

Il paese dove nor si muore mai:
Peter Pan and Today's Society

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*When I am a man
I will be an astronaut,
and find Peter Pan.
Second star on the right,
Straight on 'til morning.*

~ Kate Bush - "In Search of Peter Pan"

As a child, dreams are a dime a dozen, but as you get older you are not allowed to indulge in those childhood fantasies. Never, Never Land is a place where you can stay a child for as long as you want and have fun for the rest of your life. The story of *Peter Pan*, by James Matthew Barrie, can be read as a revelation of the problems arising in Post-Modern society. These problems arise from acting like the child we long to keep forever. This is seen in the actions of the characters in *Peter Pan*.

“‘To be born is to be wrecked on an island.’ James Matthew Barrie was cast ashore on May 9th, 1860, in a four-room cottage in the Brechin Road of the little town of Kirriemuir, seventeen miles north of Dundee, surrounded by some of the most beautiful country in Scotland” (*J.M. Barrie: A Walck Monograph*, 9). His father, David Barrie, was a handloom weaver and his mother, Margaret Ogilvy was a traditional Scottish housewife.

The Barrie household was typical of the God-fearing, industrious and ambitious Scots of the last two centuries, living in the strange combination of almost savage independence and a truly Christian sense of communal duty and fellowship so well depicted by Barrie in his later “Thrums” novels.

(*J.M. Barrie: A Walck Monograph*, 9)

James was the sixth of ten children. In the winter of 1867, the second oldest son, David, died in a skating accident just before his fourteenth birthday. At that point, James realized that by dying young, his brother would stay a boy forever. (*J.M. Barrie: The Man Behind the Image*, 9-10)

After David's death, Margaret went into a deep depression. She withdrew herself from her children. James became very disturbed by his mother's actions. He longed to make her happy, so he pretended to be his brother David. Their relationship slowly grew stronger and Margaret was roused from her depression. Margaret and James spent much of their time together. They made up stories and Margaret would tell James stories about her childhood in Scotland. Because of this interaction with his creative side, brought on by his mother's depression, James started to develop a passion for writing.

In 1884, Barrie packed up and moved to London because of an acceptance to *The Times*. Three years later, he was being published by the majority of the important papers circulating at the time. Barrie also started to compile *Scotland Stories*, which quickly became a best seller. Due to the success of this book, James decided to publish two more stories to complete his Scotland Trilogy. All three books were very popular and best sellers (*James M. Barrie: Author of Peter Pan*).

In 1894, James fell in love with the actress Mary Ansell. They married shortly after. Then Barrie met with disappointment when he discovered that his wife would not have children. After their marriage they moved to Kensington Gardens and stayed there till they were divorced in 1909 (www.kirjasto.sci.fi/jmbarrie.html).

In 1895 James mother, Margaret Ogilvy, died. Barrie returned home to see her buried. Heart-broken, Barrie wrote *Margaret Ogilvy* in the memory of his mother. Two years after her death, Barrie finally achieved the status of the great writer that he wanted to be, but it was too late for his mother to enjoy the glory he contributed to her. He was recognized as a great writer in both Britain and the United States. His mother never lived

to see her favorite son become one of the greatest artists of his day (www.kirjasto.sci.fi/jmbarrie.html).

Shortly after this tragedy, Barrie started to seek the company of children in Kensington Garden. While walking Porthos, his dog, through the garden, he met the Davies boys. George, Jack, and Peter Davies started meeting Barrie everyday in the park. Barrie would tell them stories to which the boys would act out adventures. Barrie later met Sylvia Davies, the mother, who he immediately fell in love with. While in the garden, he also met four-year-old Margaret Henley, who was the daughter of W.E. Henley. She would call James “my friendly,” but because she could not pronounce her R's, she would call him “fwendy” or “wendy.” Margaret died at the age of six (www.kirjasto.sci.fi/jmbarrie.html).

Michael Davies, the fourth child, was born in 1900 and Barrie automatically made him his favorite child. He became the prototype for Peter Pan. Up until Michael was born, Peter had been Barrie's favorite. This caused some pain for poor Peter who now became second best. Barrie was so taken with the boys that he took pictures of them dressed up as Peter Pan and other characters, such as pirates, and Porthos was dressed as a tiger. These pictures inspired Barrie to finally write *The Little White Bird*, which was then published in 1902 and was the first concrete plan for *Peter Pan* (*J.M. Barrie: The Man Behind the Image*).

