs. Darling represents various aspects of English society, demonstrating that growing up and interacting with civilization is, in fact, a childhood effacing force that should be fled. Mrs. Darling depicts an adulthood that is fraught with struggle and failure, specifically in the way that she strives to fit into the British social sphere in which she is

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\(^1\) For an extended discussion see *The Cult of Childhood* by George Boas.
installed. Ultimately, her interaction with English culture forces her to negotiate her own desires with the expectations and responsibilities placed on her as an adult.

Throughout the text, Mrs. Darling functions as the ideal English mother. She is kind, understanding, and maternal without being overbearing and surly. When we first meet her, the narrator writes:

She was a lovely lady, with a romantic mind and such a sweet mocking mouth. Her romantic mind was like the tiny boxes, one within the other, that come from the puzzling East, however many you discover there is always one more; and her sweet mocking mouth had one kiss on it that Wendy could never get, though there it was, perfectly conspicuous in the right-hand corner (1).

Though the narrator is describing Mrs. Darling’s womanhood and character, the terms in which he does so places her within the context of British imperialism, which was at its height during the time that Barrie wrote *Peter Pan*. For instance, the reference to “the tiny boxes from the puzzling East” is a direct allusion to the commodities that flowed into England as a result of Britain’s imperial conquests in China. In her comparison to “the tiny boxes from the puzzling East,” Mrs. Darling is reduced from person to commodity. She becomes conflated with her secret; she is desirable because of her unobtainable kiss, which the men in the text seek to possess. The narrator exaggerates this reduction in the terms used to discuss Mrs. Darling’s marriage when he writes, “they all ran to her house to propose to her except Mr. Darling, who took a cab and nipped in first, and so he got her. He got all of her, except the innermost box and the kiss” (1). Most striking in this passage is the way the text marks Mrs. Darling’s loss of agency by narrating her courtship as described as a race. Mrs. Darling, as exotic trinket, becomes a commodity that can be “nipped in” and “got.” Mrs. Darling, though kind and

2 This reduction alludes to the diminished agency of women in imperialist England. As Anna Davin highlights in her essay *Imperialism and Motherhood*, the state became
maternal, is not allowed the freedom and innocence that we see granted to Wendy, and certainly Peter, because of her tie to imperialism. Thematically, her kindness is offset by a violent and oppressive history that betrays the calm and nurturing tones that define Mrs. Darling.

It is this relation to commodity, through Mrs. Darling's correlation to imperialism, which contaminates Mrs. Darling and prevents her from being seen as pure figure. In chapter 4 of *The Case of Peter Pan*, Jacqueline Rose argues that money is seen as a poisonous force. She writes, “Money is something impure. It circulates and passes from hand to hand (children are warned that coins are dirty)...it is contaminated by association and exchange” (87). As Rose argues, money and commodity are seen as inherently impure, so by speaking of Mrs. Darling in these terms, the narrator subtly marks Mrs. Darling’s loss of innocence. By reducing Mrs. Darling from person to commodity through her tie to imperialism, Mrs. Darling demonstrates that adulthood erodes the self. As Mrs. Darling becomes an adult, she is pinned, shaped, and reduced to terms laid on her by English society.

But even more than her tie to the corruptive economy, Mrs. Darling represents the tension between faith and knowledge that define the adult/child dichotomy. When Wendy tells Mrs. Darling of Peter Pan, the narrator says, “[Mrs. Darling] had believed in him at the time, but now that she was married and full of sense she quite doubted whether they was any such person” (6). Here, the text positions knowledge (“sense”) and adulthood (“marriage”) as opposite to the freedom and play that Peter Pan represents; the existence of Peter Pan is threatened by the dynamically invested in the lives of women and the process of mothering a child. Davin writes, “Moreover the relationship between family and state was subtly changing....child-rearing was becoming a national duty not just a moral one: if done badly the state could intervene” (13). In imperialist England, women were reduced to their function of producing imperialist conquerors. The language that surrounds Mrs. Darling in this passage references this reduction.
sensibilities that growing up brings. As Mrs. Darling engages more with reason and sense, she forgets about the creative possibilities of adventure and magic represented by Peter and Neverland.

