

**“TO DIE WOULD BE AN AWFULLY BIG  
ADVENTURE”: THE ENIGMATIC TIMELESSNESS OF  
PETER PAN’S ADAPTATIONS**

Deborah Cartmell  
Imelda Whelehan  
Montfort University

*Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* can be seen, on one level, as a critique of the attractiveness of Peter Pan’s eternal youthfulness. Indeed, J.K. Rowling, through Professor Dumbledore, rewrites Peter Pan’s famous comment, “to die would be an awfully big adventure” to “to a well-organised mind, death is but the next great adventure” (Rowling, 1997: 215). In order for the story to reach to a happy conclusion, the elixir of youth must be destroyed and the passage of time acknowledged. Contrary to the countless adaptations of Peter Pan, Barrie’s Edwardian narrative has much in common with this perspective: the myth of timelessness is, indeed, a dangerous one.

Originally written as a play in 1904, the success of *Peter Pan* was and is phenomenal. It is a story that is completely open to adaptation and its origins in drama particularly lend it to the medium of film. It brings together three popular genres in children’s fiction: the adventure story for boys, the domestic story and the fairy tale. Restricting ourselves to four adaptations of the text - the 1911 novelization, the 1953 Disney adaptation, Steven Spielberg’s *Hook* (1991) and Disney’s sequel, *Return to Never Land* (2002) - we will consider four very different constructions of time and timelessness and show how the trope of childhood innocence is appropriated for

quite different purposes in each version.

As has been noted, Peter Pan, in many respects, could be not only an expression of nostalgia for childhood, but also for a brother who died at a young age in a skating accident. Certainly for many, the idea of a forever young sibling would be common, given the numerous child fatalities in the Edwardian period, those who die young and therefore will be children forever. This image of “lost” children echoes both the potentially brutal short lives of the young and offers an antidote to death itself while the lost boys remain on the island. In the novel they are described as “the children who fall out of their perambulators when the nurse is looking the other way” by Peter; the explanation for why they are all boys is that “girls, you know, are much too clever to fall out of their prams.” (Barrie, 1994: 44). Peter Pan first appeared in Barrie’s novel, *The Little White Bird* (1902), where he was associated with death and was given the task of burying the dead children who break the rules and stay in Kensington Gardens overnight. Like Peter, dead children never grow older. The earlier novel is possibly recalled in the alarming description of the first sighting of Peter Pan by Mrs Darling; the window has blown open and something rushes in, disturbing the nursery:

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 his first teeth. When he saw she was a grown-up, he gnashed the little pearls at her. (Barrie, 1994: 20)

At the time of writing, one quarter of children died before they reached the age of five. Mrs. Darling’s fears are clearly of a disease, coming through the window and taking her children to their deaths. Indeed, Neverland is a place where death is a great adventure: as for the possibly endlessly multiplying lost boys, Peter ‘thins them out’ (ibid: 72) in cold blood if they do not meet their death by adventure.

Originally it was Peter not Hook who was the villain of the piece – Hook was added in a later draft as the play was in preparation and becomes the evil father figure. Barrie’s well-known closeness to his mother and Peter’s great desire for a mother is another feature of the story – ‘the Peter Pan syndrome’, after all, is about fear of sexuality. Peter wants nothing to do with adult sexuality as evidenced in his first meeting with Wendy.

She also said she would give him a kiss if he liked, but Peter did not know what she meant, and he held out his hand expectantly.

“Surely you know what a kiss is?” she asked, aghast  
‘I shall know when you give it to me,’ he replied stiffly;  
and not to hurt his feelings she gave him a thimble.

(Barrie, 1994: 41)

“Peter”, she asked, trying to speak firmly, “what are your exact feelings for me?”

“Those of a devoted son, Wendy.”

“I thought so,” she said, and went and sat by herself at the extreme end of the room.

“You are so queer,” he said, frankly puzzled, ‘and Tiger Lily is just the same. “here is something she wants to be to me, but she says it is not my mother.”

