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Ventures into Neverlands:

The Relationship between Parents and Children

In *Peter Pan* and *Winnie the Pooh*

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Introduction

"All children, except one, grow up. They soon know that they will grow up, and the way Wendy knew was this. One day when she was two years old she was playing in a garden, and she plucked another flower and ran with it to her mother. I suppose she must have looked rather delightful, for Mrs. Darling put her hand to her heart and cried, "Oh, why can't you remain like this for ever!" This was all that passed between them on the subject, but henceforth Wendy knew that she must grow up. You always know after you are two. Two is the beginning of the end." (James Matthew Barrie 1)

This is how James Matthew Barrie opened his iconic tale about 'The Boy Who Would Not Grow Up', *Peter and Wendy*, better known as *Peter Pan* (1911). Interestingly enough, Barrie does not start with the hero of his novel, Peter Pan, but with a seemingly ordinary picture of family life. However, this authorial decision may help us understand the central concerns of the entire novel. The narrator himself reveals that he will not spend much time on this kind of reading-material – "There were, however, many adventures... To describe them all would require a book as large as an English-Latin, Latin-English Dictionary, and the most we can do is to give one as a specimen of an average hour on the island" (91). These adventures are, surprisingly, not the heart of the novel. I contend that the main purpose of this novel is to explore the complex relationship between the figures of parents and children, in which *time* and *storytelling* are dominant forces.

Both *time* and *storytelling* serve as double-edged swords in the relationship between the figures of parents and children. *Time*, in *Peter Pan*, serves as a barrier and a bone of contention between the figures of father and son, but as a bridge and a shared-knowledge between generations of females. In *Winnie the Pooh*, *time* has a similar effect – the *time gap* and *time-perception*, promote an alienation between the 'traditional' father figure and son figure, but foster closeness and mutual-trust between the 'modern' father figure and son figure.

Storytelling, in the hands of the female figure in *Peter Pan*, serves as a powerful tool for *tempting* her audience into doing as she pleases and *creating* reality. Both male and female characters in *Peter Pan* appreciate the value of a 'good' story. However, in *Winnie the Pooh*, *storytelling* and literature is misunderstood as nonsense by the 'traditional' father figure, but is understood, admired and created by the

'modern' father figure and child figure. This shared appreciation for literature not only strengthens the bond between the 'modern' father figure and child figure, but also allows the 'modern' father figure to reconcile with his inner child.

Aims and General Description

This thesis will analyze and compare the relationships between the figures of parents and children, as they appear in two 20th-century iconic novels for children, *Peter Pan*, by J.M. Barrie, and *Winnie the Pooh*, by A. A. Milne. My research questions are: how are the figures of the father, mother and child (both girl and boy) depicted? What seems to preoccupy and occupy them? How are they influenced by *each other* in these novels – specifically, in terms of their mutual development and stagnation? What roles do *time* and *storytelling* play in this relationship? This thesis will address relevant literary criticism and theory in order to understand the broader view of literary parent-child relationship constructs in this period.

This thesis should contribute to an ongoing, thought-provoking discourse about the role children's literature plays and played in the 20th century, regarding the parent-child relationship. In addition, I hope this thesis will also contribute to a gradual, favorable shift as to how we see 'children's literature,' a term which I find limiting, due to this literature's complexities, as well as its actual and intended *audiences*.

Historical Background

Didacticism characterized children's literature from its inception through the 19th century. The first children's book we know of was 'Orbis Sensualium Pictus' by John Amos Comenius, published in Europe in 1658, which included pictures of objects, animals and actions, accompanied by concise descriptions of them, as a means of educating the young about the world. According to Ann Alston in her influential work, *The Family in English Children's Literature* (2008), "the earliest children's fiction [of the 17th and 18th centuries] was heavily influenced by religion and didacticism" (77). This could be attributed to the fact that up until the end of the 19th century, education was mainly acquired in religious institutions, even when students were *not* intending to become members of the clergy. In addition, until then (the end

of the 19th century), literacy was mainly the share of the upper classes – only about half of the male population (and an even lower rate of the female population) were considered 'literate', due to their ability to sign their name on marriage forms. It is clear, then, that actual literacy, as we perceive it nowadays (the ability to read and write fluently), was the share of even fewer people.