The contrast between faith and knowledge reflects the Edwardian conditions in which Barrie wrote *Peter Pan*. In his book, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind*, Samuel Hynes argues that a rejection of the science and a preoccupation with the psychic was characteristic of most Edwardian fiction writers. He writes, “The literature of the late Victorian and Edwardian periods includes a strain of super-naturalism and fantasy that seems to related to the main stream of English literature in something like the way that psychic research relates to science” (146). As Barrie’s text embodies the preoccupation with psychic and supernatural forces, he necessarily problematizes the pursuit of knowledge. This becomes prominently featured in the text through Peter’s discussion of fairies in the nursery. He explains to Wendy, “you see, children know such a lot now, they soon don’t believe in fairies and every time a child says, ‘I don’t believe in fairies,’ there is a fairy somewhere that falls down dead” (22). Here, knowledge literally becomes volatile to Neverland as it destroys the inhabitants of the island. This is contrasted with the iconic “Do you believe?” scene at the end of *Peter Pan*. After having saved Peter by drinking Hook’s poison, the narrator writes, “[Tinkerbell] was saying that she thought she could get well again if children believed in fairies... ‘Do you believe?’ [Peter] cried” (106). The effect of this request demonstrates the narrative’s advocacy for faith. Tinkerbell is rejuvenated, becoming healthier than she was before the poison. Belief, not science, is figured as medicine; knowledge becomes corruptive while faith is redeeming. In this opposition, the uneducated child becomes ideal when compared to the educated adult.
Finally, in addition to demonstrating the impurity of English cultural values, the way that Mrs. Darling strives to subscribe strictly to British social cues actually precipitates the Darling children's adventure to Neverland. The English removal of the children begins with Mrs. Darling's hanging of Peter's shadow. As she tries to figure out a place to leave Peter's shadow for retrieval, the narrator says, "Nana had no doubt of what was the best thing to do with this shadow. 'He is sure to come back for it; let us put it where he can get it easily without disturbing the children.' Mrs. Darling could not leave it hanging out at the window, it looked so like the washing and lowered the whole tone of the house" (9). What is critical here is that despite knowing what is the best way for Peter to retrieve his shadow, an event that she and Nana both predict will happen soon, Mrs. Darling goes against her maternal instincts to protect her children so that she can embody an English ideal of respectability. She is forced to negotiate her desires to protect her children with her responsibility of being an excellent homemaker. Therefore, she ignores Nana and by doing so, Mrs. Darling invites the disturbance that they both predict Peter will bring into the nursery.

The medicine scene that occurs during the Darling children's final night in the nursery magnifies the notion that English propriety precipitates the flight to Neverland. In preparation for bed the narrator writes:

Before bed, the children are required to take their medicine. Strong man though he was, there is no doubt that [Mr. Darling] had behaved rather foolishly over the medicine. If he had a weakness, it was for thinking that all his life he had taken medicine boldly, and so now, when Michael dodged the spoon in Nana's mouth, he said reprovingly, 'Be a man, Michael' (13).

The tension here is that the Darlings knows that to be good parents they must care for their children, which means giving them medicine to keep them healthy. However, Mr. Darling
realizes that taking medicine is not desirable and wants to avoid taking it himself, once again alluding to the tension between one’s desires and one’s responsibilities. The medicine scene quickly becomes a disaster as Mr. Darling plays a mean trick by secretly feeding Nana his medicine. Against his better judgment, as he negotiates between having himself be seen as a respected and authoritative father and his desire to be liked and coddled by his family, Mr. Darling locks Nana outside in a display of power, which directly sets the stage for the Darling children’s departure. The medicine figuratively becomes an English poison\(^3\) in the way that it becomes the cause of the Neverland adventure. Ultimately, the way that Mrs. Darling’s performance of adulthood precipitates the departure of her children establishes England as an unsuitable environment for children. The very social demands for order, discipline and daily routine in England push childhood out of the country, not maliciously, but because childhood stands in stark contrast to the adulthood that the nation demands.

Because of the opposition between tragic, struggling adulthood, which flourishes in England and pure, innocent youth, which cannot exist in England, Peter Pan requires a space to preserve childhood. Thus, the text demands that Neverland exist as a child sanctuary. The opening paragraph of Peter Pan works dynamically and subtly to state this demand. Concluding with the line, “Two is the beginning of the end” (1), the text posits urgency onto the quest to escape growing up. By putting an expiration date on childhood that is already overdue, the text raises the stakes of the desire to escape growing up. Rather than wanting to find Neverland, the

\(^3\) This trope becomes literalized later in the text when Captain Hook poisons Peter’s medicine in an attempt to kill him. In both instances, the children are pressured to take their medicine out of a paternal responsibility to care for the children as the parents leave which instigates disaster.
characters and readers of Peter Pan need to find Neverland. Neverland, as a space, functions as a bastion through which the purity of childhood can be preserved. The island realizes the desires of both Peter, who yearns for a place where he can shirk the duties of adulthood (“I never want to be a man; I want always to be a little boy and to have fun” [22]) and the Darling children who desire an environment of perpetual play.

Ironically, Neverland, the very fantasy that the narrative yearns for, is the device that reveals the textual instability of Peter Pan. As Neverland explores the limits and boundaries of eternal childhood, the distinctions between the compromised adult and the innocent child break down in such a way that the text actually undercuts its own belief in the sanctity of youth. Whether it is through the mischievous nature of Peter, which contradicts the idea of childhood innocence, or the children’s frequent play of adulthood which reflect a latent desire to grow up, Neverland resists its positioning as a utopian space and becomes a space through which Barrie can complicate, though not completely reject, the tropes of the child/ adult dichotomy.

The first way that Neverland resists its positioning as a perfect utopia is in the way that it encourages the mischievous behavior of the children who play on the island. The first time that we meet Peter in the nursery, the narrator writes, “He was a lovely boy, clad in skeleton leaves and the juices that ooze out of trees, but the most entrancing thing about him was that he had all of his first teeth. When he saw [that Mrs. Darling] was a grown-up, he gnashed the little pearls at her” (8). Here, as Peter is directly tied to nature through his clothing, he represents the

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4 The film version of Peter Pan exaggerates this urgency even more. When Mr. Darling kicks Nana out from the nursery, he also tells Wendy that it will also be her last night in the nursery. All of sudden, the quest to preserve childhood and the coming adventure to Neverland is given an immediacy because the narrative demands a way to save Wendy from being doomed to adulthood.
uncivilized and primitive state of the child unaffected by social demands. This directly correlates to what Jacqueline Rose argues to be a characteristic of the pure child redeemer. She writes, “Rousseau, like Garner, sets up childhood as a primitive state where ‘nature’ is still to be found if only one gets to it in time” (44). By noting Peter’s natural dress and baby teeth (which are another indicator of his arrested development and the stoppage of time), the narrator positions Peter as possessing the pure, natural quality that Rousseau argues to be characteristic of the uncorrupted child. The narrative argues that Peter becomes one who instantly needs to be preserved, which the text overtly states when the narrator notes, “we should have seen that he was very like Mrs. Darling’s kiss” (8), which functions as the remnant of her forgotten childhood. By comparing Peter to Mrs. Darling’s kiss, the text advocates for the preservation of Peter’s purity. It even forgives Peter for gnashing his teeth at Mrs. Darling by figuring the gesture as an act of self-defense.