“No, indeed, it is not,” Wendy replied with frightful emphasis. Now we know why she was prejudiced against the redskins. (ibid: 146-7)

Barrie seems to have had a preference for boys over girls and the Neverland, on at least one level, is surely a male fantasy. It has been given a Freudian interpretation, an escape from the abusive father where the children witness, first hand, Hook’s obsessive search for Peter – it is no accident that Hook and Mr Darling are almost always played by the same person when the play is staged (Rose: 1994).

Peter is obsessed with the figure of the mother – he doesn't want a girlfriend, he wants, as the lost boys do, a mother; in part someone to protect him from his evil abusive father, as, of course embodied in the sadistic, gratuitously evil Captain Hook. This Freudian reading can be expanded if we look at the narrator's position in the novel. Barrie uses an adult narrator who seems to be strangely complicit with the children rather than the adults. Once the voyeurism is detected, the experience of reading becomes an uncomfortable one. As Jacqueline Rose notes, "the narrator veers in and out of the story as servant, author and child" (Rose, 1994: 73). The film adaptations perhaps recall some of the feel of the stage play by dint of the disposal of this intrusive narrator so crucial to the shaping of narrative fiction, but displaced by the *mise en scène* of cinema. His point of view shifts at the end of the story where he becomes like a mischievous reader of his own book, favouring the figure of Mrs Darling over the children:

Some like Peter best and some like Wendy best, but I like her best. Suppose, to make her happy, we whisper to her in her sleep that the brats are coming back. (Rose, 1994: 219)

The novel was written in what is often referred to as the golden age of children's literature, beginning with *Alice in Wonderland* in 1865 and ending with *The House at Pooh Corner* in 1928. In this period, there was a great deal of focus on children, especially the middle and upper classes who idealised them – this is reflected in the huge increase in toys, books and children's fashions. Barrie himself was fascinated by children and met a family of boys prior to the writing, the boys he eventually adopted after their parents' premature deaths.

Barrie himself oversaw adaptations of his work and sanctioned the removal of Peter's infamous comment "To die will be an awfully big adventure" during the First World War when most of the audience consisted of soldiers on Christmas leave. Indeed, one of

the boys who Barrie adopted and who the story was written about, died in the first world war. Undoubtedly in Barrie's own lifetime, certain characters and events portrayed in the story became increasingly problematic, in particular the "redskins", the pirates and the portrayal of violence.

The story started really as a holiday narrative constructed by Barrie to entertain his five adopted boys, the Llewellyn Davies children – boys he befriended in London and whose parents died prematurely. Its second appearance was in the novel, *The Little White Bird*, then the play, and the novel (novelization) based on it, *Peter and Wendy*, which became widely circulated under the title *Peter Pan*, the text we have, originally published in 1911.

Originally the play called for a boy to play the part of Peter, but licensing laws in 1904 forbid this and therefore a woman, Nina Boucicault, was chosen as the first Peter. This has been the tradition, up until about twenty years ago. In films this has been different, although the first version – the silent film of 1924 – cast a female in the part. In 1953, Walt Disney produced an animated *Peter Pan*. Changes were many, especially Tinker Bell who instead of a magical light, became a real figure, often thought to be modelled on Marilyn Monroe, but actually modelled on the pin-up girls of World War II, such as Betty Grable. The animated version was hugely influential in subsequent stage adaptations; and, although the novel exists, it is not regarded as a sacred text in the way that Shakespeare, for example, is.

### ***Peter Pan*, 1953**

Disney was very keen to get the rights to *Peter Pan* and the animated version proved the most popular yet. Disney's famous embracing of innocence in his films makes it immediately clear why he would be drawn to *Peter Pan* which comes complete with its own "magic kingdom": "Innocence in Disney's world becomes

the ideological vehicle through which history is both rewritten and purged of its seamy side” (Girous in Bell et al. 1995: 46). The first impression that we have of this post Second World War production is that the violence is tamed down, the threat of death is removed, and the focus is on domesticity and the differences between boys and girls, as well Europeans and “natives”. Wendy is clearly linked with her mother – she visually replaces her on screen, and she has a maturity that is contrasted to the other children (with the exception of Peter) who are dressed in animal costumes, reflecting a need to be tamed by a mother. The sexualisation of Tinker Bell, together with a grown-up looking Wendy (a mini Mrs Darling) function to endorse the desirability of growing up, to conforming to society’s rules – particularly for girls. Wendy exists on the periphery of Neverland adventures – she is disliked by Tinker Bell, the bitchy mermaids and Tiger Lily, all who regard her as sexual threats in Peter’s regard for her. The implication is that friendship is a purely male domain. The women are stereotyped as either seductresses or mothers and Wendy’s more wholesome charms win out over the scantily clad Tinker Bell and the mermaids.