Due to the great influence of religion and didacticism, children's literature of the 18th century was mostly *not* very cheerful reading material. These 18th century children's novels told the stories of saints and martyrs which sent explicit messages to the young audience: take an example from the books' godly protagonists, be good, be angel-like. Angel-like indeed, since these books often revolved around death, due to high rates of infant mortality at the time. The main aim of these children's books was often to prepare children for a possible death and to comfort sick children by binding visions of heaven and salvation to death.

Even books of such 'serious' nature, were not accepted warmly. Many parents, educators, and even writers of the 18th century, who were mostly of the ruling classes and had the ability to read and pay for children's books, rejected it and considered it a waste of time or a dangerous tool against unarmed innocents. An ironic example of this, as Troy Boone mentions in his essay, is the celebrated philosopher and novelist Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who claims in *Emile: or On Education* (1762) that, he "hates books" (184) and that "the instruments of [children's] greatest misery—... [are] books. Reading is the plague of childhood and almost the only occupation we know how to give it" (116).

However, the First Industrial Revolution (which happened approximately from 1760 to 1840) changed things dramatically in the Western World, and, among other influences, made books much cheaper and much more accessible. This made the literacy rate in England (as was the case in other western world countries) rise considerably – from about 53% of literacy rate to 76% in the fifty years between 1820 and 1870¹ - and led to a proliferation of fiction and children's fiction.

¹ According to the data from the website OurWorldinData, URL: <https://ourworldindata.org/literacy>.

Although Ann Alston claims that "didacticism still hovers below the surface of much writing for children" (32), the 19th century did bring winds of change, and didacticism became less prominent or at least less overt. The 19th century was especially known as the "Golden Age of Children's Literature" thanks to many talented and prolific writers. With Lewis Carroll, Frances Hodgson Burnett, Mark Twain, Louisa May Alcott, Robert Louis Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling and many other great writers, children's literature became more lighthearted, exploring new genres like adventure, coming-of-age (also known as bildungsroman) and 'nonsense' fiction, as well as more sophisticated and complex. Nineteenth century 'children's' novels often spoke in at least two levels of meanings – a simple plot for the children, and a rich 'behind the scenes' for adults - references, metaphors, jokes, puns etc. – a 'wink' which flew above children's heads undetected, but met with a satisfied adult (Knoepflmacher XIII).

Influenced by religious ideas, the mid-nineteenth era encouraged an image that was prevalent until the Edwardian era, of the child as an innocent being, and a savior of a "fallen world" (Alston 58) and of humanity, with his/her prelapsarian innocence. It is important to note that, at the same time, the evangelical image of the child as fallen or sinner competed with the romantic notion, though this is not central to my purposes. This romantic notion has left a significant mark on children's literature, and even nowadays, children's literature is full of child protagonists who have the role of a savior, whether by providing physical aid, spiritual support, or both.

With the development of child labour laws and public education around the western world in the 20th century, as well as the adoption of a more respectful attitude towards children and childhood, the 20th century too enjoyed a proliferation of children's literature (as Alston points out, some referred to the period between 1945 and 1970 as 'a Second Golden Age' [57]) and even came up with a new sub-profession, writers of children's literature. What that meant was an even deeper dive into the waters of 'family' with its complexities and uncertainties. According to Alston, "The retreatism evident after the First World War had vanished post-Second World War, and as Thacker and Webb argue, it was the threat of nuclear annihilation that 'made the possibilities of a better world more difficult to imagine'(110)" (57). Despite, or perhaps, because of these grim anxieties, children's literature became more of a sanctuary, an almost utopian world despite its various oddities, unique creatures,

and adventures. Everything in this world is in order, the rules are clear and the places are marked and explained – an organized mess, if you will. However, the fears and anxieties from the 'outside' world were not shut out of this period's literature completely, but often echoed real-world problems, in a way that usually portrayed the child as the hero, one whom – independent of adults – defeats enemies and overcomes every obstacle, leading to a triumphant ending (Kimball 573).

Stories often begin "with the separation of children and parents" (59), which frequently leads to role-reversals of a traditional hierarchy – the oldest boy/ eldest brother becomes the leader or the 'father', the girl/ sister - a 'mother'. If so, the 20th century's literature kept promoting "traditional notions of the cohesive family" (60). It was presented as "the all-important backdrop to events" (60) and as an object worthy of fights and sacrifices.