However, as Peter and the children interact with Neverland, Peter’s playfully mischievous nature transforms into something much more sinister and wicked. This first happens as Peter prepares to escort the Darling children from the nursery to Neverland. When Peter realizes that Wendy could come to Neverland to be his mother, the narrator writes, “there was greedy look in his eyes now which out to have alarmed her, but did not.” (25). Unlike Peter’s previous act of violence and wickedness, which was figured as an act of protection, this one appears unwonted. It is as if the narrator has tapped into latent evil desires found within

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5 His clothing works in the same way that Wendy’s flower imagery marks her innocence.  
6 Peter is a character who very clearly works within the framework of the child redeemer. In her essay, “A Little Child Shall Lead Them”: The Child as Redeemer, Margot Hillel explains, “What threatens the child in literature today are social problems such as living in a dysfunctional family, where the absentee parent (now very often the mother) still figures prominently” (67). Peter fits directly into this troupe as he resists social problems of England and is living in Neverland because of his abandonment by his mother.
Peter. Peter, as an uncorrupted child, is supposed to be unaffected by greed, which is a staple of commodity culture, a feature that is associated with the adult world. Peter’s fluctuation from innocence to wickedness is best seen through the Darling parents who view Peter, not as child redeemer, but as kidnapper and violator. As we see through the Darling family’s mourning, Peter functions simultaneously in the text as both hero and transgressor. These flashes of wickedness, which reveal themselves through Peter’s behavior, slowly push Peter away from the pure child trope. His innocence is tainted by these sudden sinister moments that occur in the text.

However, the text of *Peter Pan* does not only reveal the latent wickedness in figures like Peter and the Lost Boys; it also argues that its readers are not as innocent as they would like to be. This happens when the Darling children first approach Neverland. The narrator projects ahead to give the reader a preview of the adventures and inhabitants that Neverland promises. When we meet Captain Hook, the narrator writes:

The blackest and largest jewel in the dark setting, reclined James Hook... he was cadaverous and blackavized, and his hair was dressed in long curls, which at the little distance looked like black candles...His eyes were of the blue of the forget-me-not, and of a profound melancholy, save when he was plunging into you, at which time two red spots appeared in them and lit them up horribly (41).

The attention to physical detail here is unlike any of the previous descriptions of characters that we have encountered before, where the narrator focuses on the moral and internal climate of a

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7 His journey to the Neverland is figured as a kidnapping by the Darling parents. Here, Peter literally becomes an allusion to the inherent violence found within the *Peter Pan* franchise. In *The Case of Peter Pan*, Jacqueline Rose details the character of Peter as he first appears in Barrie’s first book *The Little White Bird* in a short story. The protagonist of the text has kidnapped a child and in his efforts to appease and comfort the child, he tells him the story of Peter Pan. Here, it is Peter, not the adult, who becomes kidnapper and a symbol of violation.
character, rather than his or her physical description. As the narrator describes Hook, he is
dehumanized. He is reduced to his candle like hair, eyes that are melancholy or haunting, and
his hook, all which indicate a bodily disfigurement of Hook. This disfigurement functions as a
physical manifestation of Hook’s corrupted nature.

To demonstrate Hook’s violent and corrupt nature, the narrator writes:

Let us now kill a pirate, to show Hook’s method. Skylights will do...the hook
shoots forth, there is a tearing sound and one screech then the body is kicked
aside, and the pirates pass on (42).

While marking the violence that Captain Hook brings to Neverland, this passage also
problematicizes the child reader. In the discussion of Captain Hook, the narrator and the
reader have become accomplices to the murder of Skylights. The narrator’s prompt “let
us now kill a pirate,” implicates the reader into an act of casual violence that eschew the
conditions of child innocence that the text advocates. Through this violence, the reader is
separated from notions of innocence and purity and becomes a force that directly disrupts
Neverland’s fantasy of eternal childhood.

Hook does not only enact this violence; Peter and the Lost Boys also turn to
random acts of violence in their play on Neverland. This especially surfaces in chapter
11 “Wendy’s Story.” Upon hearing that Wendy wants to return to England, both the
Peter and the Lost Boys turn to violence as a way to cope with their disappointment. The
Lost Boys turn on Wendy and approach her menacingly, planning on keeping her hostage
in Neverland. Peter’s violence is more humorous and jarring. The narrator outlines,
“[Peter] breathed intentionally quick short breaths...he did this because there is a saying
in the Neverland that every time you breathe, a grown up dies; and Peter was killing them
off vindictively as fast as possible” (90). Here, as he tries to kill adults in England, Peter
becomes wrathful and vindictive in a way that mirrors Hooks own violence. The juxtaposition is that while Hook’s assault on Skylights is fraught with jarring, tearing imagery, Peter’s violence gets no textual response. The narrator refuses to let us know whether or not breathing on Neverland actually kills adults.⁸ By refusing to narrate the results of Peter’s intentions, Peter’s attack seems futile and therefore comically tragic.

