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"A lady to take care of us at last": Problems of New Womanhood in J.M. Barrie's *Peter and Wendy*

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This essay explores the depiction of the "New Woman" figure in J. M. Barrie's Peter and Wendy (1911). By exploring contradictory modes of femininity, Barrie's novel points to the ways in which established norms of masculinity at the fin-de-siècle were defined and frustrated by their relation to an unstable feminine ideal. The following essay will argue that the novel's inconsistent depictions of femininity point to an end-of-the-era anxiety surrounding the emergent New Woman, an ambivalence which is symptomatic of the wider social and political uncertainties that defined the aftermath of the nineteenth century.

The conspicuous arrival of the "New Woman" figure in fin-de-siècle literature signals both an increased awareness of the changing place of women at the onset of the new century, and an underlying anxiety about the dwindling Victorian social order. Numerous theorisations of the New Woman emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century, but common traits attributed to the figure include sexual transgressiveness, revolutionary politics, and a rejection of heterosexual marriage, all of which were at odds with the gendered expectations of late-Victorian society (Ledger 6). Such traits are exhibited in several of the period's most distinctive and provocative female characters, Henrik Ibsen's Nora Helmer (*A Doll's House*) and Bram Stoker's Lucy Westenra (*Dracula*) being notable examples. Representing a radical challenge to the status quo, the New Woman's existence as a consistent entity beyond fiction, however, is debatable, and critics have tended to view the figure as an amalgamation of various mythologies around female emancipation; as Patricia Marks puts it, "her very existence depends on the desire of others to fictionalize her" (10). Despite this evident fictiveness, as a symbol of the anticipated liberation of the new century, she has endured as a potent figure within the late-Victorian/early-Edwardian imagination. However, inconsistencies around the classification of the New Woman problematise her radical potential, undermining the definitiveness with which proponents of New Womanhood tended to apply the term. As Sally Ledger notes, the New Woman, though a real influence on suffrage and feminist movements, was simultaneously "constructed as a product of discourse", and her literary depictions bear out this constructedness through their deviation from the *ideal* of the New Woman (3). Ambivalence around the figure can also be seen to operate as a deliberate strategy of destabilisation and indeed fin-de-siècle fiction, particularly that which is male-authored, tends to express uncertainty about the ability, and willingness, of New Women to exert social change, and challenge established gendered hierarchies.

J. M. Barrie's children's novel *Peter and Wendy* (1911) considers these ambiguities through the mode of escapist fantasy, removing the narrative from the political and social contexts which might otherwise point to a representation of New Womanhood. The novel centres on Peter, a boy who has never grown up, and a young girl, Wendy, who flies with him to the fantasy island of Neverland. Joining the Lost Boys, a group of children who have also escaped impending adulthood, Wendy and her brothers soon become engaged in a series of adventures on the island, whilst evading the attentions of Peter's antagonist, Captain Hook. Despite this imagined space being removed from social and political expectations, gendered hierarchies are replicated in Neverland, demonstrating the pervasiveness of such ideologies. In the construction of Wendy in particular, Barrie destabilises the New Woman figure by depicting her in multiple, potentially conflicting roles: a passive woman subdued by conquering men, but also as (proto)spouse and mother with responsibilities and authority. Barrie further suggests that Wendy's fluctuating identity poses an existential threat to hegemonic ideals of masculinity, particularly to Peter's carefree boyhood. Critics such as Jacqueline Rose have highlighted the novel's ambivalent perspective on the child/adult transition, and Wendy's maternal significance in this dynamic, but the representation of New Womanhood in the novel has gone largely unexplored. The following essay will argue that the novel's inconsistent depictions of femininity point to an end-of-the-era anxiety surrounding the emergent New Woman, as the text both embraces and rejects the characteristics of New Womanhood. By exploring contradictory modes of femininity, Barrie demonstrates the ways in which norms of masculinity at the fin-de-siècle were defined and frustrated by their relation to an unstable feminine ideal, recommending instead a conservation of traditional sexual roles into the new century.