As Alston suggests, the family and the "family home" (69), which she considered as "almost inseparable" (69) are presented in the 19th and early 20th centuries as metaphors of a "haven" (69), a "womb" (83), however "confining and limiting" (77). The father was usually presented as the provider and protector of the family and as such was sometimes absent (due to his work, military service etc.), which contributed to the significance of the mother in the literary home. The literary mother figure of this era was often a loving and moral character, whom the children figures loved and adored and who had the greatest direct influence on them. Perhaps due to the relatively low divorce rates at the time (pre-Matrimonial Causes Act in 1937), the literary parents were presented as one inseparable unit, which only death could tear apart. The mother would usually tolerate and balance the father's strictness, while the kids would usually love and respect both of their parents, who sometimes used punishments as a disciplinary tool.

Nonetheless, unlike the children's literature before the 1960s, post-1960s children's literature "demytholog[i]zed parental authority" (60) and exposed the darker sides of the family unit– its "uncertainties and instabilities" (60). Suddenly, themes like divorce and abuse were being explored, even if with a brighter ending than in reality. Nonetheless, this is not to say that the "fantasy of the perfect family" (61) has vanished; the image of a 'perfect family', living in a 'perfect' cozy home, is still, according to Alston, prominent, and often highlighted with "bad families" that

serve as foils. The "only real change", According to Alston, "is the recognition that families do not have to consist of the two-parent, two-children model any more" (70).

Both *Peter Pan* and *Winnie the Pooh* express this "real change" (Alston 70) and present different family models. True, *Peter Pan* does begin with an 'ordinary' family unit of a two-parent, *three*-children model, but goes on to portraying a family model that consists of many children, a mother figure that is a girl herself, and a confusing *father* figure that also serves as a *son* figure (as well as a few hints of disloyalty on both the mother's and the father's sides). *Winnie the Pooh* is, perhaps, even more untraditional, with a 'family' of toys and two humans, that for the most part of the novel consists of males only (the only female in this novel is a mother figure who only comes three chapters from the end of the novel).

If there was any risk in portraying such unique family structures in 20th century children's literature, it certainly paid off. *Peter Pan* and *Winnie the Pooh* have stood the test of time and are extremely successful, even nowadays, a century later. The two Scottish "Allahakabarries" cricket team members (Darton 9) – Barrie and Milne – seemed to have had a special understanding of "a person's mind" (Barrie 7), since their novels have spoken to the hearts of millions. With an abundance of book editions, constant cinematic and theatrical adaptations, various cartoons, and an ocean of merchandise – *Peter Pan* and *Winnie the Pooh* not only make two thriving economic empires, but also remain beloved as well as studied classics, transcending gender, time, and even age.

Methodology

My research strategy will be based on a close reading and a comparative analysis of two 20th-century children's novels. I read these novels as influential examples of 20th century children's literature, which explore the theme of relationships between children and parents, with a special focus on time and development, as well as on the act of storytelling. I will use relevant literary criticism including psychoanalytic literary criticism, feminist literary criticism, New Criticism, and Structuralism, focused on the forms and meanings of child-parent relationships in children's novels. I will also use criticism illuminating the perspectives and roles of *time* and *stories* in

children's fiction. In addition, I will attempt to find out whether these texts are emblematic of wider trends at the time or produced since.

Although *Peter Pan* and *Winnie the Pooh* have no *obvious* connection other than being popular children's novels of the 20th century, I think these novels have a lot to say about father-son relationships, mother-son relationships and the intersection between these relationships. These novels touch upon the touchy, yet (or hence-) so relatable subject of *family*. This seemingly innocent word, these novels tell us, is just like the innocent-looking honeycomb in *Winnie the Pooh*, oozing and buzzing with complications, fears, pains, desires, loves, and much more. These novels assert that these primal relationships, or the lack of such, are the source of both the 'honey' and the 'sting' in *everyone's* life, and are the most dominant factors in shaping who we are, as children *and* adults.

In a way, both *Winnie the Pooh* and *Peter Pan* are a unique sort of a bildungsroman, a bildungsroman 'gone wrong', if you will. *Peter Pan* presents a boy who cannot grow up and, to strengthen the juxtaposition, sets besides him a girl that can and will *willingly*. While *Winnie the Pooh* presents two boys who will never truly 'grow up' and will always return to their childhood haven, even when mature, in the shape of Christopher Robin and the *narrator*, in order to feel happy, secured, and, ironically, *mature*. Both of these novels display how being an 'adult' or an adult figure can change greatly due to the society one takes part in.