Despite the fact that the characters’ interactions with Neverland resist dominant opinions of inherent child innocence, Peter Pan refuses to make an overtly subversive commentary on assumptions about childhood. In her book Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion Rosemary Jackson argues that utopias often engage in an inflammatory commentary on the world that the utopia opposes. She writes, “Fantasy has tried to erode the pillars of society by un-doing categorical structures…it has been possible to claim for the fantastic a subversive function in attempting to depict a reversal of the subject’s cultural formation.” (177). Barrie, however, doesn’t go as far as to reject cultural norms. Rather, he distorts them to engage in a more nuanced and dynamic conversation concerning cultural values. For instance, while noting the wickedness of childhood, the narrator also relishes in the latent corruption of the child. Before the children embark on their Neverland quest, they become devious and plotting. As the children are about to flee the nursery, the narrator notes, “their faces assumed the awful craftiness of children listening for sounds from the grown-up world. All was as still as salt” (26). The drama that surfaces here, and resonates throughout the text, is that the endearing qualities of youth are that children are crafty and innovative. However, as demonstrated here, these skills can be put to

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⁸ The text leaves this intentionally unanswered. As we have seen in the texts increased value of faith and the psychic, ones beliefs on and off of the island do, in fact, have very real, corporal effects.
negative use. Still, the narrator does not stop reveling in their craftiness; on the contrary, he seems to appreciate it.

This childhood deviance is not something that vanishes due to the journey to Neverland. As Barrie concludes Peter Pan, he writes “When Margaret grows up she will have a daughter, who is to be Peter’s mother in turn; and so it will go on, so long as children are gay and innocent and heartless” (143). The wickedness of children is not something that the narrative shirks away from. Being heartless is condition of childhood and it is something that the text values because it resists the decay, responsibility, and lack of imagination that characterizes the adult world.

The ambivalence that Peter Pan expresses to notions of childhood ultimately forces the reader to question whether the quest to preserve the purity of childhood is worthwhile. Childhood cannot be saved from corrupting influences because, as seen through the occasional acts of violence performed by the children in Neverland, childhood contains its own latent corruption within itself. Furthermore, as the narrator relishes in this inherent impurity found within childhood, the text questions whether it is the assumed innocence that makes childhood such a precious moment in one's life. Rather than relishing in the innocence of the child, Peter Pan praises the innovation and the craftiness that characterizes one’s youth, even if this creativity is used to engage in occasionally mischievous behavior. Neverland does, in fact, present a childhood that is precious and fleeting. However, through the subtle details of the text, it questions whether the quest to preserve the innocence is the right way to protect one’s childhood.

Even though the text strives to protect childhood, Peter Pan doesn’t repudiate adulthood altogether. On the contrary, the children in the narrative often express a hidden desire to grow up. This latent desire to mature is most prominently featured through the character of Wendy in
her constant preoccupation with mimicking adulthood. Other than opening paragraph of the text, Wendy is never figured as child. She is always seen as an adult. For instance, in an act of reconciliation for his conceit, Peter says, "'Wendy, one girl is of more use than twenty boys.' Now Wendy was every inch a woman, though there were not many inches" (21). The humor in this interaction is the disjuncture between the characters' opinions of Wendy. Peter sees Wendy as a mature girl. Wendy views herself as a little woman. As Wendy strives to be more womanly, she posits a tension within the text. The desires of the text and the narrator to preserve childhood are in direct conflict with Wendy’s desire to grow.

The irony of Neverland is that although it is supposed to be a place of eternal childhood, it actually strengthens the association between Wendy and womanhood. This is demonstrated in Chapter 6 of Peter Pan, "The Little House." Upon arriving on Neverland, the Lost Boys build a house to protect an injured Wendy. As an unconscious Wendy lists the demands for the house she desires, "I wish I had a pretty house, the littlest ever seen, with funny little red walls and roof of mossy green" (55), she literally becomes homemaker, a role that is reserved for the adult mother. But the correlation between womanhood and Wendy is made even more apparent after the house is built. The narrator writes, "The door opened and a lady came out. It was Wendy…'Of course, its frightfully fascinating, but you see I am only a little girl’" (57). Here, the shift in language that surrounds Wendy is critical. Whereas in England, Wendy was a girl who asserts her adulthood, in Neverland, Wendy is a woman who asserts her girlhood. Ironically, Neverland is a space that, despite being a bastion for childhood, allows for Wendy’s maturity. 9

9 The paradox here is between maturity and play. Wendy matures through her play. But in her play, she is marked as child. Through assuming the role of, Wendy simultaneously matures and defies age.
The tragedy of this desire to grow up is that although Wendy strives to be mother, she fails to understand the hardships that motherhood brings. When we first meet the Darling children they are pretending to be their parents. “[Mrs. Darling] had found her two older children playing at being herself and Father on the occasion of Wendy’s birth…Wendy had danced with joy, just as the real Mrs. Darling must have done” (10). When Wendy and John pretend to be their parents and re-enact their own birth, they play a carefree and unrestricted version of adulthood. They dance when they have their children (who is played by the youngest Darling, Michael) because they only see the joy of having a child and not the repercussions and demands that parenthood places on adult life. Their play contrasts the actual conditions of their birth, which, as we see earlier in the text, is fraught with anxiety about paying for their needs. Mr. Darling calculates, “I have one pound seventeen here, and two and six at the office; I can cut off my coffee at the office…” (2). Parenthood brings an entire new set of social and financial anxieties that Wendy and John do not capture in their play.

