# For Whom the (Tinker)Bell Tolls: The Construction of Love and Possession in *Peter Pan*

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Scotland is a country with a rich and varied history, a land of strikingly beautiful scenery inhabited by people who are proud of their traditions and heritage. Thus, Scotland's folklore has passed from generation to generation. When the Scots emigrated from Ireland, they brought with them a rich blend of belief and tradition based on Celtic pagan myth and Christianity. That is why Scotland abounds in stories and legends of magical sea folk, changeling legends about fairies stealing or possessing the bodies of babies, and tales of shape-shifting witches, ghosts, and family curses, not to mention their famous lake monster (Ormond 1987).

James Mathew Barrie is one of the most representative Scottish authors. Through his plays he reflects his personal and ironic way of seeing life. He chooses to deal with his view of Scottish society and its cultural heritage. *Peter Pan*[9], which remains Barrie's masterpiece, both draws on and parodies his society and its traditions. *Peter Pan* is the culmination of the author's long process of literary creation. Barrie transforms his initial play—*Peter Pan or The Boy Who Would Not Grow Up (1904)*—into a fairy tale—*Peter Pan and Wendy (1911)*—and achieves a great success, as he manages to reach a wider audience, especially children. In both works, Barrie plays with reality and fantasy; the author introduces not only real characters, but also imaginary ones, like mermaids or fairies who are present in Scottish folklore.

Fairies feature greatly in Scottish folklore, and there are many beliefs and stories that speak of these beings. They are considered a variety of supernatural beings endowed with the powers of magic and enchantment. Nowadays, a common conception of fairies, especially in children's fairy tales, rests largely upon their depiction in old folklore tradition, where, despite their

[9] The character of Peter Pan appeared by name in Barrie's adult novel *The Little White Bird* (1902). This was a first-person narrative about a wealthy bachelor clubman's attachment to a little boy, David. Taking this boy for walks in Kensington Gardens, the narrator tells him of Peter Pan, who can be found in the Gardens at night. The six chapters in which Peter appears were published later in 1906 in a book titled *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*. Barrie produced his play *Peter Pan or The Boy Who Would Not Grow Up* in 1904 (Ormond 1987).

alluring semblance, they are generally described as serious and sinister. There are many theories that speculate on the origins of fairies. They are considered to be anabaptized souls, fallen angels, nature spirits, diminutive human beings, and more (Sayce 1934). However, Barrie has a personal and much more poetic explanation of the origin of fairies; according to the author, "When the first baby laughed for the first time, its laugh broke into a thousand pieces, and they all went skipping about, and that was the beginning of faeries" (Barrie 1993: 33).

The belief in fairies seems to reach back in time, and it is traceable in both written and oral tradition. From ancient times, the presence of fairies in literature is very common, and Barrie, following his ancestors and Scottish traditions, introduces the figure of Tinker Bell. She is Barrie's fairy in Peter Pan, the jealous pixie[10] who glows brightest for this character. Her voice sings like a tinkling bell, and a sprinkle of her pixie dust can make people fly. In the play, the writer describes Tinker Bell as "a jug [that] lights up [and] flashes hither and thither" (Barrie 1942: 514-15). However, in the fairy tale, Tinker Bell is humanized, and she is depicted in Barrie's words as "a girl called Tinker Bell exquisitely gowned in a skeleton leaf, cut low and square, through which her figure could be seen to the best advantage. She was slightly inclined to embonpoint" (1993: 27). Tink's behaviour and nature are well defined in both texts. In Peter's words, Tinker Bell is portrayed as "not very polite. … She is my fairy … She is a common fairy,… She is called Tinker Bell because she mends the pots and kettles" (Barrie 1993: 34).

She might be a common fairy, but her name—Tinker Bell—is rather peculiar. It is a play on words, as it makes reference to the person who travels, repairing pans or other metal containers, for instance a "bell," the second word of this character's name. In the fantastic world that shapes the story of Peter Pan, the word "bell" characterizes Tinker's fairy language; her voice comes as a tinkle of bells, a language that Peter understands and speaks. But at the same time, the immediate connection with the cultural point of reference introduces an interesting layer of meaning that brings forward an unexpected trait in the character of Tinker Bell. Her name is thus associated with a male figure, as the task of repairing things was considered a man's job at the time the text was written. As a matter of fact, the tinker person, who travelled from place to place, was always a man. In this way, Barrie hints at a visible masculinisation of the figure of Tink, who repairs the pots and kettles in the story.

