

Conclusion

Walt Disney's *Peter Pan* is an extremely interesting case of a well-succeeded adaptation of an excellent novel. Not only is it enthralling to analyse how the transcoding was made by the Disney studios (contemplating, of course the similarities and the differences between both mediums) but also to appreciate the artistic manoeuvres, totally handmade, that were used to create the illusion of reality in such a magical world. But most interesting of all, I believe, is to study how the movie was able to search for and find the correct tone to meet the high expectations of children all over the world and still does, today, 54 years later.

Peter Pan: Child/Adult Relationship and the Narrative Strategies of Time(s) and Spaces(s)

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This essay will focus on the adult/child as well as on the time/ space relationships in J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*.¹ Some parallels will be traced between two distinct worlds presented in the book: the real world, on the one hand, as reflected by the Victorian social background underlying the whole narrative; the imaginary world of Neverland, on the other.

It is however extremely significant to point out briefly some relevant aspects regarding Victorian society. Generally speaking, it was a very strict society, though highly industrialized and hard working, ruled by narrow moral values and almost entirely submitted to a patriarchal social order. Children and childhood were beginning then to be sensed as particular problems of the time, with their own needs and demands to which there were no definite answers. Specially children from the lower, working classes were forced to work hard in extremely bad conditions, both human and sanitary, living short and dreadful lives with hardly any possibilities of finding a way out from their families' long established misery. They worked usually eight to twelve hours per day, six days a week, had no access to education, and even playing with other children was scarcely allowed to them by parents or any other kind of adult tutor or teacher. Apart from their natural liveliness and willingness to live life in full, often assailed by illnesses that cut short their hopes and future prospects, these were unhappy children, often treated very much as slaves, earning little more than nothing to help with the household daily expenses.

Nevertheless, it was in Victorian times that education and the welfare of children began to be a theme of concern to many physicians, psychologists, pedagogues and educators in general. Books for children seem to have first appeared as a consequence of children's unhappiness, as they tried to give

them back their lost hope, opening up their dream capabilities through the creation of imaginary worlds, full of fantasy and beauty. In these utopian realms, children could eventually be happy, having to obey to no rules, as they could simply be children and nothing else, utterly free to play as much as they wished, without all restraints of the adult world they knew so well and abhorred so much. This kind of utopia is quite recurrent within Victorian children's frame of mind because it represents an escape from real life. Barrie's Neverland in *Peter Pan* was actually a utopian world, immersed in one of the most elaborate fantasies of children's imagination, where everything is made possible, including endless fights with pirates, sea waters inhabited by mermaids, woods and clears filled up with the magic of fairies, and above all the non-existence of rules and parents (specially mothers). *Peter Pan's* Neverland was a place where things appeared just by "make-believe".

However, both in Victorian society and in Neverland there are adults and children, and we will therefore proceed by establishing some comparisons and contrasts between these two worlds. In the real world we have the Darlings family: Mr. and Mrs. Darling, representing the adults, Wendy, Michael and John, representing the children. On the one hand, Mr Darling is presented as a very severe figure, and being the father he was considered the most important member of the family. On the other hand, his wife, Mrs Darling, appears as a very sweet person as well as a dedicated mother, like all mothers in Barrie's works: "Mrs. Darling had bathed them and sung to them till one by one they had let go her hand and slid away into the land of sleep." (Ch, 1: 10). As for the children, Wendy, Michael, and John, they were being raised in a Victorian society (when Wendy was born the Darlings considered to give her to adoption) and as a consequence of this, these children dreamed about Neverland and Peter Pan, who represented to them the possibility of flying, in other words, of being free. In Neverland there are mainly children, because even the pirates (Hook, Smee), who apparently are the adults, behave like children, specially Captain Hook who is the most childish of all, as his attitudes in general show: he is envious of Peter's youth and of his "cockiness", as the game-like dialogue with the boy at the mermaids' lagoon so clearly illustrates: "In his dark nature there was a touch of the feminine, as in all the great pirates, and it sometimes gave him intuitions. Suddenly he tried the guessing game." (Ch. VIII: 94, 95). The Neverland children, named "The Lost Boys", differ in many aspects from the Darling children, for they got literally lost from their parents and home as they fell from their perambulators and had then been caught by fairies: "They are the children who fall out of their perambulators when the nurse is looking the other way. If they are not claimed in seven days they are sent far away to the Neverland to defray expenses." (Cap. II, p. 31). These lost boys refused to be educated, refused any responsibilities, but mostly they refused to grow up.