This evasion of motherhood’s responsibilities echoes in Neverland once Wendy has stopped playing mother and has started being mother. Once installed as Neverland’s mother, Wendy immediately preoccupies herself with the responsibility for caring for the Lost Boys. The narrator says, “I suppose it was all especially entrancing to Wendy, because those rampageous boys of hers gave her so much to do. Really, there were whole weeks when, except perhaps with a stocking in the evening, she was never above ground” (61). However, despite having a keen sense of the responsibilities of motherhood, her play lacks the gravity of motherhood’s expectations. The narrator constantly interjects the narrative to state that the events that happen in the home are make-believe, as he does in this scene where he notes Wendy often cooks imaginary food in an imaginary pot. Thus, Wendy’s understanding of adulthood is
limited. She understands that mothers have specific responsibilities such as nourishing her children but she does not understand the anxiety that mothers feel to actually succeed at these responsibilities. As we see through her insistence on keeping her parent’s memoires alive in Neverland, Wendy’s nostalgic concepts of Mother and Father are comforting because they do not reference their parental struggles.

In addition to Wendy’s preoccupation with playing adult, Peter also shows the desire for an adult presence in Neverland, despite the fact that adulthood is the very thing from which Peter is fleeing. The text nods to this before the Neverland adventure as Peter eavesdrops on the Darling Nursery. The narrator says, “[Wendy] was slightly disappointed when [Peter] admitted that he came to the nursery window not to see her but to listen to stories... ‘Oh, Wendy, your mother was telling you such a lovely story’” (24). Though he does not overtly yearn for an adult presence, Peter’s eavesdropping in the nursery to hear fairy tales does reflect a desire for the comfort that motherhood brings. This desire for a maternal presence is made all the more evident at the end of the book. At the end of the narrative, Peter returns to the Darling nursery to find Wendy all grown up. However, unlike the beginning of the text where Peter comes to the nursery to hear fairy tales and passively receive the maternal comfort that mothers bring, here Peter returns to directly find a mother. He writes, “I came back for my mother, to take her to the Neverland,” to which Jane, Wendy’s daughter, responds, “he does so need a mother.” (142). Though he does not want to admit it, Peter needs a mother. It is the comfort that motherhood brings that allows Peter to engage in the adventures that he undertakes in Neverland.

The way in which Barrie breaks down the adult/child dichotomy is nuanced but profound. At the beginning of the text, especially the first few chapters, Peter Pan subscribes to the dominant notions that childhood needs to be preserved because childhood, in its purity and
innocence, stands in stark contrast to compromised adulthood. In this dichotomy, the text demands that a fantasy such as Neverland to exist. However, once that fantasy comes to fruition, the text then undercuts itself and breaks down this dichotomy, which fantasizes for Neverland. As the characters interact with Neverland, childhood loses its so-called innocence. As we see through the mischievous behavior of Peter, children show signs of inherent corruption that stem from without social influences. By marking the inevitable loss of purity, the text argues that childhood is, in fact, something that might not necessarily need to be saved.

Furthermore, the text undercuts its own assumptions that adulthood is inherently flawed. The text begins by showing an adulthood that is fraught with struggle. However, as the characters interact with Neverland, adulthood gains a softness that is to be desired. Wendy mimics adulthood in her play because she finds something rewarding about taking care of children, a role that is reserved for the adult mother. The characters all yearn for the presence of the mother. Whether it is through Peter’s masked desire for motherhood by yearning for the maternal comforts that mothers bring or whether it is through the overt request of the Lost Boys who ask Wendy to be their mother, adulthood becomes something to be desired, not feared. Finally, as we see through the mourning of the Darling parents when their children leave the nursery, the responsibilities of adulthood do not exclude the creativity and innovation that the narrator argues makes childhood precious. Mr. Darling, as an act of solidarity and mourning for his departed children, locks himself up in Nana’s kennel. His adult sense of responsibility guides him to this punishment but it is child-like sense of creativity that creates this particular form of punishment.

The first stage of Peter Pan’s instability therefore is the fact that the text undercuts its own desire for Neverland to exist. By taking away the conditions that establish the need for
Neverland, the text rejects the opinion that Neverland is a utopia that is truly to be desired for the child. The narrative displays ambivalence toward Neverland as a space; while it is a fantasy, the text makes us question for whom is the space fantastical.

The text then makes another shift to reveal the instability of Neverland as a textual fantasy. *After Peter Pan*, questions the necessity of having Neverland function as a fantasy space against adulthood, the text demonstrates that, ultimately, Neverland fails at being a bastion for childhood. The children do, in fact, grow up to a certain extent, in Neverland. Furthermore, although the characters flee to the island to escape English pressures, once installed in their utopia, they begin to recreate England and are susceptible to its corruptive influences.