[10] Micha F. Lindemans provides the following definition for Pixie: "In folklore, pixies (or piskies) are little people believed to live on the downs and moors of Cornwall, England. According to one myth, pixies were originally Druids who resisted Christianity, and the more they resisted the smaller they grew. Yet another myth tells of a race of people who were not good enough for heaven, nor bad enough for hell and were doomed to wander the earth forever" (1997).

Tinker Bell, as Peter's fairy, is always near him, and she follows him everywhere he goes. She is in love with Peter and believes that she has to compete with Never Land's other adoring females (Princess Tiger Lilly and the mermaids), as well as with Wendy, a creature from the real world. Tink would lay down her life for Peter, even after realizing he is too busy playing Wendy's hero to care. This elicits Tink's hatred toward Wendy, of whom she is highly jealous. As Jerome Neu points out:

> ...jealousy is over what one possesses (or has possessed) and fears to lose and in jealousy there is always a rival, believed or imagined, but the focus of concern is the valued object. Jealousy requires that the other […] be seen as a genuine rival for the [valued person]: their [his/her] gain is one's loss. Thus at the center of jealousy is insecurity, fear of loss, specifically fear of alienation of affections. (1980: 433)

In this thread of thought Tink sees Wendy as her enemy because she believes that Wendy will get Peter's love. Wendy embodies the nineteenth-century woman, who was defined by her adherence to submission to and resistance of sexuality. She is portrayed as a woman who only worries about how to be a good and perfect wife. Therefore, following Neu's statement, Wendy is Tinker's rival, and the fact that Wendy gives special attention to Peter provokes in Tinker a repulsive emotion, an emotion that mirrors the traditional concept of possession of the beloved object (Peter). At first sight Tinker's attitude in the text seems to be in tune with the patriarchal conception of love, following the standard plot pattern of Victorian times.

Tink considers herself Peter's fairy, and thus, she believes that she is his partner for life because she understands Peter's behaviour. However, Tink does not accept Peter's admiration for Wendy and, following her jealous instinct, will do whatever she can to separate Wendy from Peter. Her behaviour is dominated by jealousy, despite the fact that Tink knows that Peter does not love her. Perhaps Leila Tov-Ruach explains the complexity of a love triangle such as the one comprised of Tinker Bell, Peter and Wendy:

> One need not be in a real relation to feel jealousy; one need never have had, [sic] what one takes oneself to have lost. … A figure who plays an objective role in one's life can be fantasied as providing a forming [i.e., special] attention. The person can be real, and the effect real, but the forming attention only fantasied. The person can then be jolted by jealousy, and even jealous vertigo at the feared loss of something that, although it never existed, did indeed form some aspect of their [sic] sense of themselves [sic, here and in what follows]. If a person has neither had, nor imagined themselves to have had what they feel as a deprivation, their condition is one of longing rather than jealousy. (1980: 473-474)

The fact that Tink feels deprived from Peter makes Tinker Bell hate Wendy "with the fierce hatred of a very woman" (Barrie 1993: 53), and she does not accept to be under any obligation to her. Tinker fears the loss of Peter's attention; she constantly wishes to receive more attention and thinks about ways to eliminate Wendy. She even lies to the Lost Boys, telling them that Peter wants them to shoot a bird, "the Wendy." Fortunately, Wendy does not die, which makes Tink furious. But this fact provokes a disagreement between Peter and Tinker, and she ends up crying. In the play version, Barrie shows this argument in the following terms:

> PETER. Then listen, Tink, I am your friend no more. *(There is a note of acerbity in Tink's reply; it means 'Who wants you?')* Begone from me for ever. *(Now it is a very wet tinkle.)*
> CURLY. She is crying.
> TOOTLES. She says she is your fairy.
> PETER. *(Who knows they are not worth worrying about).* Oh well, not for ever, but for a whole week.
> *(TINK goes off sulking, no doubt with the intention of giving all her friends an entirely false impression of WENDY'S appearance).*
>
> (1942: 532-33)

Tinker Bell withstands Peter's rejections, sees how Peter worries and goes back to her, even if she does not agree with his decisions. But in spite of the initial acceptance of Peter's attitude, when Tinker gets angry with Peter she shows a childish behaviour; she ends up insulting him in order to gain his attention. But Peter follows her game and behaves like a child, as well, which leads to several childish confrontations.

