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## Barrie's Traditional Woman: Wendy's Fatal Flaw

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### **Cover Page Footnote**

I want to give credit to Dr. Sarah Terry, who encouraged me to keep writing even when I was ready to scratch it completely. I wish to give thanks to Dr. Reshmi Hebbar and her Children's Literature course that greatly influenced this work. Gratitude to the professor that never doubted my abilities, Dr. Robert Hornback. And lastly I wish to thank those that read it and did not keep commentary to themselves.

## Barrie's Traditional Woman: Wendy's Fatal Flaw

“Wendy knew that she must grow up. You always know after you are two. Two is the beginning of the end.”  
*Peter and Wendy* by J. M. Barrie

This literary critique is an analysis of J. M. Barrie's 1911 novel, *Peter and Wendy* through the Centennial Edition, *The Annotated Peter Pan*. Barrie's novel, though published post-Victorian era, is regarded as a critique on the cultural order of the Victorian period by numerous literary critics. Modern social awareness was relatively absent within the Victorian woman, but writers such as, Simon Heffer, assert that, “Victorian literature – as with Victorian reality – abounds with intelligent women going mad with frustration, denied the means to state their intellectual curiosity and the opportunity to pursue a career” (Heffer 32). Modernity and its advancements in Barrie's novel refer to the capability of a woman to achieve social or political mobility within the Victorian patriarchal system, while also breaking the traditional mold of femininity. Within *Peter and Wendy* the Victorian woman is the idealized perfect female that adheres to the patriarchal structure of the good, doting wife and mother, rather than Heffer's intelligent and curious woman. The modern woman demonstrates the fight for women's right of divorce, property, and education during the feminist movement in the 19th century (Heffer 31), but in the context of Barrie's novel the modern woman is described by unconventional attributes such highly-sexualized, independent, and “other.” In this analysis of Barrie's work, the critique is cast from a feminist reading of *Peter and Wendy* in order to demonstrate the importance of Barrie's commentary on women, whether it be modern or traditional women. The focus of the feminist approach is to understand the boundaries that gender roles place between men and women as seen within Wendy's role in England as well as Neverland, and the developmental social stages that occur during childhood that produce perpetuated conventions of social structure. The argument being made in the breadth of this critique is to prove that Neverland is a perpetuation of patriarchal structures under a mask of a false modernity. As a result of this distorted fantasy, it will show that Wendy's inability to achieve modernity through societal expectations is a product of transition into womanhood. Therefore, the undermined freedom of Peter's Neverland constitutes J. M. Barrie's novel, *Peter and Wendy* as a critique of the restrictions of modern behavior in the traditional women of Victorian England.

Wendy Darling is forthrightly presented in Barrie's novel as the cultural production of the Victorian patriarchal societal structure, defining her as

inherently Victorian. Her behavior as a young adult woman coming of age is culturally appropriated even with her tendency to lash out and refuse the realities of growing up because, "...Wendy knew that she must grow up" (Barrie 13). Her internal struggle with modern and traditional behavior begins when Wendy must move out of the nursery for she has outgrown, in age and maturity, her shared room with Michael and John. This is the first boundary line set between the male and female characters: Wendy and her kid brothers. The next struggle that Wendy faces is the portrayal of conventional behaviors within Mr. Darling and Mrs. Darling: "Mrs. Darling loved to have everything just so, and Mr. Darling had a passion for being exactly like his neighbours; so, of course, they had a nurse" (Barrie 16). This scene depicts the beginnings of what can be stated as the traditional mold of the Victorian patriarchy. Mrs. Darling is the embodiment of the ideal woman by sociocultural standards, proper and mannered, while Mr. Darling is the product of sociocultural norms and expectations, the external world rooted in the Victorian era. Critic Shelley Rakover, interprets the discourse between Wendy and her parents as a display of utter rejection regarding the influence of cultural expectations and norms that tend to define men and women and sets herself on a journey to find her own identity, her own instinctive nature, and her personality. She states that Mrs. Darling "is governed by the will of her husband, and displays the restraint and manners of an English lady," (Rakover 1) while stating that this is the role that Wendy must fall into without protest. Wendy's rebellious attitude is not only a rebellion of growing up, but as a rebellion of what she is to become: a woman. With this struggle Wendy wishes to search for answers within Neverland. The questioning of the maternal figure or idealized Victorian woman by Wendy is what floods this novel with such rich feminist commentary regarding the rebellion against traditional social conventions as well as the traditional definition of gender roles. The problems with defining Wendy as a true modern woman are her inherent tendencies to act as a maternal figure towards her brothers, as well as to Peter Pan and the Lost Boys. Her feminine urges tend to cloud her judgment while her internal desires lead her to attempt to explore a conventional relationship with Peter. And lastly, with the overwhelming subjection to her defining role as woman, she returns to England in order to grow up, leaving childhood behind. Wendy's action throughout the novel leads the reader to discern that Wendy conforms to the patriarchal structure of Victorian society. "All children, except one, grow up..." (Barrie 13) according to Barrie, therefore Wendy must inevitably answer to her traditional gender role, such as Mrs. Darling has done.