The fact that the children do eventually age is especially evident in Chapter 10 of *Peter Pan*, “The Happy Home,” which is a calmer chapter, providing a moment of respite between the Mermaid Lagoon adventure and the final fight against Captain Hook, both of which are adventures that are fraught with fear, anxiety, and melancholy. “The Happy Home” is critical in the exploration of Neverland as a space because of the way that it dispels the myth of Neverland as an escape from English responsibility. “The Happy Home” positions Neverland as a utopia that never realizes its own fantasy.

The chapter is significant in the way that it establishes Peter as a liminal character. That is to say, unlike the traditional myth of Peter Pan as a boy who never grows, “The Happy Home” positions Peter as a perpetually changing character. This first appears at the beginning of the chapter, as the Redskins celebrate Peter, praising him as the “The Great White Father” because he saved Tiger Lily from Captain Hook and his pirates in the Mermaid Lagoon adventure. The title, “The Great White Father” is one that Peter readily embraces. The narrator says:
They called Peter the Great White father, prostrating themselves before him; and he liked this tremendously, so that it was not really good for him. "The great white father," he would say to them in a very lordly manner, as the groveled at his feet, "is glad to see the Piccaninny warriors protecting his wigwam from the pirates" (81).

Peter’s embrace and revelry in this particular patriarchal and imperialist position is critical because it opposes Peter’s anxiety of growing up. Where Peter runs away from real world to Neverland because of the demands of adulthood, here Peter readily embraces this new title, which references a fantasized form of fatherhood that mirrors Wendy’s maternal performance.

Yet, Peter’s embrace of this particular patriarchal role is exoticized in the way that it accompanies Peter’s participation within the Redskin culture. Specifically, the opening narration serves to dehumanize the Redskins. The narrator says:

All night [the Redskins] sat above, keeping watch over the home under the ground and awaiting the big attack by the pirates which obviously could not be much longer delayed. Even by day they hung out smoking the pipe of peace, and looking almost as if they wanted tidbits to eat (81).

Here, rather than appearing as a people with a culture, the Redskins appear as barbaric creatures that function as guard dogs for Peter and the Lost Boys. The Redskin’s exotic status is further highlighted in the presentation of Tiger Lily. When Tiger Lily appears she says, “'Me Tiger Lily' that lovely creature would reply, 'Peter Pan save me, me his velly nice friend. Me no let pirates hurt him'” (81). Here, Tiger Lily’s fractured English and her description as “that lovely creature” further degrades the Redskins and positions them as inferior to the English subjects within the text. This contrast is made even more dramatic when compared to the English sensibilities that Wendy brings to Neverland. The fact that Peter revels in a patriarchal position given by the Redskins who are degraded as barbarians within the text serves to further separate

10 Interestingly, the actual guard dog in the story, Nana the Nurse, has human qualities projected onto her.
Peter from the English tradition. Rather than embrace form of fatherhood that bears responsibility, Peter is revered as a father, like a savior, but he is not accountable for anything. Where English fatherhood seemingly burdens one with responsibility, Peter's "fatherhood" releases him from responsibility, specifically the duty of keeping the Lost Boys safe from Captain Hook and his pirates, now that the Redskins are functioning as personal guards.

However, the text only briefly allows this comfort because, through a series of subtle narrative shifts, Peter's engagement in an initially exotic form of fatherhood given to him by the Redskins soon bleeds into a more Western form of fatherhood within his interactions with the Lost Boys. When Peter returns home in "The Happy Home", the following dialogue occurs:

'Children, I hear your father's step. He likes you to meet him at the door.'...He had brought nuts for the boys as well as the correct time for Wendy. 'Peter, you spoil them, you know,' Wendy simpered. 'Ah, old lady,' said Peter, hanging up his gun (82).

This scene is comical in the way that it mimics Western familial patterns. Peter becomes Father, functioning as the provider of the family while Wendy becomes Mother, who stays in the Lost Boys' hideout as the home maker. This Western depiction of adulthood is strengthened in the way that Peter's stubborn yet playful nature parallels Mr. Darling's behavior at the beginning of the text, specifically in the dancing that Wendy and Peter share much like the romp that Mr. and Mrs. Darling share in the nursery on the night that the children fly to Neverland. Peter's gradual slide into adulthood in this chapter is all the more jarring because it marks Neverland's failure. As a utopian space, it does not realize its own fantasy. In the way that Peter slowly assumes the role of "Father" in this chapter, Peter is placed within the very Western constraints of adulthood that he is trying to escape by running away to Neverland.
The final way that the text tears at its own promise of fantasy through Neverland is the way that Neverland ultimately gets distorted and turns into the inverse of what it desires. That is to say, while Neverland is supposed to be an environment where children can stay young and innocent, through the subtle textual details of *Peter Pan*, Neverland gets distorted into a corruptive influence on the children. Through the subtle details of the text, Neverland begins to embody the very ideals that make adulthood so fraught with anxiety and disappointment.

Whether it is through the sexual tension found between Peter, Wendy, Tinkerbell, and Tiger Lily or Captain Hook’s concern with good form and his appearance, Neverland slowly becomes a corruptive environment that acts as the inverse of its promise to preserve childhood.

The first way that Neverland corrupts is that, as we see through the text, Peter’s sexuality is heightened on the island. In *The Case of Peter Pan*, Jacqueline Rose says that childhood is critically opposite from sexuality. Rose writes, “Children’s fiction has never completely severed its links with a philosophy which sets up the child as a pure point of origin in relation to language, sexuality, and the state” (8). The child is assumed to be pre-sexual. *Peter Pan* follows this notion of sexuality (veiled in the less threatening terms of marriage or “the kiss” which is more appropriate for children’s fiction) as something that precludes childhood.