The action of the story starts when Wendy, Michael and John fly away with Peter to Neverland. In order to understand more clearly why they were so eager to go away from home, from the window of their nursery upstairs, without even caring to leave their parents behind, we have to consider some of their motivations. For Michael and John, Neverland was a dream, the extraordinary land they dreamed about when they were asleep and the place where they desired to live in real:

"Of course the Neverland vary a good deal. John's, for instance, had a lagoon with flamingos flying over it at which John was shooting, while Michael, who

was very small, had a flamingo with lagoons flying over it. John lived in a boat turned upside down on the sands, Michael in a wigwam, Wendy in a house of leaves deftly sewn together. John had no friends, Michael had friends at night, Wendy had a pet wolf forsaken by its parents; but on the whole the Neverlands have a family resemblance, and if they stood in a row you could say of them that they have each other's nose, and so forth. On these magic shores children at play are for ever beaching their coracles." (Ch. I: 7).

As for Wendy, her motivations were quite different, as she chose to go simply because she wished so much to become a mother, as a consequence of the kind of education given to Victorian girls, who were taught from an early age how to become good wives and good mothers as well: " 'Let me go!' she ordered him" (Ch. III: 33). In short, Wendy sees in Neverland the opportunity of making her motherhood dream come true.

As far as the Lost Boys are concerned we can easily notice that even though they respect Peter as a 'father' figure, or perhaps more as a 'leader' in their adventures, they feel that they need a mother, what leaves the reader with the feeling that Neverland is a perfect world but not a complete one. Peter Pan is rather a complex and somehow strange boy who is the actual leader of the Lost Boys, as it he who sets the law in Neverland. A clear example of this is, for instance, the fact that although Peter forbade the Lost Boys to talk about mothers, he flies back to the real world in order to find a mother for all of them lost in the 'never' island, and also to find out the end of Cinderella's story: "Peter was bringing her to us [...] A lady to take care of us at last [...]" (Ch. VI: 65) –

"O Wendy, your mother was telling you such a lovely story."

[...]

"Peter," said Wendy excitedly, "that was Cinderella, and he found her, and they lived happy ever after." (Ch. II: 32, 33).

Peter chose Wendy to be the mother of all lost boys because he had already seen her taking care of her brothers; he believed she might be their ideal mother because she knew a lot of stories – "Oh the stories I could tell to the boys!" (Ch. III: 33) – she could put them to sleep "And you could darn or clothes, and make pockets for us. None of us has any pockets" (Ch. III: 34) – feed them, take care of them when they were sick and all sort of things mothers usually do; but most important of all was that she was also a child. Barrie's Wendy is a kind of small adult and she goes to Neverland to satisfy her brothers' wishes as well as her own: being the elder and the most responsible of the three she believes she is in charge of them and must protect them. That is one of the reasons she agrees to go; the other, and not a lesser reason, is that she feels sorry that Peter and the lost boys have no mother.

On their fantastic fly to Neverland, again we sense the invisible clash between the real and the imaginary world, in fact, between two distinct spaces with their respective geographic locations: London and Neverland. While London is well described in the Darlings household, the architectural outline of a common Victorian house, its typical interiors showing the children's nursery upstairs in the attic, and an imaginary island, located somewhere in an imaginary map if one just follows its simple instructions: "SECOND TO THE RIGHT, and straight on till morning". (Ch. IV: 39). But we have to bear in mind that we only realize the different spaces within the book when the imaginary world is transported to the real world (by way of dreams or by Peter himself), or else when the real world is transported to the imaginary world (when the Darling

children go to Neverland). Space in *Peter Pan's* story is somewhere between reality and imagination, a place where only the children can go, because they are innocent, and that is why they are still allowed to dream and eventually to fly.

