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ENG_3180

12/02/2019

Relinquishing Control: Peter Pan, The Boy Who Tried to Grow Up.

Peter Pan. The boy who never grew up. This piece of children's literature has been the source of timeless analysis. Children's literature is often meant to expose qualities in children that are either valuable, or undesirable. It can therefore be argued that most works of children's literature center on some form of childhood maturation. So if this is true, how are we to look at Peter Pan? How can Peter experience maturation when he is encapsulated in a state of everlasting childhood? Peter's growth is a paradox, but his story is not about everlasting youth, it is about the fear of not being able to control our own process of maturation, which are two different things. One is about maintaining youth, while the other suggests that children implicitly know that they will inevitably grow up. The interesting theme here worth examining is that J.M. Barrie never suggests outright that Peter is aware of the fact that he *cannot* physically grow up. He simply does not want to, which lays the ground work for Peter's unconventional growth, because unlike regular children who fear getting old because they know it is inevitable, the turning point in Peter's life manifests when he finally comes to the terrifying conclusion that he is incapable of physically maturing, even if he wanted to. This is the paradox of Peter Pan's growth, because this is a story about the fear of growing up, but it is also a story about the fear of *not being able* to grow up.

When we are first introduced to Peter's character we are met with a few accounts of Peter's position on growing into adulthood. He repeatedly states that he does not want to grow

up; however, he never says that he cannot grow up. The evidence is overwhelming throughout the course of the novel with some notable statements by Peter himself. When Peter first meets Wendy she asks him how old he is, to which he replies “I don’t know...but I am quite young” (Barrie pg.32). Barrie further states that Peter “really knew nothing about it; he merely had suspicions” (32). This passage is evidence of the fact that Peter is not aware that he is physically unable to grow up. More evidence to support this claim can be found in Katherine Frazier’s critical analysis “The Peter Pan Paradox” where she retraces the origins of Peter Pan back to the early works of his character in “The Little White Bird.” Frazier comments “throughout The Little White Bird, the reader sees how Barrie views Peter Pan as a little bird...In fact, the early stages of Peter involved him as a bird because Barrie viewed all children who did not grow up in this way, as little birds: ‘He [Peter] was quite unaware already that he had ever been human, and thought he was a bird’” (Frazier pg.16). Although this quote is more analytical of Barrie’s early work, and Barrie himself, the point remains the same. Peter is completely unaware of the fact that he will never physically grow up. At this point Peter simply does not want to grow up, and this is the decision that he holds close because this is how he exercises control over his maturation or existence. Peter later tells Wendy that “[he] ran away the day [he] was born...because [he] heard father and mother talking about what [he] was to be when [he] became a man” adding “I don’t ever want to be a man, I want to always be a little boy and to have fun” (Barrie pg.32). Again, here we find that Peter is speaking of things that he feels are within his control.

Peter’s character is displayed as controlling throughout the novel. He feels that he is in control of his maturation process, and he certainly controls the lost boys to the point that have to wear the skins of bears because they are forbidden to look like him in the slightest (59). Peter

also determines or controls what he wants to participate in, mainly the things that involve adulthood such as domestic responsibility. But this is where the irony of the entire situation occurs. In Peter's attempts to control everything around him, he is entirely lost on the fact that he does not have the free will to choose whether or not he can physically mature. He only believes that he is choosing to stay young, but he has yet to acknowledge that he does not have a choice in the matter; however, there are several instances that point to the possibility that Peter is not entirely happy with being a child exclusively. In support of this claim Frazier argues that "though Peter puts on the façade that he never desires to grow up, he actually appears to long for it" (Frazier pg.21). Evidence to support this statement can be found between the interactions of Peter and Wendy. At one point when Wendy is tucking the children into bed Peter keeps watch outside "drawn sword" to protect his family from pirates and "wolves on the prowl" (Barrie pg.84). This is indicative of Peter taking on a role of domestic responsibility. He is playing protector while Wendy is playing nurturer. He also indulges Wendy by pretending to be her partner in parenting. He even says "Me! My old bones would rattle" in response to the boys wanting him to dance with them (120). This is the only passage in the novel where Peter presently refers to himself as "old" in a jesting way, and although he reneges on playing father later, asking Wendy "It is only make-believe, isn't it, that I am their father?...you see...it would make me seem so old to be their real father" it is not hard to argue that Peter actually enjoyed getting lost in the idea of being the boy's father, and even Wendy's husband. Of course, he does not realize this until Wendy takes it away from him. This is the turning point in the novel. This is the first indication that Peter may want something more, and that something may be to grow old.