In addition to the cult of domesticity, this film presents the Indians as unequivocal stereotypes. They are identified by the colour of their skin – in fact this is their sole identity. The Native American genocide is described in the book as one great ‘adventure’ and this is reflected in the film. Interestingly, the Indians are excised in Spielberg’s *Hook*, remembered possibly in the costumes of the Lost Boys, especially the leader, Rufio, whose skin and costume recall that of the original inhabitants of North America. In the 2002 *Return to Never Land* all that remains is a totem pole. Disney goes further than the novel in 1953 in his portrayal of the Indians, asking the question “what makes them red?”

Wendy, the quintessential English little lady, is appalled at the rituals of the Indians, which imply something more primitive than her own society. They are linked to the children and Wendy’s disapproval of them is similar to her disapproval of the children.

Tiger Lily's kiss literally turns Peter Pan red – the blushing Peter provides the answer to the question why is the Indian red. The red men and women are portrayed as if in a permanent state of sexual excitement (constantly blushing) and are thus more akin to animals than are the white Europeans (see Byrne & McQuillan: 1999). The film perpetuates a myth that the Indians are inferior as they exist on a lower physical plain – all but Tiger Lily are portrayed as corpulent and grotesque.

At the end of Barrie's novel, the travellers return to heartbroken parents, as if coming back from the dead. They are able to literally turn the clocks back. Mr Darling also literally comes out of the doghouse and is restored to his family, and the Lost Boys are admitted into the Darling household. The boys all grow up and become ordinary adults. What is striking about the ending is how quickly time passes – compared to the timelessness of the Neverland, where no-one grows old. Here we have time passing at an alarmingly quick pace:

As you look at Wendy you may see her hair becoming white, and her figure little again, for all this happened long ago. Jane is now a common grown-up with a daughter called Margaret; and every spring-cleaning time, except when he forgets, Peter comes for Margaret and takes her to the Neverland, where she tells him stories about himself; to which he listens eagerly. When Margaret grows up she will have a daughter, who is to be Peter's mother in turn; and thus it will go on, so long as children are gay and innocent and heartless. (Barrie, 1994: 242)

The final paragraph comes as a shock – the pace is so quick – the fear of growing up, implied throughout the narrative – is replaced with the harsh reality of time passing. The male-centred story has changed too – the focus is on Wendy, not Peter – possibly suggesting that while men stay the same, women are changing, developing at an alarming rate and Peter has been left behind. The ending of the

novel presents the future through the matriarchal line and this focus on the changing female might be accounted for by the changing position of women in society at the time in which Barrie was writing. Yet ultimately women are merely designated “mothers” and “daughters” who represent the cycle of life and reproduction and are perhaps seen in relation to it. Barrie is possibly suggesting that men are the ones who are fearful of change: so while the men remain stubbornly the same, women are progressing, changing at an alarming rate. It is possible, that central to the novel, is the belief that a girl is “more use than twenty boys” (Barrie, 1994: 40). Women’s functional roles are portrayed as overlaying their very individuality, whereas Peter and Hook, not to mention all the lost boys, have their own histories, their own personal explanations for how they came to be (for example we’re told about Peter’s mother and Hook’s public school education). Lynda Haas asserts that “the mother and the mother-daughter relationship are, as yet unsymbolized in our cultural imaginary. There is no maternal genealogy, no importance attached to a mother’s heritage.” (in Bell et al. 1995: 196). Whilst Barrie figures precisely that – a maternal genealogy – at the end of the novelisation of *Peter Pan*, the mother remains indeterminate, a girl’s destiny.