Passive Women, Conquering Men

Late-Victorian depictions of the New Woman noted common attributes such as dress, education, and employment, with Carolyn Christensen Nelson suggesting that the New Woman stock character depicted in the popular press was "educated at Girton College, Cambridge, rode a bicycle, insisted on rational dress, and smoked in public" (ix). More recently, critics examining the New Woman figure in fin-de-siècle literature have tended to emphasise her place within a wider trend of cultural, national, and gendered instability. Ann Heilmann defines the New Woman as a "vibrant metaphor of transition", whose "political demands" and "international resonance" communicated as much about changing class categories and Britain's imperial demise as her sexual anarchism did about volatile feminine norms (1). The New Woman is thus presented as both superficial and profound, discernible by her clothing and behaviours, but also by her symbolic influence on wider social issues. Heilmann's characterisation in particular speaks to an enduring trend in New Woman critique to connect her with the fin-de-siècle's inherent in-betweenness, suggesting that she is a "metaphor" for other anxieties instigated by the "epoch of endings and beginnings" (Ledger and Luckhurst xiii) represented by the aftermath of the nineteenth century Ambivalence around the depiction and function of the New Woman is therefore symptomatic of this figuring of the fin-de-siècle as curiously between and within opposing values.

Peter and Wendy stages several forms of liminality which reflect this fin-de-siècle context. Peter Pan is a boy who has never grown up, a temporal ambiguity which puzzles the Darling children, all of whom, but particularly Wendy, have fixed expectations about the inevitability of the transition towards adulthood. The narrative is physically removed from the familiarity of such signifiers, transporting its protagonists from suburban London to Neverland; a place in which growing up, and thus any expectation of abiding by unwritten social codes around marriage and family, is strictly "against the rules" (Barrie 112). Peter rewrites the rules of growth and development in an effort to avoid the practical limitations of maturity, but Neverland itself, a literal utopia or 'no place', operates similarly as a constructed escape from adulthood. Initially a 1904 play which was later adapted by Barrie into a children's novel, the narrative simplifies gendered hierarchies for its young audience, but these symbolic ambiguities in the novel's spatial and temporal realms suggest that such seemingly straightforward sexual norms must also be reinvestigated.

Key to the narrative's escapist imperative is a comparison with the social norms Peter seeks to reject, here exemplified by the Darling parents. Their traditional marriage is defined in the first instance with reference to their financial capabilities, a concern which implicitly associates them with reality, practicality, and maturity. The New Woman is defined by Gail Cunningham as "everything that was daring and revolutionary" in fin-de-siècle society, but as Gillian Sutherland notes, such revolutionary potential must be premised upon financial liberation – “If you controlled adequate resources, you had choice … without economic resources, you were dependent, on either husband or family or both” (Cunningham 10; Sutherland 8). The New Woman is thus crucially both sexually and *financially* liberated, and this aspect of the Darling marriage is therefore key to the novel’s consideration of New Womanhood. Mr. Darling is described as having “often said stocks and shares were down in a way which would have made any woman respect him”, whilst Mrs. Darling “was married in white, and at first kept the books perfectly” (Barrie 70). If, as John Middleton Murray argues, marriage in the fin-de-siècle novel always presents a “surrender to a man’s sexual attachment on terms: the condition being economic security”, the conflation of this virginal white imagery with the suggestion of fiscal incompetence undertakes new meaning, highlighting the role of marriage as financial transaction, with men as the materially wealthy consumers (57).

However, similarities in their characterisations, particularly around the financial terminology which comes to define them both, creates an engendered mirroring which resurfaces in Wendy’s own later proto-familiar structure. There are also connections drawn between transaction and motherhood, particularly where Barrie goes on in this opening section to assert that, in place of book-keeping, Mrs. Darling soon began drawing “pictures of babies without faces. She drew them when she should have been totting up” (70). Barrie playfully highlights this transition from the domain of work to motherhood, with “totting up” being reminiscent of the “tots” the family soon welcomes. These anonymised children evidence an ambivalence towards familial ideals, an inability by Mrs. Darling to fully realise or imagine marital life in its totality. This abstracted symbol of motherhood, which soon supersedes the concrete materiality of numerical book-keeping, pre-emptively removes her children from the bounds of reality, a liminal space of existence which precipitates their later adventures. That it is Mrs. Darling alone whose “guesses” soon materialise as Wendy “then John, then Michael” further distances Mr. Darling from the responsibility of parenthood, highlighting a separation of the domains of familial and financial obligation (Barrie 70).