Whether in the shape of a silly pirate or a gloomy donkey, these novels say their truth, unapologetically. However colorful and beautifully illustrated these books may be, these books are clearly a case of "don't judge a book by its cover" (or for its literary genre, for that matter). The novels these books treasure are no 'ordinary' bedtime stories – the voices of these novels are opinionated, cynical, humoristic and sometimes brutally honest. And, perhaps this is their 'elixir of youth'; their honest and respectful approach towards *whoever* is reading.

Chapter Outline

My thesis will consist of an introduction, four chapters (the first two chapters of which will focus on J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* and the last two chapters will focus on A. A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh*), and a conclusion.

Introduction

In the introduction, I will provide the theoretical background about children's literature of the 20th century, as well as about the relationships between children and parents as they appear in children's literature of the 20th century, in general, and as they appear in the two novels I will focus on (*Peter Pan* and *Winnie the Pooh*), in particular. As this work will discuss literary representations of parents – a mother and a father – the theme of 'gender' and its different literary representations will also be part of this research. In addition, some of the scholarly works will discuss the differences between 20th-century children's literature and the literature that preceded it, as well as the plausible reasons for these differences. I will then explain my main argument and the steps I will take in the next chapters to support it.

Chapter One: Time Flies - *Peter Pan* on Fathers, Sons and Their Battles

In this chapter, I will discuss the representation of both adult and child male figures, and their similar infantile, dichotomous nature and the battles they have due to their similarity and to the time gap between them, as it appears in Barrie's novel. I will suggest that the adult and child figures in Barrie's novel are fighting each other in two battles. One is the Freudian/Oedipal battle, which is discussed in depth by many scholars on the subject. The other battle, I will suggest, is the battle over time and youth. I will explore the interaction of three main 'family units' in the novel – Mr. Darling (as the father figure), Mrs. Darling and their children; Captain Hook (as the father figure), Wendy, Peter Pan and the Lost Boys; and, Peter Pan (as the father figure), Wendy and the Lost Boys.

Unlike many other novels, in which adults and children are portrayed as polar opposites, Barrie shows that the adult is actually an older version of a young self, of a

child, and not a different 'being'. In other words, there is a sense of circularity in Barrie's vision of the male version of growing up, according to which male adults will always complete a full circle in their growth process and return to their childlikeness and, sometimes, childishness.

In this chapter, I will show how Barrie's *Peter Pan* presents a collision between the façade the adult figure wears due to social and literary conventions² and his inner child, which, in turn, leads to a battle between the male adult and male child in the novel. It appears that, according to Barrie, the male adult sees the male child as a mocking 'reflection' of him and realizes he will never be able to return to the "Neverland" that is childhood, which fills him with jealousy and even resentment towards boys (unlike the female adult who is in tune with time and who accepts growing up).

In addition to jealousy and resentment, I will also suggest that in the relationship of the male adult and male child there is also a craving for love, a sense of unity and even some mutual trust. The desire of the male adult to be loved by his children (by all three father figures of the novel – Mr. Darling, Captain Hook, and Peter Pan) represents men's desire to love and accept their inner child, which young boys remind them of, while the male child's desire to be loved by the father figure represents a need for a paternal love as well as a desire to accept the man he is slowly becoming.

Chapter Two: "A Kiss in a Box" – *Peter Pan* on Femininity, Time and Storytelling

In this chapter, I will discuss the representation of the female character in Barrie's novel. Naturally, this chapter will focus on the novel's female protagonist and Peter's foil, Wendy, and will explore her nature, her development throughout the story, and her hereditary natural connection to *time* and *storytelling*. This chapter will also touch on the other female characters in the novel, who, similarly to Barrie's male characters, are quite similar to each other. I will show how Barrie, unlike more traditional novels,

² For example, in a moment of rare vulnerability Hook cries, "No little children love me!" (159) ; as the villain of the novel, it is obvious to the audience that it could have never been otherwise due to genre conventions, which makes Hook somewhat of a tragic hero.

creates a female character that is neither a 'mistress' nor a 'mother', but a round, human-like character that is equal, if not superior, to her male counterparts.