What surprises us about the Disney ending is the removal of the parents’ pain – they are not left for days without their children and the fear of loss through death is entirely excised. Mr Darling isn’t in the doghouse, but is reconciled to the dog, and the Lost Boys do not return with the children to the Darling household. The period, renowned for its creation of the nuclear family, remains intact: two parents, three children and a dog. Indeed it’s almost as if the whole thing was a dream; and Wendy and her father are totally reconciled – she’s prepared to grow up and he is prepared to accept her as she is. Typically, the father has the final word in this – “I think I saw that ship a long time ago” – and with this clue that the father recalls his own boyhood we are left with the feeling that patriarchy has been restored and that the women are now in good hands.

Wendy is not replaced with Jane – her daughter – in this adaptation. This Peter is a more romantic one than in Barrie’s text and therefore incapable of exchanging one Wendy for another one or forgetting Tinker Bell. He still has his milk teeth in the novel that would place him around six years old – in Disney, he appears to be between eleven and fourteen, on the verge of sexual maturity. As the Barrie version flirts with a matriarchal conclusion, the Disney version provides us with a decidedly patriarchal ending; everyone is reconciled to their position in society, just like Nana, who at the beginning of this film, hands Mr Darling the rope, willingly allowing herself to be restrained. Indeed, the dog is the moral centre of the film in its preaching of conformity over rebellion and its celebration of a patriarchy to which everyone willingly submits. Whereas in the novel, we have argued, patriarchy is indeed at crisis point with Mr Darling being conveyed to and from work in his kennel, having made a misjudgement which placed his family in jeopardy.

### ***Hook, 1991***

While the Disney film preserves the period in which the book was written, *Hook* translates it to the late twentieth century – and this is, indeed a translation, rather than interpretation or preservation of the text. “Updating” or “modernizing” the text entails a number of necessary changes – it would be no longer appropriate to refer to “redskins”; the children can’t be abandoned to the care of a dog in a live-action film. In fact, awareness of paedophilia today ensures that children would not allow themselves to be taken away by an intruder in the middle of the night. This is a period which saw reported a huge number of child abductions – and this would be an ultimate taboo in a film directed at children. You can’t have nineties kids running away with an intruder who, in reality, is a very old man. As a consequence, these children have to be kidnapped – they don’t go on their own volition. They are, however, like the children

in the original story, insofar as they are displeased with their father – although he is not abusive, he is negligent. He has forgotten what it is like to be a child - in fact, he has forgotten that he is Peter Pan.

We are told that Peter Pan saw Wendy's granddaughter and fell in love with her. Wendy arranged for him to be adopted by American parents so we have, in the Disney tradition, an American Peter Pan. And in the tradition of Disney, the good guys are the Americans and the bad guys – the pirates – are British. Purposefully, the American actor, Dustin Hoffman, who plays Hook, adopts an English accent for the role. Typically we see London through the eyes of an American, signifiers of London – such as Big Ben, taxis, and the furniture and period of Wendy's house, give us a clichéd tourist account of London, just as Big Ben and Tower Bridge are used as key signifiers of London in the 1953 and 2002 animations. In fact the house itself seems to be frozen in the past – the decoration reflects a nostalgia for the past – but the past as it is recreated in the present. Rather than the first decade of the twentieth century, the house reflects the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the taste in Edwardian antiques, especially to do with children's toys, such as rocking horses, dolls' houses and teddy bears. The appearance of an Edwardian-looking Wendy, played by Maggie Smith, and a late twentieth century Peter, played by Robin Williams, reinforces the initial gap between then and now.

Although, seemingly a departure from the original, the film pays homage to the source material on a number of occasions. We are told, by Wendy, that the story was recorded by J.M. Barrie who used to live next door to them. Indeed Wendy is honoured by Great Ormond Street Hospital – the hospital Barrie left the rights to *Peter Pan* to – and to this day, the hospital benefits from Barrie's profits, thanks to an extension to the UK copyright, which expired in 1987, to in perpetuity as well as copyright extensions in Europe and the US to 2007.