Mrs. Darling’s monetary passivity is amplified in Neverland’s symbolic space, as masculine protectiveness is transformed from financial to physical concern. The structural composition of this community is dependent on acts of brutality – “the boys on the island vary, of course, in numbers, according as they get killed and so on”– and there is the implication here that violence is to be expected in this intensely masculine space (Barrie 112). That this island is subject to violent territorial disputes, despite the presence of the implied native “Piccaninny tribe” (Barrie 116), corroborates Jacqueline Rose’s assertion that here “discovering, or seeing, the world is equivalent to controlling or subduing it” (58). This perspective is particularly helpful when considering the colonising repercussions for the novel’s female dimension; Barrie’s depiction of Tiger Lily introduces her in hegemonic marital terms, “there is not a brave who would not have the wayward thing to wife”, and underlines the intersection of colonising and sexist ideology present in this imposition of Westernised norms (116). Critics have noted the “transparency” of Tiger Lily’s depiction in Barrie’s narrative, highlighting the ways in which she is demarcated by her physical presence rather than through speech or active involvement in Peter’s adventures (Cary 1). Her subjugation as an object of desire is premised upon her racial identity, a contrast with Wendy who “performs stereotypical, white, middle-class femininity” (Yoo 393). Neither Wendy nor Tiger Lily are able to overcome the island’s norms of masculine supremacy, but Tiger Lily’s relative voicelessness serves to highlight the particular ways in which the novel’s invocation of imperial ideology further denies female characters the subjectivity of their male counterparts.

The masculine enterprise of colonialism arises in fin-de-siècle literature across the generic spectrum, often highlighting the intersection between colonial conquest and crises of masculinity. As Mrinalini Sinha argues, British colonial masculinities were informed by a wider culture of “public school ‘manliness’” which was linked to athleticism, intellectualism, and patriotism (9). In this light, it is perhaps no wonder that the colonial adventure narrative was popularised as a children’s genre during the period, solidifying a masculinity premised upon comradeship and male loyalty which would be familiar to public school boys. Novels such as explorer Verney Lovett Cameron’s *Three Sailor Boys* (1902) often displaced their protagonists to far-flung lands whilst retaining the familiar gendered, and racialised, hierarchies of empire which perpetuated a myth of white, masculine supremacy. However, fictions suggesting that the imperial project prompted a reassessment of traditional tenets of masculinity also proliferated across the fin-de-siècle, particularly narratives shaped by the intervention of aberrant, threatening femininities. Indeed, as Robert Fraser argues, “the camaraderie evident in these narratives bolstered a male myth of self-nurturing intended to keep women at a distance” (3). In the aftermath of the height of empire, such anxieties about imperial decline were often staged as sexual conflicts, transposing fears of feminised, colonialised nations onto female characters who sought to overturn homosocial ideals of masculinity. Outside of the children’s adventure genre, novels such as H. Rider Haggard’s

She "banish women", as Joseph Bristow argues, from the plot until the central confrontation with "the ultimate feminine evil" is realised (141). *Peter and Wendy*'s consideration of this trope of active masculinity enforcing passive femininity begins with the Darlings' domestic sphere but it is literalised in the colonising hierarchies of Neverland. This continuity highlights the pervasiveness of such ideologies across spatial and temporal boundaries, thereby undermining the potential of the imagined space to encompass New Woman sensibilities which deviate from those articulated in reality.

