

Psychoanalysis at the Theatre

PETER PAN



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Peter Pan

J. M. Barrie (1860-1937)

Premiere: Duke of York Theatre,
London, 1904
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Jill Savege Scharff

James Matthew Barrie, a Scottish journalist and playwright, later Baronet Barrie, was a peculiarly small man, shy, and insecure except around a child or a motherly woman with whom he could be intimate in an a-sexual way. At 4 feet 6 inches he was indeed short in stature but he was huge in imagination. He had an extraordinary capacity to use his creative mind to compensate for own emotional deprivation and to divert the sorrows of the world into entertainment. He was the ninth child of his parents Margaret

Ogilvy and David Barrie of Kirriemuir, Scotland. Seven of the Barrie children were girls, of which several died in infancy. The eldest was a boy who had left home and was 26 when James was 7, the age at which life changed suddenly for him, when his brother David (named after his father and the only other son at home) died in a skating accident at the age of 13. This devastated James's mother and led her to withdraw into a deep depression in which she was communicating emotionally only with her dead son David. This was painful to her live children, and the emotional stress on James, her only other son at home, stunted his growth. James attempted to replace his mother's lost son by imitating him and dressing like him, and while he could never live up to the ideal, in the process he became extremely close to his mother, which had a profound effect on the development of his attitude toward women and children. At age 34 he married the actress Mary Ansell, but they had no children, and the marriage ended when she had an affair 15 years later. They had had no sexual relations because Barrie was unable to consummate the marriage. I guess that this followed from hormone deficiency going along with his stunted growth, but Barrie explained it in psychological terms by saying, "Boys can't love" (Dunbar 1970).

Barrie's father, a weaver, had little to do with the children. Not much is revealed about him except that James was proud of him. In life, as in the play, the father is a marginalized character. All James's energies were directed towards his mother. After the death of Margaret Ogilvy's mother, which had

occurred when Margaret was 8 years old, all her energies went towards her father, a literate stonemason who loved poetry and religion. As a young woman, Margaret Ogilvy joined the Calvinist splinter group, the “Auld Lights” that believed in original sin and predestination. From this background, she told many tales of fantasy and spirit-life that were to inspire James’s imagination. She was grieved by the loss of her daughters, but not all children were expected to survive infancy in those times, and she may have got over that to some extent but not the loss to follow. It was the death of her son David that undid her, and her grief for him would last 29 years until her death – one year after Barrie’s marriage to Mary.

As a result, James immersed himself in his mother’s world of childhood memories and fantasy, which were the direct inspiration for his early writing of *Auld Licht Idylls* and later for his most famous work *Peter Pan* in which his title character combines the image of a boy who never grew up (his brother David) with one who was small, naughty, inventive, and endlessly charming (himself). In linking Peter with Wendy who carries his nickname, Barrie fashions a loving mother devoted to him instead of to her actual children. And in the end he sends Peter off without her, much as he might have wished to keep his brother out of his mother’s mind.

The idea for the Darling Family

For the family setting of *Peter Pan*, Barrie drew on his friendship with the Llewellyn Davies family. When he met a beautiful woman called Sylvia, the young Mrs. Llewellyn Davies, at a dinner party she realized that he was the fun-loving man her son George (named for mother's father George du Maurier, the novelist) had mentioned having played with in Kensington Gardens. George was the living inspiration for the character of David, the boy in *The Little White Bird*, a collection of stories including some that introduce Peter Pan as a boy who has escaped from his nursery by flying out the window to live in Kensington Gardens where he plays the pipes. He is a "betwixt-and-between," a half-boy/half-bird, who is "ever so old," "one week old," and "always the same age."

Barrie enjoyed talking to Sylvia and entertaining her sons, George, John, Michael, Peter and Nicholas with tales and games that became the basis for the more fully developed *Peter Pan*. And it seems to me that Barrie spent more time with that family than in his marriage, not as a rival lover for Sylvia but as another of her children. Sylvia's husband Arthur was not so delighted by Barrie but he put up with him as a close family friend. Barrie was also involved with Sylvia's relatives, the literary du Maurier family. Sylvia's brother Gerald du Maurier played Mr Darling/ Captain Hook, and her niece Angela played Wendy (in full, Wendy Moira Angela Darling – I have not been able to figure out where the 'Moira' comes from). Nana, the nurturing dog-nanny in the play is a Newfoundland, not unlike like the St. Bernard that

James Barrie had given Mary as a wedding gift. The Barries named their dog Porthos after the dog in the novel Peter Ibbotson by George du Maurier, Sylvia's father, and Peter Pan was named after Peter Llewellyn Davies, who in turn was named after Peter Ibbotson in his grandfather's novel. For James Barrie, life and fantasy were intertwined.