This maturity, I will show, is expressed in the female character's harmony with the passing time and seasons and with the change they bring. This, I believe goes hand in hand with her 'magical' ability to tell stories, thus to 'tempt' her male listeners; the female character is able to grasp the 'bigger picture' and narrate a story with a satisfying pattern of a start, middle and an end – fittingly to Frank Kermode's "tick-tock" (44-46) theory. These abilities make Barrie's female figure capable of truly *loving* someone – romantically and/or motherly – unlike the male figures in this novel who find *love* complicated and sometimes even impossible.

In this chapter, I will also explore the interaction between the male and female characters in the story, from the female character's perspective. I will discuss the ways the male and female characters attempt or succeed in restricting one another. Then, I will discuss the effects these power-relations have on the different relationships in the novel. I will explore how Barrie's female figure, despite the male physical and metaphorical attempts to limit and enclose her, remains a strong, confident and enigmatic character and how she uses *time* and *storytelling* for her advantage.

Chapter Three: An Invaluable 'Nothing' - *Winnie the Pooh* on the 'Old' Father, the 'New' Father, the Child and the Time between Them.

In this chapter, I will discuss the ways in which A. A. Milne presents in *Winnie the Pooh* two contradictory father-son relationships: a progressive literary father-son relationship as well as a more traditional literary father-son relationship. I will explore how both models influence the child and the adult within these relationships and the roles of *time* as well as *storytelling* and *poetry* play in them. I will suggest that through *Winnie the Pooh* Milne attempted to create a new literary father-son sphere, in which the father is not bound to being a 'traditional' literary father, but, instead, could be a father that is a friend, a storyteller and a 'savior', while the child is equally respected and heard.

I will discuss how the 'traditional' and the 'modern' father figures view time and the ways they occupy it as well as the child's views and occupation of time – focusing on how these views and actions affect the father-child

relationship. I will argue that Milne's 'traditional' father is very focused on being 'busy', seeing no value in taking the time to relax and play. Using stuffed-animals, Milne created a 'traditional' father figure who, much like Barrie's father figures, suits the Victorian father's description "strict, yet out of place and subject to mockery" (Alston 56) and who exudes superiority and vanity. This chapter will demonstrate how this father figure's old-fashioned views and actions lead him to misunderstanding and underrating the child figure's mind and habits. In turn, this behavior results in lower self-esteem and self-confidence of the child figure as well as a precarious bond between the 'traditional' father figure and the child figure.

The 'new' father figure, however, admires and shares the child's perception of time as non-expendable resource, to relish and linger upon, which helps strengthening their relationship and lifting the child's self-esteem and confidence. Like Barrie's Neverland, in which time feels longer than in the 'real' world, both the 'new' father figure and child figure in *Winnie the Pooh* believe time should be spent much more peacefully, slowly and spiritually, in order to *experience* the world with all the sense. Through these figures (the 'new' father figure and the child figure) Milne strives to show his audience how calming and beneficial "doing nothing" actually is.

Chapter Four: "Where is Mommy?" - *Winnie the Pooh* on the Significance of the Literary Mother and her Absence

In this chapter, I will consider the semi-absence of the female/mother figure in this novel. I will suggest that the fact Milne created only one female figure, Kanga, which "happens" to be a mother, is actually a sign for the dominating power a female character has in Milne's opinion (especially over children, but not only) as well as a telltale for his view of femininity as maternity. Milne seems to present the mother-child connection as the strongest of all, and the child and mother as two completing parts of a harmonious one. This, and not necessarily chauvinism, as Claudia Nelson and other scholars suggest, could be the reason for Milne's 'reluctance' of adding a female character to his father-son bonding narrative. I will argue that the fact that Milne created a female character that is much like Barrie's, a witty, observant, and mature female character signifies that this novel actually appreciates the powers and mental abilities women have.

I will then show how Milne presented two models of relationships between the mother figure and the father figures (the 'traditional' and the 'modern' father figures), and will claim that Milne expresses his approval of the harmonious relationship between the mother figure and the 'modern' father figure.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I will summarize the different models of father-child relationship and mother-child relationship in these novels as well as the impact *time* and *storytelling* has on these models. I will also examine the ways in which the two novels perceive gender and the impact it has on the novel's characters, in particular, and on the novel as a whole. In a literature that is usually experienced by two audiences at once – a parent and a child - I hope to contribute to the existing discourse on the parent-child relationship as it appears in these two cornerstones of the 20th century children's fiction.

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