On November 23, 1903 Barrie started work on *Peter Pan*. The following day Nicholas Davies was born. James started working harder than ever, trying to fit every Davies family member into his new play. The Davies family, as a whole, became the Darling family, Michael became Peter, Porthos became Nana, George became Mr.

Darling, and Wendy was inspired by both little Margaret Henley and Barrie's mother Margaret. Captain James Hook was Barrie's projection of himself into the story. James chose the name Peter because of what he heard Peter Davies recall the Tommy Sandys' play "The Happy Boy," in which the boy could never grow up and runs away from pain and death and is made wild (*J.M. Barrie: A Walck Monograph*).

Never, Never Land, like Peter said, was a heaven for children who had died. Barrie had a great empathy for children who died and wanted to create a perfect place where they could be happy. Although none of the children in the story *Peter Pan* were dead. Peter Davies thought that when children died, Peter Pan would take them on a journey to a place called Never, Never Land. In response, George said that "dying must be an awfully big adventure!"

Barrie finished *Peter Pan* and on December 27, 1904 at Duke York's Theatre, London, it is performed for the first time. This original script, along with costumes and set, ran till 1954. In 1911 *Peter Pan* became a narrative piece called Peter & Wendy. In 1928 *Peter Pan* was finally published. Every Christmas Peter Pan is revived and it still packs houses. Some scenes, such as the "Mermaid's Lagoon" were cut, but have now been returned (*J.M. Barrie: A Walck Monograph*).

In 1907, Arthur Llewellyn Davies dies of cancer. James felt that the boys needed a father figure, so he bought a house closer to the Davies so that he could help Sylvia take care of them. In 1909, Sylvia became very ill. In May of 1910, Sylvia Davies died of cancer and James became the foster father of the Davies boys (www.kirjasto.sci.fi/jmbarrie.html).

In 1914, George and Peter joined the army. Jack had already joined the Navy. In March of 1915 James wrote to George “I surely hope that we may all be together again once at least.” Four days after this letter was sent they learned that George had died. In 1919 Jack got married and Michael went off to Oxford. In May 1921, James was struck by another harsh blow. Michael drowned in the Thames at the age of twenty. From then on, Michael was referred to as “the boy that will never be old.”

Sir James Matthew Barrie died on June 3, 1937 with Nicholas and Peter at his side and was “buried at Kirriemuir, in a grave beside those of Margaret Ogilvy, his father, sisters and brother, David” (*J.M. Barrie: The Man Behind the Image*, 390).

On April 5, 1960, Peter died. He committed suicide by throwing himself under the London Subway Train. The following day, the papers read: “Peter Pan Killed by London Subway Train.” “Peter Pan Commits Suicide.” “The Boy Who Never Grew Up Is Dead.” The death of Peter was the last tragedy to occur surrounding the story of *Peter Pan*. Many speculated that his death was caused by Barrie’s interference in his family’s life. Barrie had courted his mother, and Peter felt that the problems in his parent’s marriage had been all Barrie’s fault. He also did not like the legacy Barrie had made for him. He did not want to be known as “Peter Pan,” because to him, Michael was Peter Pan (www.itsonline.com/archive/pan.html).

But the legacy did not only live, it flourished. In 1915, when *Lusitania* was sinking, Peter Pan’s original American producer, Charles Frohman, refused a place on a lifeboat, saying: “Why fear death? It is the greatest adventure in life.” The Bird Sanctuary in Serpentine in Kensington Garden became very popular with Barrie’s fans.

The Times ran a notice about the restoration of the chains intended to keep all human visitors from the Serpentine shores. It read:

This is the island on which Peter Pan used to land in his nightly adventures, and perhaps he still does so; but the Ministry of Works have not extended the privilege to anyone else.

(*J.M. Barrie: A Walck Monograph*, 35)

Barrie also influenced what people would name their daughters in the future. Before his story *Peter Pan*, Wendy was not a name given to anyone, but after this story became popular, it became common use in 1960's in Britain and the United States (www.its-online.com/archive/pan.html).

The story of Peter Pan has inspired people from all genres of artistic ability. Sir George Frampton made a bronze statue called *Peter Pan* and it was erected in Kensington Gardens as a remembrance of Barrie and his fantastical story (<http://landow.stg.brown.edu/victorian/sculpture/frampton/1.html>).