Wendy as (Proto)Mother and Spouse

The adventure narrative form of *Peter and Wendy* thus lends itself more to traditional displays of masculine heroism, and gendered hierarchies are proposed along the lines of the active, male aggressors who subdue, or protect, passive female outsiders. However, there are notable instances where this dynamic is reversed, particularly in terms of Wendy's relationship with the Lost Boys. Significantly, Wendy's motherly protectiveness evidences an almost contradictory gendered dynamic to which Claudia Nelson refers – "even female children are to some extent adult and dangerous, even adult males childlike and endangered" (170). The island's Lost Boys rejoice at the arrival of Wendy, "a lady to take care of us at last", and in doing so refigure her in language which corresponds to her expected level of responsibility; a 'lady' notably implies both maturity and status (Barrie 124). That the Lost Boys believe that they need someone to "take care" of them presents a significant deviation from the image of manliness and liberation from parental restriction that Neverland otherwise facilitates. This imperative is continually maternalised and likened to a proto-familial structure, in which Wendy as "a nice motherly person" takes on traditionally maternal responsibilities to the continually infantilised male characters (Barrie 132). In this way, the novel's gendered divisions grant its female characters an increased sense of agency by diminishing the perceived capabilities of the supposedly superior boys.

As Mary Louise Roberts points out, ambivalence towards motherhood formed a key component of the New Woman sensibility, a rejection of domesticity which moved the figure beyond previous feminist movements that had attempted to justify legal or political rights by a reassertion of the moral influence of women as wives and mothers (21). Although this mothering imperative might be seen to constitute a deviation from total masculine supremacy, being as it is both an inflection of status and maturity, Wendy's willingness, indeed desire, to undertake this maternal responsibility therefore does not overtly align with New Womanhood. Barrie's critical perspective on female emancipation from domesticity is foregrounded in this particular dynamic between Wendy and the Lost Boys, a relationship which serves to instil a sense of domestic calm in the otherwise chaotic and violent culture of Neverland. The stabilising of this society, signalling a form of narrative resolution, is premised upon assimilation to the familial ideals that Wendy comes to embody. In this construction of Wendy as mother figure, Barrie is therefore able to enact a kind of narrative cyclicality, framing her rejection of New Woman ideals of childlessness as a victory for civilised society, and justifying the Darling children's eventual return home.

Aside from motherhood, the proto-familial dynamic also remains intensely patriarchal, and it is emphasised that Wendy "was far too loyal a housewife to listen to any complaints against father" (Barrie 157-158). Wendy's own ambivalence towards New Womanhood manifests as an ingrained desire to become both mother *and* spouse, replicating the familial structures of her own time and space. The novel's depiction of Wendy as running a form of household might seek to elevate her to a position of authority and influence over the Lost Boys, but the continual reassertion of her deference to Peter as husband figure further affirms her subjugation – she expresses a romantic, spousal desire for Peter, whilst his feelings for her are "those of a devoted son" (Barrie 62). This challenges Adrian Smith's argument that Wendy's maternal "identification is idealised and stands in uneasy relation to her gradually increasing urge to gain psychological independence, creating a tension which constitutes the dramatic heart of the tale"; rather, it is Wendy's continuing desire to be considered in a capacity which Peter, in his prolonged childhood, cannot understand, which exposes their fundamental incompatibility (519). Wendy's narrative ends as "a married woman" fulfilling the hegemonic expectation of marriage which Peter denies her and, rather than gaining psychological independence, she becomes further identified with a necessarily dependent maternal ideal at odds with the tenets of New Womanhood (Barrie 220).

Difficulties of Becoming

As Isobel Armstrong reasons, "[fin-de-siècle narratives] are stories of masculine rites of passage, but they manifest masculine anxiety about the difficulties of becoming a man. The New Woman prompted either reassertion of traditional masculinity or redefinition of it" (6). Having considered the novel's depiction of marriage and maternity, it is evident that proto-familial/spousal relationships, rather than the pure rejection of feminine intervention evidenced by other adventure fantasy novels, are a key part of *Peter and Wendy*'s exploration of gendered roles. The novel clearly considers the implications of maturity for young women, but there is also a conflicted depiction of masculinity articulated, connected through its relationship to an increasingly unstable feminine norm. Taking femininity as the central element by which masculinity defines itself, as Armstrong suggests, necessitates a re-evaluation of fin-de-siècle modes of manliness which locate narratives such as this at a crucial threshold between traditional, Victorian values and the impending attitudes of modernity.