The film picks up on the theme of nostalgia – it's not just a nostalgia for childhood, but a nostalgia for the period in which the novel was set. The technological present, symbolised by Peter's

mobile phone, has overpowered the simpler more rewarding pleasures of life, as reflected in a previous time. The children are linked with an earlier age to suggest that life was purer and simpler in the past: Maggie is seen performing in the play *Peter Pan* (literally becoming her great-grandmother as the novel version foretells) and Jack takes part in a baseball game. Rather than a romantic association between Peter and Wendy, we have the “family romance” where Peter Banning must rediscover his own origins in order to understand his actions as a father. The Neverland is a place, where the family isn’t forgotten, but remembered and restored: Tinker Bell (played by Julia Roberts) attempts a seduction, but gracefully gives way to the pulls of marital monogamy and parental responsibility. Maggie takes the place of Wendy; whereas in the Disney film she is a “young lady”, here she is clearly a little girl who learns to believe that Peter Pan is her father.

While Barrie’s text challenges patriarchy and while Disney’s film celebrates and affirms it, Steven Spielberg presents fatherhood in a more ambiguous light. Peter has become the bad father, the Mr Darling at the beginning; visually this is signalled at the end by his visiting the doghouse. This version owes as much to other “parenting” films of the time as it does to Barrie’s texts – best represented by *Baby Boom* (1987) (where Diane Keaton plays a Yuppie who “inherits” a small baby and she tries to combine its care with big business, and ends up setting up her own home-based work) and *Parenthood* (1989), a rather mawkish Steve Martin comedy which follows the tribulations of three generations of one family, but focusing on one father’s (Martin’s) troubled relationship with his eldest son. *Hook* is also a parenthood text and Hook himself tries to usurp the fatherly role by telling Jack some home “truths” such as “Before you were born they were happier” and suggesting that parents only tell stories to send their children to sleep. Maggie, the daughter is never beguiled by Hook and continuously identifies with her mother, becoming the mother when she sings. The struggle between Pan and Hook, therefore, becomes the struggle over the

son and heir. Peter only recalls the times he has let his son down and it is only the father-son relationship that is portrayed as fraught with difficulties, as it is in all versions of the Peter Pan story, where fathers disappear or become emasculated.

Spielberg turns the story inside out by bringing Peter home, uniting father and son and changing the meaning of the text from “to die would be an awfully big adventure” to “to live would be an awfully big adventure”. The fear of death and the horrors of child mortality are removed entirely from the 1991 retelling of the story. As in the 1953 story, patriarchy has been restored and its crisis is resolved by Peter’s reinvention of the role of father for the postmodern age. Perhaps because this film emerges just after the Gulf War (which ended in March 1991) we are lulled into feeling that the women and children are in good male hands once again.

### ***Return to Never Land, 2002***

Disney’s recent sequel is, in common with most Disney sequels, partly a homage to the Disney “original” as well as, more cannily a vehicle by which to profit from the “classic” status of the 1953 version. Unlike *Hook* which signals a return to Barrie’s novel version when the adult Peter finally remembers his past in order to reclaim the “happy thought” that will enable him to fly (“I wanted to be a Daddy”) this sequel takes as its lead the closing passage of the novel and focuses on Wendy’s daughter, Jane during the period of the Second World War.

Jane is significantly the opposite of her mother who still lives in the fantasy world of Neverland, telling endless stories to her small son Daniel. Jane is a pragmatist, always armed with her notebooks and giving her younger brother a pair of socks for his birthday – a sensible wartime investment. Given that she takes no part in listening to her mother’s stories, Neverland has to come to her, in the form of Hook’s flying ship, last seen silhouetted against the moon and