Music is also heavily influenced by the idea of Peter Pan. Toad the Wet Sprocket wrote a song called "Crowing," which addresses the "Peter Pan" syndrome. "Crowing" refers to Peter Pan crowing like a rooster when he feels he has won something. In the song, "he is crowing for repair." It seems to be a song about Wendy trying to make Peter Pan come back and grow up, but he always leaves instead of staying. It speaks of the pain she is probably feeling because she could not help that poor, lost soul. Blues Traveler has a song called "Hook," which makes a reference to Peter Pan and how, in the movie *Hook*, Captain Hook has lured Peter back to Never, Never Land. Meatloaf, when he first started, played with a band called the NeverLand band. The first song on his album *Bat Out of Hell* was called "Heaven Can Wait" which addresses being in Never, Never Land and how it is a sort of heaven. It says that the person would rather put the

real heaven on hold for this imaginary one, which seems so much better. Folk musician Patty Griffin wrote a song called “Peter Pan” which talks about having to grow up and let go of childhood, which means saying goodbye to Never, Never Land and Peter Pan, because you can never go back to Never, Never Land once you have grown up. In The Smashing Pumpkin’s “Sad Peter Pan” and Kate Bush’s “In Search of Peter Pan,” we see the digression towards the longing of being young and the harshness we impose on youth. Smashing Pumpkins takes a more melancholic view than Kate Bush, with their dark descriptions of how adults abuse children and force adulthood onto them at such a young age. Kate Bush takes the side of longing to have the innocence of the child that she is watching. Liz Carroll used her wonderful talent as a violinist to make the song “Letter To Peter Pan.”

Several movies have also been made that have obviously been heavily influenced by *Peter Pan*. Movies like *Disney’s Peter Pan* (1953) and *Hook* (1991) directly address what *Peter Pan* was really about. Disney’s version is a hack version of the novel, made for the enjoyment of children and families and *Hook* took a spin off of the original *Peter Pan* story. It seems to start from where Barrie left off in his last chapter of *Peter Pan* entitled “When Wendy Grew Up.” There was also the *Betty Bronson’s Peter Pan* (1924) and *Io, Peter Pan* (1989), which deals with a man who has to grow up quickly so that he can take care of a newborn child. Then there are the made-for-TV movies which were your typical Peter Pan movie, picking and choosing what they wanted to accentuate from the book. Then there was Disney’s *Peter Pan on Ice* (1998), which was the taking of *Disney’s Peter Pan* and putting it on ice. We also have children’s animated TV Series. “Peter Pan and the Lost Boys” (1990), “Peter Pan and the Pirates” (1990), and “The

Adventures of Peter Pan” (1989). These cartoons made up their plots for the day and strayed from the book more than most would have liked. And last but not least, there are the plays. There is *Anna Neagle’s Peter Pan* (1937) and *Stephanie Stephen’s Peter Pan* (1915). Many other people have done the *Peter Pan* play, and it will continue to be performed for years to come (www.internetmoviedatabase.com).

Psychiatrists decided to name a psychological disorder after this lovable character: The Peter Pan Syndrome. This syndrome refers to the type of man who avoids responsibility and emotional demand. They are the type who need to be coddled and you can not depend on them. If you say someone acts like a Peter Pan, it is not a good thing (“Peter Pan Syndrome,” Compton’s 1998 Encyclopedia).

James Barrie’s *Peter Pan* is a reflection of today’s society. There is a lack of positive adults and good role models, problems with gangs and social groups, and there is too much emphasis on what is make-believe instead of what is real. Barrie was not doing a social critique when he wrote *Peter Pan*. He was merely writing a creative story full of magic and adventure, but maybe society has taken his story and allowed it to disillusion them to the point where it has helped to cause the negative view adulthood.

Never, Never Land is a place where you can stay a child forever. There are no rules or parents and you can play all day long. This reflects our society, in that our children are no longer disciplined and rules are hardly ever enforced upon. They are free to act up and the most a parent can do is yell at them. Parents are no longer allowed to touch their children and they do not have control. The lost boys do not have any parents. The only adults on the island are the redskins and the pirates. The lost boys are always dodging them, flying higher so that they can not be touched. Children today seem to put

themselves above everyone else, not allowing anyone to touch them or do to them what they do not want.

There is a lack of parents and caring adults in *Peter Pan*. This leads to a deterioration in morals and values that are usually instilled in children by their parents. This can be dangerous, as is demonstrated in *Peter Pan*. Captain Hook has set out a plan to poison the lost boys. He sets a cake out on Marooners' Rock in Mermaid's Lagoon. This is to entice the boys, because he thinks that no boy could resist such a delicious morsel. "They will find the cake and they will gobble it up, because, having no mother, they don't know how dangerous 'tis to eat rich damp cake" (*Peter Pan*, 71).