As it was referred above, children find in this utopian world the possibility to live without rules, to live great adventures, to live as children. Yet, it is also important to focus on the gaps existing in Neverland, because what should be a perfect world to live in was, after all, incomplete: so much for their unacknowledged distress, these lost boys don't have a mother, and ultimately they also need some rules. It is also important to see that there are two parallel adventures experienced while the Darlings children, Peter and the lost Boys are in Neverland. While on the one hand, we find the Darlings children flying, living without rules, playing and experiencing big adventures as they somehow get involved with the fight against the pirates, on the other hand we find both Peter and the Lost Boys experiencing how it is to have a mother. This turns out to be very significant, because after having a 'mum' all except Peter want to come back to reality, for different reasons: Wendy misses home and her parents' love. It is also a cause of serious apprehension to her that her brothers are losing their memory (forgetting their home and parents) because, being their elder sister, she knows she has the responsibility, not only to take care of them, but also to bring them back home safely; the Lost Boys and Wendy's brothers realize that the most important thing in the real world is to have a mother, because mothers don't let their children ever fear anything. Peter, on the contrary, refuses to go back to the real world, because it represents too him to grow up, eventually to be a father, and to assume responsibilities. Meanwhile, ironically or not, his decision to continue in Neverland can be seen as a very responsible one, because he knows that there will always be Lost Boys for him to take care of. This attitude may lead us to see Peter as some kind of father to the children in Neverland, although it highly contradicts his general attitude of carelessness, being thoughtless and childish all along. His deliberate refusal of generational time, his static perspective on life as a complex evolution and transformation makes him also deny emotional growth as something that comes only from the experience of time and family bonds.

At the same time *Peter Pan* also reminds us that we can never be wholly satisfied in either of those worlds, because both reality and imagination have indeed positive and negative aspects alike: childhood is not entirely an earthly paradise, but neither it is adult life.

However, to analyse this partial 'victory' of the real world expressed by the Darling children's and the Lost Boys' wish to come back home, we have to consider the symbolic meaning of the 'window' in Barrie's book. It was through the window that the dream of living in Neverland came true, as the fulfilment of an incredible adventure, and it was again through that same window that all adventure came to an end and children came back home. We can therefore establish a parallel and, at the same time, a contrast between the window and Neverland. Whereas Neverland is a place that does not exist, except in the imagination, we can also find there a particular instance of 'never' that "becomes real and final, permitting neither escape nor return" (Hollindale 2005: 200). The window represents a duality as well: the closed window "prevents the children from getting out (to the world of imagination)" (Ibid.), while the open window allows the children to get in, to come back home. Wendy had always

believed that the window would be open, because she trusts her parents' love. The window opens to the little girl not only the possibility to dream, but also to come back to reality; The Lost Boys also believed that the window would be open, because they believed in Wendy, as she represented a real mother to them. The window, in this case, gives them the possibility of a real life, with a real mother; Peter Pan, in contrast, believed that the window would be closed, because his own window was once closed, and that became the only memory he kept from the world he once escaped from. In his case, the closed window is definitely a lock which will forever cast him away in the land of dreams and timelessness. That is why he remains an eternal child and can appear in dreams to other children. This will take us to analyse the importance of time in the book.

As distinct places, both Victorian London and Neverland have distinct time measures. Time does not exist in Neverland, while in Victorian London, time is thoroughly measured and is constantly changing. In Neverland there is no evidence of time, and the only character that seems to be aware of what time is, is Captain Hook, who is always running and trying to escape from the sinister crocodile that had swallowed a clock, being presented as, in fact, a live symbol of time. Hook tries to flee from the crocodile because he fears time more than anything, once he is an adult in a children's world. There is also a parallel between Hook, as a childish adult and Mr. Darling, when he closes himself into Nana's nursery, because both are denying the responsibilities that Time brings. The only difference between them and the children in the book is that the children are allowed to dream because they are children, and they can use the window as an open way to their dreams.

At the end of Barrie's narrative, we can see Peter constantly going to the real world, despite his unbelievable losses of memory, to pick Wendy at spring-cleaning time back to Neverland, until she got too grown up to accompany him. Once again, the window is the connector between the two opposing time categories in two words irrevocably apart, as Peter continues to visit Wendy and all generations of little girls after Wendy through that same window. As the story comes to its end, Peter Pan is still a child of around seven years old, as he was in the beginning, what proves that while in the real world time is moving, in Neverland time has stopped and ceased to be, somehow resembling Peter's lost memory. That is the reason why Peter's only memories are from the real world. However, the eternally little boy will never return from Neverland, but in fact he will never be alone:

"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 springcleaning 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 will go on, so long as children are gay and innocent and heartless".

Works Cited

1Barrie, J. M.. (1995). Peter Pan, (ed.) Penguin Popular Classics.
Hollindale, Peter. (nº.3, September 2005). Children's Literature in Education. A Hundred Years of Peter Pan.vol.36.