Tinker Bell is the sensuous, free spirit who is liberated from all moral responsibility; however, as a woman in love, she follows her strong and ineffable feelings of attraction toward and affection for Peter. And it is at this point that Tink's love is conveyed as powerful, but ambiguously compliant with a possibly essentialist interpretation of her ultimate sacrifice. Embodying the figure of the "self-immolator," she proves to have transformed her behaviour, from a clearly independent mood at the beginning of the story to an apparently subdued disposition to decide Peter's fate and disappear under his central position in the storyline. The ambivalence intrinsic to Tinker's offering is revealed as the natural outcome of an intense confrontation of extreme feelings that surge up simultaneously in an inescapable and pervading opposition, doomed to end tragically when they are not allowed to be brought to light. Held back in silence, these feelings can only carry the characters to the limits of their existence. In a sense, the author merely is reflecting a passionate awareness of the universal contradictions related to the narrative theme of love in Victorian times. What can be striking to the implied readers of this fairy tale is precisely

the necessary acceptance of these conflicting, yet interrelated, forces that transcend genre boundaries to compel even young readers to face the inevitable projection of tragedy onto the fantasy world. As Marsh argues, Tinker Bell's reaction might respond to "the force of physical attraction, the possibility of so strong a wish to feel the emotion of love that this is mistaken for love itself, the fear of committing oneself too far, and the need to commit oneself completely. The balance which is striven for is an understanding of all these forces, not a denial of any of them". (1976: 334-335).

Tinker Bell gives her life for Peter, not only out of love but also out of friendship and loyalty, as he becomes a pivotal energy in Tink's life. But her sacrifice should not be regarded as a predictable renunciation coming out of the oppressive dictates in the context of the patriarchal society that witnessed the publication of this story. Rather, Tink's attitude reinforces her freedom to choose and to be in control of her actions.

When Tinker Bell, in an act of love, offers her life, Barrie shows that love is not only happiness and joy, but also sacrifice for the ones we love. Tink tells Peter that Captain Hook has poisoned Peter's medicine; however, an arrogant and proud Peter does not believe her, prompting Tinker Bell finally to drink it: "Tink got between his lips and the draught, and drained it to the dregs" (1993: 131). This disobedience provokes Peter's fury, which changes when he sees that Tink is really sick. Peter Pan finds out he has been saved by his fairy. Thus, his grateful feelings about Tinker Bell emerge:

> 'O Tink, did you drink it to save me?'
> 'Yes.'
> 'But why, Tink?'
> Her wings would scarcely carry her now, but in reply she alighted on his shoulder and grave his chin a loving bite. She whispered in his ear 'You silly ass'; and then, tottering to her chamber, lay down on the bed. (1993: 131)

When Barrie writes the scene in which Tinker dies out of love for Peter, he ennobles Tink's character before the readers' eyes, and this ennoblement is accentuated by Peter's preoccupation with and Barrie's description of Tink's process of agony in the fairy tale:

> He [Peter] knelt near her in distress. Every moment her light was growing fainter; and he knew that if it went out she would be no more. She liked his tears so much that she put out her beautiful finger and let them run over it.
> Her voice was so low that at first he could not make out what she said. Then he made it out. She was saying that she thought she could get well again if children believed in fairies. (1993: 131-32)

In Victorian times, to die as a love's martyr was a romantic concept that arose from a patriarchal culture, in which women had to show reverence, affection and duty to men. women, such as Wendy, were assumed to be weak and anxious to lean on and be dominated by strong men. This repression had been imposed by the patriarchal structure that constrained women to appear as subalterns. In Spivak's words, "both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (1999: 28). Thus, Victorian women tend to be analyzed as passive and weak creatures whose main values are "based on evangelical beliefs about the importance of the family, the constancy of marriage and woman's innate moral goodness" (Abrams 2001). Both Spivak and Abrams summarize Wendy's attitude toward patriarchal values such as motherhood, passivity and submission.

As it has been suggested earlier, Tinker Bell pertains to a fantastic world that does not fit exactly into the archetypal image of Victorian women. While women of the time are only represented as docile, obedient and an abnegated wives, Tinker Bell shows concern for her benefits and her welfare; that is, she realizes that despite the fact of being a female character in a patriarchal society, she can be considered as important as any man in that society. She refuses to play the role of a dutiful woman who simply lives to make the men in her family happy. She wants to be appreciated by other people and desires Peter's attention. Thus, when she dies for Peter, Tink does not act as a submissive woman; she is pushed by an impulse that embodies a mixture of loyalty, undying friendship and love.