Peter's simultaneous refusal to abide by the heteronormative expectations of Wendy's imagined family dynamic, and his insistence on a strictly gendered hierarchical social order, present a problematic route to New Womanhood. Armstrong's "difficulties of becoming" might be a particularly revealing theory with which to consider the route to both man and womanhood in the novel, as the narrative takes the allures of childhood stasis versus embarking on the dangerous journey towards adulthood as its central thematic focus. As Peter postures, "'I don't ever want to be a man,' he said with a passion. 'I want to always be a little boy and to have fun.'" (Barrie 92). This unwillingness to enter into Armstrong's "masculine rites of passage" communicates a significant rupture in the novel's presentation of gendered responsibilities. Whilst Wendy does not adhere firmly to the New Woman ideal, her place as Neverland's representative of proto-adulthood continues to threaten Peter's carefully cultivated ideals of social responsibility.

Indeed, Nelson positions Wendy, "one of the kind that likes to grow up", as the inevitable "enemy of boyish freedom", further evidencing that Wendy's narrative role as a kind of feminine ideal is to encourage elements of maturity in Peter (Barrie 220; Nelson 172). The impulse to maturity symbolised by Wendy is thus in tension with the cyclical structure which reinforces Peter's stasis. Despite the domestic implications of Wendy's desire to grow up, this conflict between development and circularity can be seen to parallel the progressiveness of New Womanhood struggling against the constancy of Victorian ideals. As Wendy moves towards adulthood, Peter remains temporally fixed, with this aspect of Barrie's fin-de-siècle narrative perhaps recommending the inevitability, and advantages, of embracing impending modernity.

Wendy does, however, experience a further form of cyclicality, as she grows up, and watches her daughter and Peter “fly away together” (Barrie 225). Representing a further manifestation of fin-de-siècle in-betweenness, Wendy is unable to fully let go of the past even whilst desiring the future, gesturing toward Barrie’s own inability to fully either reject or embrace New Womanhood. This ultimate unresolvedness defies Fiona McCulloch’s model of the children’s story, one which starts with “the portrayal of home with its familiarity but perhaps dissatisfaction” and ends at “a circular return to a perhaps more secure place in the home” (42). The home, overwhelmingly figured both in the portrayal of the Darling family and in Wendy’s latterly attempted recreation of it as the domain of the mother, presents a continual cycle of dissatisfaction, but still refuses to fully reject these roles in favour of New Womanhood. Wendy in many ways continues the archetypal maternal role initially fulfilled in the narrative by her own mother, who “first heard of Peter when she was tidying up her children’s minds” (Barrie 72-73). This return to the novel’s beginning is significant, underlining that McCulloch’s “circular return” might not always signify resolution.

Conclusion

It is therefore clear that the conflicted presentation of the feminine in *Peter and Wendy* is symptomatic of an increasing anxiety around the gender implications of the fin-de-siècle. Barrie presents seemingly contradictory modes of femininity within his central female characters, at once subject to the controlling influence of (proto)spouses and male relatives, but also positioning them as vital adjacent figures, exerting some superiority over infantilised men. This adventure narrative depicts a hierarchical society in which women are protected from physical harm, and the colonising character of the Lost Boys endures in their dominating interactions with female characters, but Wendy’s role as proto-mother serves to elevate her to a position of status within this community. In exploring these gendered relationships, Barrie suggests that there is a need here to define masculinity in relation to an unstable mode of femininity, creating a crisis of gendered roles which manifests as authorial ambivalence towards New Womanhood. The implications for the New Woman in the novel are therefore complicated by these contradictions, and its cyclical ending undermines elements of sexual progressiveness. The binary “between Victorianism and modernity” postured by Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst is then reductive (xiii); this narrative is implicated in a more complex equivocality around the emergence of the New Woman, an ambivalence which characterises the fin-de-siècle as seeing the aftermath of one era and beginning a trepidatious advance into the next.

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