I imagine Sylvia and Arthur, in typically English (as opposed to Scottish) custom, addressing each other as 'Darling,' and so inspiring the name of the family in the play. Their son and grandfather George gives their name to the father, Peter gives his name to the title character Peter Pan, John to one of the children and Michael, Barrie's favorite, to the other, although Michael is said to most resemble Peter Pan, and Wendy was Barrie's own nickname. Barrie remained devoted to the Llewellyn-Davies children, and finagled the right to adopt them after their widowed mother's death in 1910. Sadly, George died in World War 1, Michael drowned with his lover when they were college men, and Peter committed suicide in his 63rd year after the death of his brother John.

The dark side of J M Barrie

My Scottish mother, a huge fan of J. M. Barrie, thought he was a literary genius: my father thought he was a child molester. Many questions remain about Barrie. Was he "a man who filled the vacuum of his own sexual

impotence by a compulsive desire to possess the family who inspired his most famous creation, Peter Pan ... or a charming hero, devoted to large dogs and small children ... a genius with a great heart” (Picardie 2008). Was he really involved in his brother's death, and did he blight the family he loved and cast the shadow of death upon them, as Dudgeon asserted (2008)? Or was he a lonely man who did everything for the boys he'd adopted and adored, as John's grand-daughter Henrietta said, and truly “an innocent” according to Nico's daughter Laura (qtd. Picardie 2008)? Birkin agrees with them, writing, “Yes, of course Barrie was a lover of childhood, but was not in any sexual sense the pedophile that some claim him to have been” and yet Birkin is disturbed by sensuous undertones in lyrical passages that describe an adult undressing a child and sleeping with him (qtd. Picardie 2008). Picardie concludes that Barrie's intention was not to stimulate adult sexual desire in boys, but to join them in the innocence of eternal youth.

Yet Barrie had a cruel streak expressed in fantasy in other chapters in *The Little White Bird* and in Peter's thoughts of how he liked to torture people. In actuality, the sinister side of him emerged when he succeeded in becoming the legal guardian of the Llewellyn Davies boys by devious means after their mother's death in 1910. Their mother Sylvia scribbled a note indicating that she wanted her sister Jenny, helped by the children's faithful nanny Mary, to care for them. When Barrie transcribed the note, he changed the name from Jenny to Jimmy, sent it to the maternal grandmother as if it were Sylvia's will,

and the boys fell to him. Whether this mistake was conscious or unconscious, Barrie's obsession with his adoptive family was then complete: he now had his own lost boys. There is no report of any pedophilic activity with the boys, and I think it may have remained mainly an unconscious interest that sought expression in a few pieces of writing that are creepy to modern ears, and instead took the form of identification with the boys and possessiveness of them. The boys complained that Barrie removed them from their parents' friends after he had adopted them; and Peter, who recognized Barrie's genius but remained bitter over the exploitation of being linked to Peter Pan, burned all Barrie's letters to Michael because they were "just too much."

The idea for the play

I have reviewed the manifest content of Barrie's experience that informed the setting of his play – his family history, Oedipal conflict, and pre-oedipal trauma only partly covered over by closeness to his mother through love of tales, and his intense interest in lively interaction with young boys. But how did he work from there to create a genius work of fiction? Barrie claimed that he had no memory of writing the play. This says to me that it was written in a state of dissociation, as if transmitted to him from the children. Karpe (1956) suggests that it must have flown in the window of his mind from his unconscious. As for the skill of flying, he tells the children they will succeed if they "think lovely thoughts", a reminder of his mother who he described as

“God of all who looked to beautiful thoughts.” Most people think of flying as a symbol of power and freedom. But in Karpe’s view, the children who fly up into the sky from their sleep must be dead children, a way of conceptualizing the loss of his brother who skated to his death. *Peter Pan*, a simple play that is apparently about childhood fantasy also addresses our major preoccupation with aging and death versus youth and immortality, and that explains its resonance with people of all ages.