While Tinker is dying and her light begins to fade, Peter Pan—in a desperate attempt—asks the children in the audience whether they believe in fairies; in case they do, they should clap their hands, so they would not let Tink die. The children in the audience help Peter by clapping their hands. However, in the fairy tale version Barrie adds extra suspense:

> The clapping stopped suddenly; as if countless mothers had rushed to their nurseries to see what on earth was happening; but already Tink was saved. First her voice grew strong; then she popped out of bed; then she was flashing through the room more merry and impudent than ever. She never thought of thanking those who believed, but she would have liked to get at the ones who had hissed. (1993: 132)

Tinker Bell is resurrected by the wave of love and belief that pours onto the stage. It is the first time both in the play and in the fairy tale that Peter shows his sweet feelings, and the first time that he worries about Tink. In an

analogous drive, Tinker Bell is comforted and gratified because her lover has saved her. After all, she is the only character who does not abandon Peter. In the end, her conception of love moves from the physical attraction to the more idealistic qualities of friendship and loyalty, which perhaps highlight her fantastic reality by distancing her from the more ephemeral, mundane and treacherous nature that she exhibits at the beginning of the story. When Wendy, John, Michael and the Lost Boys go back to London, Tink travels with Peter to Never Land. The end of Tinker Bell is uncertain, because although Tink does not abandon Peter and remains close to him, Peter forgets her only a year later. Barrie shows, both in the play and the fairy tale, a Peter who does not remember his fairy when Wendy asks about her:

> When she [Wendy] expressed a doubtful hope that Tinker Bell would be glad to see her he said, 'Who is Tinker Bell?'
> 'O Peter,' she said, shocked; but even when she explained he could not remember.
> 'There are such a lot of them,' he said. 'I expect she is no more.'
> I expect he was right, for fairies don't live long, but they are so little that a short time seems a good while to them.
>
> (1942: 168)

Barrie induces the reader to believe that Tinker is dead; nevertheless, he never asserts this belief and uses Peter's words ironically: "I expect she is no more." Readers may infer from these words the end of the fairy, whose self-sacrificing and virtuous conduct precipitate the displacement of Peter's primary role in the story. His outstanding selfishness becomes more visible in this final juxtaposition with Tinker's invisibility and suspected eternity, suggesting a final reflection on the moral charge of such stories initially written for children, in which the critique against the dubious condition of human nature tends to be opposed to the ethical values more easily represented in a fantastic background.

To sum up, Tinker Bell is Peter Pan's fiery and jealous fairy, who represents sensuality as a free spirit liberated from all moral responsibility, and who belongs to the supernatural world. She says what she thinks and does not worry too much about what others may think. The extremes in her personality are explained by the fact that a fairy's size prevents her from holding more than one feeling at a time. Because of her minuscule size, she can only hate or love, and therefore be either bad or good. Thus, when she is jealous of Wendy, Tink is regarded as a vengeful character because Wendy loses the attention and affection of Peter. This highlights her egocentric sensibility, which prompts her to reclaim Peter's care and devotion. Nevertheless, Tinker Bell also performs the function of an altruistic character; this occurs when Tinker Bell drinks from a poisoned cup to save Peter's life, sacrificing herself in the process. It is the only

instance in both the play and the fairy tale when Tink shows her affection, friendliness, loyalty and—above all—love for Peter, without expecting any empathetic response. She is moved by the impulse of her noblest and most disinterested feelings.

Both in *Peter Pan or The Boy Who Would Not Grow Up* (1904) and *Peter Pan and Wendy* (1911) the ambiguous personality of Tinker Bell plays on the reader's expectations due to her mixture of opposing behaviours. This confrontation originates in the dual construction of love and possession in both texts. This duality, as reflected in the character of Tinker Bell, and the use of irony and paradox, allow the author to tempt Victorian and Edwardian women to transgress society's rules and conventions. Barrie seems to encourage children and adults to regard Tinker Bell as a new female character who is free and independent, and who does not reveal the prejudices and fears of Victorian and Edwardian societies in relation to the sexuality of women.

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