piloted by Pan in the 1953 version but now manned by Hook and his crew, a sinister accompaniment to the planes and bombs all around her family. She is a heroine in the model of latter-day Disney productions such as *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Pocohontas* and *Tarzan*, who can fend for herself and is suitably scornful of Peter's rescue of her, denying kisses and refusing to be "mother". She still wears the prim nightdress that Wendy wore, but the outfit is completed by a pair of sloppy socks. Ultimately she will rescue Peter from Hook's clutches; but in some ways conforming to one abiding feminine stereotype of Eve, she will have been the source of his destruction, having initially entered into a pact with Hook. Even where this film overtly "updates" the kneejerk sexism of the 1953 version, particularly in Jane's claim to be the first "lost girl" it reinforces the social power of gender difference. The fact that she is a lost *girl* takes on an entirely different resonance: Jane has been made a "grownup" by the war and by her father's request that she look after Daniel and her mother while he goes into combat; more than that he has made her a "man". Perhaps her cynicism about fairies (which almost costs Tinker Bell her life) and Neverland pre-empt the feelings of the contemporary child viewer who, so often bombarded with the rawest images of current conflicts and atrocities, might feel the necessity to share Jane's cynicism. Jane's conversion gives them "permission" to believe in fairies and to recreate a barrier between fantasy and reality, broken down by a decade and more of "reality" television. On her return home she immediately embraces her brother and begins to tell him stories herself, taking on the mantle of "mother" when she is released from her more "masculine" role of head of the household when her father is seen returning.

The placing of the events of this film at such an important modern historical juncture invites a more historicised reading of the film so that the timelessness of Neverland is more emphatically juxtaposed by the passing of time and its consequences. Just as Peter Banning is assailed by the trappings and responsibilities of modern life so that he has lost the simple pleasures, so Jane's journey to Neverland

is undertaken on the eve of her and Daniel's planned evacuation into the country. The war is presented from a more child-centred view where the enemy is not portrayed, simply the effects of war, the bombing and destruction, air raids and scenes of children being shipped away from danger. Symbolically the American view of their role in the Second World War becomes dominant when Wendy tries to escape the island on a raft fashioned by herself and decked with a union jack, only to sink ignominiously to the strains of "Rule Britannia"

The moral of the story, as in *Hook*, tells us that we, as adults, are in danger of becoming "lost boys" insofar as we have forgotten what it is like to be children. But, significantly, each text that we've looked at has constructed children, race, gender, and nationalism differently. We have suggested that the novel, unlike the film adaptations is a critique of timelessness as evidenced in the absurdity of Peter standing still while Wendy becomes an important part of the historical process. Through the novel we can call into question the position of women, the massacre of the indigenous population of the island and the class system (the nurse is not only treated like a dog, she is a dog).

The adaptations, in their attempt to capture the timelessness of the Peter Pan narrative, a story which Barrie himself was reluctant to claim authorship of, display their own historical periods boldly. Disney, whose stories favour harmony and closure, shuns the starkness of the ending of Barrie's novelisation with its melancholy message of death and forgetting. In each of the Disney versions it is the mother who is first greeted on the children's return and yet the narrative is not complete until the father returns to the heart of his family. In the 1953 version he is made to see sense and recognize that the nursery is women's (or females – women and dogs) domain. In the 2002 version the return of the father does not just suggest familial but also national cohesion in its suggestion that the war is coming to an end. Neither father is shown to self-consciously interrogate what fatherhood might mean when motherhood is so obviously symbolically attached to biology and

nature, but *Hook's* Peter does. Set in a period when anxiety increases over the role of parenting, because so much social dysfunction is attributed to upbringing, and in a period which makes much of sexual equality ("parenting" as opposed to "motherhood" and "fatherhood"), Williams's portrayal of Peter is of a man in crisis. Like the men, bewildered by feminism who sought their primitive selves through movements such as Robert Bly's "Iron John", Peter Banning returns to his boyhood self only to discover what made him want to grow up. His desire for Wendy's granddaughter Moira is figured as the desire for children and the conception of the family is cleansed of all the sexual complexities identified by Freud at the time Barrie's play emerged. In each adaptation subsequent to the novel it is the family itself which represents timelessness: a concept cleansed of history, ideology and social dysfunction.

## References

Barrie, J.M. (1911; rpt. 1994) *Peter Pan*. London/New York: Penguin.

Bell, Elizabeth, Lynda Haas and Laura Sells (1995) *Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender and Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Byrne, Eleanor and Martin McQuillan (1999) *Deconstructing Disney*. London: Pluto Press.

Rose, Jacqueline. (1984, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1994) *The Case of Peter Pan, Or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction*. London: Macmillan.

Rowling, J.K. (1997) *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. London: Bloomsbury.