Part of growing old includes compromise, which Peter has shown to be capable of in his relationship with Wendy. Another part of growing old includes relinquishing power over others,

which Peter expresses when he allows Wendy and the lost boys to leave Neverland. It is not that Peter does not care about them leaving, in fact, Barrie explicitly states “if [Wendy] did not mind parting, he was going to show her, that neither did he. But of course he cared very much” (131). This is a true marker of growth, Peter’s newfound ability to set his feelings aside to make Wendy happy and even allowing his posse of lost boys to accompany her is something that would be unfathomable to him in the beginning of the novel. In the beginning of the novel Peter vehemently rejected all notions of wanting to grow up, but as the novel progresses so does Peter’s longing to grow with Wendy. He has shown intentions of wanting to grow up and he has even made some substantial efforts in compromising and letting go, including unbarring Wendy’s bedroom window when he is confronted with his first emotions of empathy. As Peter witnesses Mrs. Darling’s sorrow over losing Wendy he says to himself “she’s awfully fond of Wendy...I’m fond of her too. We can’t both have her lady” (188). Ultimately Peter, once again, sets aside his own feelings to relieve someone else’s grief; however, his sincere efforts to grow up mentally and emotionally do not equate to his ability to physically grow up. This is evident in the final scenes of the book. The lost boys have left Peter to grow up, Tink has died, and now Wendy is not the same as when he left her. Everything around him has changed except him. When Peter returns to see Wendy 25 years later he expects Wendy to come back with him; however, when Wendy tells him not to waste fairy dust on her Barrie states that “now at last a fear assailed him” (204). This is the crux of the material, the moment when Peter begins to realize that he has no choice or control on whether or not he can physically mature. When Wendy tells Peter that she is going to turn on the light (to reveal her old age) Barrie writes “for almost the only time in his life that I know of, Peter was afraid” (204). After Wendy finally does turn up the lights Peter gives “a cry of pain...he sat down on the floor and sobbed...Peter

continued to cry, and soon woke [Wendy's daughter] Jane" (205). In cyclical fashion Jane asks Peter the same thing that Wendy asked him so many years before; "Boy why are you crying?" (205). In the end Peter takes Jane to neverland to be his mother and to do his spring cleaning, then he takes Jane's daughter Margaret, and so on and so forth (206-7). These final moments are symbolic because the children represent everlasting pieces of Wendy, and they are pieces that Peter can take with him, which is the only thing that allows Peter to reconcile with himself and bear the weight of his own everlasting existence.

The adventures of Peter Pan are anything but straight forward. J.M. Barrie's masterpiece is full of irony and paradoxes that will surely be analyzed for years to come. The only things that are seemingly true in the novel are that Wendy will grow up, and Peter will not. Everything else is up for interpretation. This story is about much more than the adventures of a child who will never grow up. In this interpretation of the text I argue that "Peter Pan" is not merely an adventure consisting of Pirates, and Indians. It is actually an unconventional story about the adventure of self-realization, which only happens when we accept that we are not in complete control of our own path to maturation. Peter Pan encapsulates the spirit of childhood, but he also encapsulates the fear of not being able to control our own process of maturation, which is evident by the degree of control that he inflicts upon himself and others. He separates modes of mental and emotional growth, with physical growth. He himself will never grow physically, but that does not mean that he is incapable of mental and emotional maturity. In fact, the real substance of the story revolves around the growth of a child that is seemingly incapable of growing. This story is relevant to our own human experience because it is a creative outlet that simultaneously allows children to reconcile with their anxieties about not being able to control their aging process, while also allowing adults the ability to examine their anxieties of never fully maturing.

Works Cited

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Frazier, Katherine E., "The Peter Pan Paradox: A Discussion of the Light and Dark in J.M. Barrie's *Shadow Child*" (2014). University of Tennessee Honors Thesis Projects