This is reflected in our society by the lack of parents in the homes. Parents are too busy working and making money, and they abandon their children at day-cares and leave them at home to fend for themselves. At day-cares there are more than five children per one adult, leaving the child lacking affectionate and caring attention. The children feel abandoned and start to alienate themselves from the adults in their lives. This causes them to reject the morals and values that are trying to be impressed upon them.

The children in Never, Never Land also feel that they are invincible. They feel that they can run around and that nothing will ever harm them. They feel that they will live forever. When Peter first comes to the nursery to see the Darlings, he tries to talk them into coming to Never, Never Land with him. Peter used things he knew the children would be attracted to, because of the stories they had heard. They thought it would be fun to fight pirates, because they have no concept of danger. They are not afraid to lift off the ground and fly or "do a billion miles." The lost boys also feel that

they are not able to be hurt. They think that playing with the pirates and redskins is just a game. “All wanted blood except the boys” (*Peter Pan*, 59).

All children feel that they are invincible. It is not just today’s children, but all children. They have no concept of danger. However, today that idea extends far beyond childhood. It extends all the way into adulthood. People feel free to have sex with whoever and however many people they want, unprotected. This is dangerous, but they refuse to see the dangers. They say it is fun and that is all that matters.

Some of these problems could extend from the fact that both Never, Never Land and today’s society have few positive role models. The lost boys have no one to look up to, until Wendy comes along. When Hook put out the cake for the children, they did not eat it, because Wendy was there to protect them and teach them to be weary of food placed on rocks for them. She looks out for them and tries to help them to live a better life, instilling in them positive values, such as napping after you eat so that you digest better.

Lack of good role models and parents in the home makes children feel the need to band together in groups. They form gangs or very tight social cliques. This leads to groups of children fighting each other and even killing each other. In *Peter Pan*, there are three different social groups: the redskins, pirates, and the lost boys.

The pirates are the worst of the three gangs. They would kill their own men when one acts stupidly. The redskins are a family group. They hunt together and do not treat the members of their group harshly. The lost boys band together and merely feel that they are playing a game. The first time you see these three groups collide is when the Darlings are first entering Never, Never Land. The lapping of water is the beasts drinking

at the ford, the rasping sound is the sound of the redskins sharpening their knives, and then they are fired upon by the pirates as they fly to safety.

The pirates hate the lost boys, because Peter leads them. Hook hates Peter, because Peter cut off his hand and fed it to the crocodile. Therefore, the pirates and lost boys must hate each other, because their leaders are at odds. The three groups also stalk each other. It is not only the redskins, pirates, and lost boys who take part in this, but also the crocodile, and the beasts of the island.

On this evening the chief forces of the island were disposed as follows. The lost boys were out looking for Peter, the pirates were out looking for the lost boys, the redskins were out looking for the pirates, and the beasts were out looking for the redskins. They were going round and round the island, but they did not meet because all were going at the same rate.

(Peter Pan, 59)

The children of Never, Never Land and today's society also have no concept of what is real and what is make-believe. The young boys joining gangs for life can not grasp the full meaning of what they have just lost. They do not understand what a real family is or what it means to be truly educated. They are even lacking what is the most important in everyone's lives, which is love.

The lost boys have no education in Never, Never Land. They sleep and play all day. They do not learn how to read or write or how to add or subtract. They only know how to track pirates and Indians and how to hide quickly. Today, our children's education is declining and they are not learning as much as they should. Some of their teachers can not even spell simple words or speak in proper English. The children do not receive a well-rounded education, which is only hurting their future.

The children of Never, Never Land also lack an understanding of what the real world is. They do not have responsibility and can be very selfish. Peter is the epitome of

one who does not understand the real world. “I ran away the day I was born. I want always to be a little boy and to have fun. So I ran away to Kensington Gardens and lived a long, long time among the fairies.”

Peter did not understand what the real world was like, and because he was selfish, he left his home. Another example of not understanding fully what the real world is is when the Darlings first came to the island and also when the three groups circled around the island after each other.

All are keeping a sharp look-out in front, but none suspect that the danger may be creeping up from behind. This shows how real the island was.

(Peter Pan, 65)

Never, Never Land was not real though, and so you can not expect the Darlings to think of it as anything other than make-believe.

The essentials were all the old dreams of children and storytellers since the world began: to fly, to run away from the responsibilities of growing up, and yet to assume all the prerogatives of the grown-up, to fight without being hurt, to kill without shedding blood or causing pain, to flirt with death the unrealised -- “To die will be an awfully big adventure!”