Peter Pan’s prowess elicits admiration not only among the lost boys in Never Neverland but also in the apparently happy Darling children whose bedtime routine and lovely mother he longs to share. His courage and sense of freedom attract John and little Michael, and his naiveté and sense of longing for what is lost elicit motherly feelings in Wendy – and the beginnings of romance. With no concern for their parents’ worry and grief, the children leave their life of bedtimes, medicine, and a grumpy father to taste the liberty of Never Neverland. The boys, newly courageous like Peter, will have adventures, and Wendy, patient and loving like Mrs. Darling, will mother the lost boys. The children meet beautiful mermaids and feisty Indian girls who tease and protect the lost boys. Thanks to Peter’s cleverness and courage, they barely escape death at the hands of Captain Hook and the pirates, at last returning home to a household where they are welcomed without reproach. The only one in the doghouse is the father who is held responsible for their escape.

The symbols in the play

I like to speculate on the meaning of some of the symbols in the play. I see the window as the opening to the world of the mind. A fantasy of youth and daring flies in, and draws the children to a world of play and adventure. It gives access to the world of fantasy and dreaming where anything is possible and time stands still. It also opens the window of the child's imagination to adults, and as we look through it to what lies beyond, we re-experience our thrills, adventures, and fears of pirates and monsters, this time without the terror of being a dependent child. I see the crocodile as aggression that is denied but then creeps up on us, and as death that comes and takes us eventually. I see the clock inside the crocodile as the passage of the years towards the approach of death, and the foiling of the crocodile's intentions gives us room to breathe a bit longer. I see the shadow as the dark side of Peter, as his own reflection, and as the companion of his narcissistic self. I see the fairy Tinkerbell as the light, naughty, jealous, part of him. Tinkerbell has a sexually provocative, possessive nature that sees Wendy as a rival who must not be kissed. Yet Tinkerbell loves and defends Peter fiercely, even willing to die for him. In the end, Peter Pan saves her and stays with her forever. Her efforts to keep him from loving a human girl, keep him from loving anyone but himself.

Phallic prowess and preening are part of Peter's attraction. I note that

“peter” came into use as a synonym for penis in 1902, the same year in which Peter Pan first appeared in Barrie’s story *The Little White Bird*. I fully believe that Barrie took the name from the child Peter, but by a happy accident the name fits the phallic character of the motherless Peter. At other points in the play male prowess is mocked. The pirates glorify the Captain yet hold him in contempt. The children copy their father’s adulthood yet mock his seriousness and insecurities. And the lost boy who is so proud of killing “the Wendy bird” is suddenly in disgrace for hurting the thing that is to be their mother.

This takes us to the part where Wendy, separated from John and Michael, flies in to join Peter and the lost boys and become their mother. She arrives with an arrow apparently through her heart. This image recalls the felling of Barrie’s mother by the death of her son David. What brings Wendy back to life? The kiss that she had received from Peter earlier. Since Peter did not understand or want kisses, his kiss takes the form of a button that Wendy wears as a long necklace around her neck. The arrow, it turns out, has struck the metal button and has not entered her heart after all. This recalls the love of Barrie, Margaret Ogilvy’s only remaining son at home, as the one thing that pulled his mother out of total grief so that she could relate at least to him.

The undertow of Peter Pan

Barrie has Peter Pan steal the children away from their adoring mother:

He gets Wendy as a mother for himself and leaves the mother without any children. Comparing the tale of Peter Pan to Barrie's life story, we note that Barrie through his character Peter Pan inflicts upon his mother who lost her son, the further loss of all her children. He gains a younger, more fun-loving mother for himself, and a companion- housekeeper, similar to the role his mother had played for her father. And in the end he makes reparation by returning the children unharmed to the Darlings.