Whether it is through Mrs. Darling who is married and full of sense at the beginning of the novel, or Wendy, who is married and cannot return to Neverland at the end of the novel, the text directly connects sexuality with the loss of innocence and a disruption to the fantasy of Neverland.

Yet, despite being children, four of the characters in the novel, Peter, Tiger Lily, Wendy, and Tinkerbell are all characters that are fraught with sexual tension. This first incident that demonstrates this happens in the nursery before the Darling children depart for Neverland. The
narrator writes, “[Wendy] also said she would give [Peter] a kiss if he liked, but Peter did not know what she meant, and he held out his hand expectantly” (21). The pathos in this scene is the misunderstood sexual desires. Wendy desires a kiss but cannot have one because Peter does not understand what a kiss is. But instead of pursuing her sexuality, she pulls back and gives Peter a thimble instead. Here, Peter and Wendy’s veiled discussion of sexuality focuses on fetishized objects such as the thimble and the acorn, which echoes Mrs. Darling’s own hidden kiss, a commodified and fetishized reference to Mrs. Darling’s sexuality. In this textual echoing, Peter Pan disguises Peter and Wendy’s sexuality in the nursery as a playful and non-threatening exchange.

This is contrasted with the later presence of sexuality in “The Happy Home” when Wendy directly asks Peter how he feels about her. When he responds, “That of a devoted son” Wendy gets upset and “sat by herself at the extreme end of the room” (85). Peter however, cannot understand the reason for her frustration. He says, “You are so queer, and Tiger Lily is just the same. There is something she wants to be to me, but she says it is not my mother” (85). Here, the pursuit of sexuality is a bit more direct. Rather than hesitating about sexuality, Wendy, Tiger Lily, and Tinkerbell directly refer to their sexual desires.11 Though not quite overt, the overall sense is that Wendy’s awareness and comfort with her sexuality has increased during her time on the island. The humor and the tragedy in this scene is that the sexual awareness that Wendy, Tinkerbell, and Tiger Lily display is beyond Peter.

11 There is a contrast between Mrs. Darling’s hidden sexuality and the overt way that Wendy pursues her sexuality on the island, which ultimately demonstrates that Neverland augments sexuality, a traditionally corruptive force in children’s literature.
Unlike sexuality, which the text only gently implies as a corruptive force on the island, *Peter Pan* posits class issues as an overtly corruptive presence on the island. As we have seen at the beginning of the text, the Darlings’ struggles as adults are rooted in financial and class based anxieties. Whether it is through the suspenseful calculations of the cost of raising children or the drama of needing to have a nurse but not being able to afford one, the tragedy of the Darling’s depiction of adulthood is that their class standing prevents them from both fulfilling the middle class bourgeois values and being true to their desires and creativity. In his book, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind*, Samuel Hynes argues that this attention to class is not uncommon in Edwardian literature. He writes, “To Edwardians of social conscience [poverty] was a crime that the world’s richest nation could not neglect. The ‘crime of poverty’ (a phrase that recurs in writings of the time) had been made more visible in the years around the turn of the century by the development English sociology” (54). Though a very grave issue, Barrie installs this in the narrative of *Peter Pan*. When the Darlings, as adults, are forced to balance their desires with their responsibilities, they struggle to do so because of their impoverished class standing. As they strive to be middle class bourgeois citizens, they recognize they need to possess certain luxuries. However, financially, they cannot afford it. The Darling’s class struggle reflects the fact that at the time, the economic conditions of England were a point of cultural contention.

In building its utopian status, the island plays out this contrast between the class conditions in England and Neverland specifically in the way that Neverland constructs itself as a class-less environment. In Neverland, one’s desires are unfettered by one’s class standing and one’s financial positioning. One of the things that become magical and enchanting about Neverland is the agency of the mind. If the children do not have something they desire, they merely imagine it. This is made increasingly evident during the dinner scenes with the Lost
Boys in chapter 7, “The Home Under the Ground.” As the narrator details the dinners of in Neverland, he says, “You never exactly knew whether there would be a real meal or just a make-believe, it all depended upon Peter’s whim...Make-believe was so real to him that during a meal of it you could see him getting rounder” (61). Here, Peter’s desires physically manifest themselves in ways that the Darling’s simply cannot in England. In Neverland, meals are whimsical because they are not fettered by materiality and financial strain. If they do not have something, they simply imagine it. Therefore, while the physical manifestations of one’s imagination are a sign of Neverland’s magic, they also remove class as a social institution from Neverland.

However, Neverland as a class-less environment is offset by the presence of Captain Hook on the island. After Hook kidnaps the Wendy and The Lost Boys, the narrator describes Hook saying, “[Hook] had been to a famous public school; and its traditions still clung to him like garments, which indeed they are largely concerned...but above all he retained all the passion for good form. Good form! However much he may have degenerated, he still knew that this is all that really matters.” (109). Through his descriptions, Hook places qualifiers on objects; he attended a famous school and is obsessed with good form. As Hook relishes in these concrete and elevated luxuries, he necessarily devalues the power of the imagination that makes

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12 This directly contrasts the way that the Darling family interacts with food in the *Peter Pan*. In the beginning of the text, the responsibility of providing food is viewed as the basis for the Darling’s class struggle. In Chapter 2, “Peter Breaks Through,” the narrator explains, “As they were poor, owing to the amount of milk the children drank, this nurse was a new prim Newfoundland Dog, called Nana” (3).