(J.M. Barrie: A Walck Monograph, 39)

When Wendy comes to Never, Never Land, the lost boys finally find something real. They are attracted to her, because of her soft motherly qualities. She is like nothing they have ever seen before. She is able to show them true love, not just companionship, and is able to fulfill the ache in their hearts. The lost boys missed their mothers and thought of them often, when Peter was not around to chide them for their childish thoughts. The boys had memories of their lives apart from Never, Never Land. Peter realized what the lost boys needed when he met Wendy in the nursery. That is why he enticed her to come with them. He told her that she could tell them stories and tuck them

in at night. When this approach failed, Peter told her that there were mermaids on the island. While in Never, Never Land, she took on the role of mother and even enforced rules on the boys. The lost boys loved her so much, they asked her to be their mother.

This is exactly what the boys needed someone to give them love and read them bedtime stories. They confessed that the days in which Wendy was their mother were the best days of their lives. We are lacking such an ideal love in our world. Instead of love, there is hate and violence. We give up our children to strangers, because we think that money is what we need to make their lives the best. We have become too materialistic, which is ruining the lives of our children. It is important to take care of your family, but if your job is taking away from the time you can spend with them, then you need to choose which is best. We can not always have the two cars in the garage or the two-story Belle Air mansion, but we can have a loving home, if we only try. If we put the same effort into our home lives as we put into our work lives, I am sure many of the problems with our children today would be solved. They would have better role models to look up to, more responsibility and respect for themselves, they would do better in school, and they would show more love and appreciation to their fellow human beings.

Even though this is only a story, it has many real life parallels. We all see Peter Pan as an innocent boy, because he wants to hold onto his childhood, but as we can see that can be dangerous. Wendy is not a bad person, just because she wants to help them become adults. If God had wanted us to stay children for the rest of our lives, I am sure he would have made it that way. However, becoming an adult is not what age you turn, it is how much you have experienced and learned in your life. The reason some children grow up faster than others is because they have learned more about life earlier than

others. No matter what you do, you can never stop that process. Being subjected to the role of an adult is not taking away from the innocence they feel. There are naive adults in the world, but we do not view them as innocent. We refute those who act younger than the age that they are, but think it is adorable when our children act older than the age they are. Innocence is lost when we are born, and being naive is not innocent. We need to be aware of the problems in our society so that we may correct them. Having parents who care and take care of their children will solve much of the problem. The children will be able to stay younger longer, because they do not have to seek out other things to fill the empty spaces in their lives. These spaces will have been filled by their parents.

Peter Pan is a story about a place where children go when they die. They forever stay young and never grow old. Barrie felt sorry for those children, and he created Never Never Land to be a place that they would enjoy. This is not what our world is. Never Never Land is not our world, because it is make-believe. It is okay to play make-believe once in a while, but it can not be a constant thing. It is fun to pretend you are Peter Pan and that you are fighting pirates and talking with mermaids, but you can not live that way. You can not live fighting other people, but that is the way our world has chosen to live. We are crossing the fine line between imagination and reality.

Barrie wrote a wonderful story that has touched all of our hearts. Children love the adventures and adults love the nostalgia. We can enjoy stories all that we want, but we must be weary of the fine line. Once fiction becomes reality problems start to arise. That is our problem today. Children want to be like those that they see. Children see Superman and want to be like him, so they jump out of windows. In *Look Who's Talking Now* (1993), the daughter, Julie, sees Peter Pan and thinks that if she jumps off the

bookcase that she will fly. She is attracted to *Peter Pan* and to Charles Barkley, because they can “fly.” He father flies and is away flying most of the time. She thinks that if she flies, she can be like her father. Because of her father not being around as much as he should, she resorted to following role models that might cause her harm. This is what we need to watch out for in our children. We need to be more aware of them and take care of them. We should not force them to grow up, but we should not force them to stay young. We have to let them progress as they see fit, and help them along the way. Children are not pets. They need to be taken care of properly, because they will someday be running the world. Our pets will not someday be running the world. That still does not mean we should not take care of our pets, but we need to put more into our children’s lives than our pet’s lives.

Peter Pan is a reflection of the problems our society is facing today. The world of Never, Never Land may seem harmless and wonderful, but it is not the real world. We can enjoy this wonderful story, but we also should not try to live it. Like the sign posted at the Serpentine in Kensington Garden:

This is the island on which Peter Pan used to land in his nightly adventures, and perhaps he still does so; but the Ministry of Works have not extended the privilege to anyone else.

(*J.M. Barrie: A Walck Monograph*, 35)

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