Mr. Darling is a conscientious, burdened man with an emphasis on limits and duty. In the play-within-a-play the actor who plays him traditionally also plays Captain Hook, the vain, aggressive, sly pirate with a hook in place of the hand that Peter cut off and fed to the crocodile, who having a taste o' the captain now wants the rest of him. In the early years of development, a boy wants and needs his mother. He fears the authority of the father and imagines him as a man who wants to kill him so that he cannot have his beloved mother. The child also wants to kill the father and steal the mother to have her all to himself. Looking at Hook, a child can imagine the all-powerful father as a castrated warrior, followed by a crocodile that wants to finish him off, a murderous feeling about which a child feels guilty and for which he fears punishment as severe as having a body part cut off. Having avoided him for years, in the end Captain Hook prefers to give his life to the crocodile and accept his fate than to die in dishonor of defeat at the hands of Peter. In never growing up, Peter refuses to identify with his father, never

challenges his competence, and leaves the father without any satisfaction. In giving himself up to the crocodile, Captain Hook avoids the necessity of allowing Peter to have power over him. Peter never grows up, and the father figure as Hook never hands over the mantle of masculine authority to Peter. In the end the father, Mr. Darling is a cipher, a nonentity in his family, and his only hope for recognition rests on the lost boys who promise him respect in order to get the mother they want.

Mrs. Darling is a devoted, indulgent, fun-loving mother. Unlike her husband who is shown to have a dark side epitomized by his casting as Captain Hook, the actress who plays her does not double as any other character traditionally. However, in the production I saw at Olney Theatre Center, the actress who plays the mother also takes the role of one of the pirates who want to steal Peter, and shows a more aggressive, possessive part of her that lies under her way of pulling the children towards her through love and fun. The faithful dog becomes the pirate second in command (as she is in life) and the timid, sneezy maid who dares not dance becomes the opposite, the brave and beautiful Indian girl who saves Peter. In these choices, the director shows us how the child has an image of the good mother that the child needs and loves, and within it lies an image of the bad mother which the child hates and of which the child is terrified. She plays with the relationship between the father as master and the dog as servant, and extends it into the pirate scenes, and she gives the most inhibited woman on the stage

the chance to realize a fantasy of female power.

Wendy is a good girl, fully identified with her mother, a wonderful older sister. She longs to escape the bonds of her femininity but also accepts her future role as wife and mother. The image on the cover of the playbill for the production of *Peter Pan: The Musical* at Olney Theatre Center in Maryland shows Wendy looking wistfully toward Peter. This helped me realize that Peter represents Wendy's longing to do what a boy could do. There are some girls for whom the longing to be a boy is quite strong and persists until puberty ends that fantasy, and pulls her towards finding a man to love and have a family with. The part of Wendy has traditionally been played by a small woman whose voice resembles that of a boy soprano, but in the Olney production, the director follows the modern trend of casting a young man in the role, an interesting shift, and one that brings Peter closer to the identity of the boys in the audience and to Barrie's concept of himself, but takes him away from the pre-pubertal girl's fantasy. In the last scene we meet grown-up Wendy's daughter Jane, the little girl in the next generation looking for fun with Peter Pan. Remember that it is Mrs. Darling who is the first to see the boy at the window. Thus a mother's fantasy is conveyed to her daughter, as James's mother's fantasy of an ideally powerful, imaginative man (based on her father, the poetic stonemason) had been conveyed to James.

The universal appeal of Peter Pan

In the character of Peter Pan, Barrie gives expression to an appealing fantasy of self-sufficiency, omnipotence, and eternal youth. The play creates a transitional space in which anything is possible, loss does not matter, death can be reversed, and the reality of time can be denied for a while. The clock is ticking but we can pretend it is not for us. We can return to the wonders of Never Neverland. We can freely enjoy the depths and whimsy of our unconscious spread before us as a memory of the lost joys of childhood. Unlike Mr. Darling, who had all the pressures of being the breadwinner while sometimes feeling like a little boy who hates his medicine, Peter Pan never has to grow up and face the reality of earthly existence. He is not tied to the ground. He can fly! He can fly into trouble when he feels like stirring up conflict or adventure. He can fly out of danger. He feels powerful, pleased with himself, seductive, and persuasive. Yes, he has suffered the loss of a family but he presents himself as the one who rejected them at birth. So he sets his own agenda, and creates his own family, not by marrying a woman, but by attracting other lost boys to himself. And the play Peter Pan attracts audiences of men and women, boys and girls to enjoy the fantasy and the playful turns and twists that help us take the medicine and confront our own mortality.

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