13 Peter is also concerned with “good form.” However, Peter’s obsession with “good form” is more about moral standing and fair play rather than aristocratic convention. For instance when Peter suggests that The Darling’s kill a pirate, he says, “You don’t think I would kill him while he was sleeping! I would wake him first, and then kill him. That’s the way I always do.” Peter’s obsession with “good form is focused more on fairness rather than class.
Neverland a fantasy. Rather, he focuses on reputation and aristocratic opinion, things that are excluded when the kids create from their imagination. This class hierarchy becomes an overt presence when the narrator depicts Hook’s loneliness. He says, “This inscrutable man never felt more alone than when surrounded by his dogs. They were socially inferior to him” (109). The text makes two moves with Hook to allude to class hierarchies. It makes a gentle allusion through the details of Hook’s garb but also a more brazen one through Hook’s relations to his crew. Thus, Hook tears at the fantasy that Neverland promises because, in his preoccupation with clothing, tradition, and good form, Hook sets up a class hierarchy that Neverland seeks to defy.

The text of Peter Pan raises the stakes of the presence of class in Neverland by having class function as a corruptive force on the inhabitants of the island. In other words, Peter Pan does not merely argue that Neverland fails as a safe haven from class; it pushes this farther and argues that Neverland, in fact, brings about the moral degradation that class makes class issues so insidious. In the final fight with Captain Hook, Hook strives to corrupt Peter, who fights with dignity and honor throughout the battle. Numerous times Peter refuses to take the final killing strike against Hook because of his morality. As Hook becomes frantic and bestial he loses his good form:

He had one last triumph, which I think we need not grudge him. As he stood on the bulwark looking over his shoulder at Peter gliding through the air, he invited him with a gesture to use his foot. It made Peter kick instead of stab. At last Hook had got the boon for which he craved. “Bad form,” he cried jeeringly, and content to the crocodile. Thus perished James Hook” (123).

The tension is that as Hook realizes his inevitable doom, he desires to corrupt Peter. He recognizes Peter’s focus on moral “good form” and strives to ruin it. The text, therefore, creates a subtle class struggle in this scene in the opposition between the morally inferior aristocrat that
Hook represents and the morally superior, classless boy that Peter is. As Hook realizes his inevitable doom, the battle becomes not about life or death but rather, Peter’s purity. Ultimately, in the way that Hook prompts Peter to kick him during the fight, Hook wins. As we have seen throughout the text, Peter is defined by his code of honor. He will not kill a sleeping pirate; he always gives somebody a fair chance. Hook, through his attention to class and good form, notices this admirable quality in Peter and ruins it. Peter is corrupted specifically because of the subtle presence of class in the text.

This brief moment moral degradation is heightened, however, because it is off set by the narrator’s sense of duty in this scene. The way the narrator begins the conclusion of the battle by saying “He had one last triumph, which I think we need not grudge him,” shows that the narrator is just as focused on good form and honor as Peter and Hook are. Though he is clearly championing for Peter, the narrator feels compelled to report Hook’s triumph, almost as if it were the last rites for the deceased. The text frames Peter’s corruption and moment of bad form with the narrator’s sudden assumption of unbiased narration to exaggerate Peter’s transgression.

Overall, the way that sexuality and class function as corruptive influences on the island dispels the fantasy of Neverland. Neverland is supposed to be a haven from the corruption that is so prevalent in England. However, through the details of the text, Neverland begins to replicate these influences. The text tears at its own fantasy by turning the island into the inverse of its own desires. Throughout the narrative Wendy and Peter are in more danger of growing up and becoming corrupted by English values on Neverland than they are England.

The narrative drama of Peter Pan, then, is that, although the text crafts Neverland as a fantasy, it undercuts itself and disallows true escapism within the island. Neverland, as a utopian
space, undergoes a slow devolution of fantasy. *Peter Pan* begins by positioning childhood as a pure and innocent moment in one’s life, which, therefore, must be preserved. However, as the text develops, it slowly rejects these notions. As we see Peter, the Darling family, and the Lost Boys interact with the island, the distinctions between the struggle and anxiety of adulthood and the pure youth of childhood become challenged and complicated so that, ultimately, the text problematizes Neverland as a fantastic space. As we see through *Peter Pan*, Barry challenges notions that children are inherently innocent and adults do not necessarily lose the creative energy that characterizes childhood. Then it demonstrates the adulthood is not necessarily a negative stage in one’s life. Finally, as the disappointments of adulthood surface on Neverland, Neverland fails as a child sanctuary. The kids must grapple with the same social pressures in Neverland as they would have in England. This ultimately questions whether or not it is even possible to preserve the child in Neverland.

Despite the complicated discourses that surround Neverland, *Peter Pan* still relishes in the fantasy that the island promises in such a way that Neverland, as a utopian space, becomes dynamically ambivalent rather than rejected. The text resonates with mythos because, despite the distortion that Neverland undergoes as a fantasy, it still locates purity and charm within the plight of the child. When Barrie writes, “Second to the right and straight on till morning” (30), he signals that Neverland is a complicated fantasy that never ceases to be enchanting.
Bibliography