Subsequently this list of Wendy's traditional tendencies reveals that everything "the woman" and Wendy, does in Barrie's novel is what ultimately defines her as Victorian. In this case, Barrie confines Wendy to conventional motherhood and what the constructed nature of what motherhood implies even

within the realm of Neverland. Motherhood can be equated to the interpretation of Victorian womanhood. Chris Routh states that “the terms of domesticity also [had] changed in Britain as a result of new technology, while cultural discourse continued to confine woman’s political function within the home” (Routh 60). Unlike the women of Neverland, Wendy experienced limitations in her behaviors. Wendy is solely defined as a woman through her tendencies to act under her femininity. When experiencing her first interaction with Peter Pan, Wendy exudes womanliness. Peter explains that he does not need, want, or care for a mother because he did not wish to become a man and his mother only wished for him to do so. Wendy responds with utter pity: “Wendy, however, felt at once that she was in the presence of a tragedy” (Barrie 39). Her natural instincts to nurture Peter immediately kicked in. Peter’s shadow must be reconnected to his feet and any woman would do. Wendy tends to his shadow: “...she got out her housewife, and sewed the shadow on to Peter’s foot” (Barrie 40). Routh explains that in this act of sewing, displaying domestic and motherly skills, that is a confirmation of “the maternal as figuring the archetypal patriarchal feminine inherited from nineteenth-century sentimentalism” (Routh 60). Wendy is directly depicted as an archetypal female as product of the patriarchal nineteenth-century. Her skills and instincts define her as inherently feminine, but not only feminine, traditionally feminine. This demonstrates that fact that Wendy is confined, stuck in her role as a woman. Routh’s idea that “the absoluteness of gender difference was one of the key features in mid-nineteenth-century discourses on masculinity and femininity” (Routh 61) only confirms this realization of Wendy’s character. Woman sews therefore she is “mother.” This exchange between Peter and Wendy, Wendy sewing on his shadow, is incredibly pivotal, because even though Peter lures Wendy by the possibilities of fantastical adventures with mermaids and pirates, she is also tempted by the idea of taking care of Peter, her brothers, and the Lost Boys. Peter attracts Wendy with an appeal to her motherliness, but also appeals to her womanliness by his flattery:

“Wendy,” he continued, in a voice that no woman has ever yet been able to resist, “Wendy, one girl is more use than twenty boys.”

Now Wendy was every inch a woman, though there were no many inches, and she peeped out of the bedclothes.

“Do you really think so, Peter?” (Barrie 45)

Emotional affirmation from Peter drives her to the decision to leave home as well. Peter’s intentions for Wendy are not entirely known to her at this time, but Barrie lets the reader know that Wendy’s ability to tell stories is one of the major factors that lures Peter into taking her to Neverland. Peter desires the feminine things that Wendy is capable to contributing in Neverland, motherly nurturing and her ability to entertain with stories:

“Don’t go Peter,” she entered, “I know such lots of stories.”

Those were her precise words, so there can be no denying that it was she who first tempted him.

He came back, and there was a greedy look in his eyes now which ought to have alarmed her, but did not. (Barrie 48)

Wendy’s ability to tell stories puts Peter’s plans for Wendy into motion. Barrie puts great emphasis throughout the novel on the womanly attributes, or motherly actions that Wendy exudes while in England and within Neverland. He demonstrates the fact that Wendy is naturally traditional and instinctually Victorian due to her submission to masculine characters such as Peter. The structure of patriarchal society is perpetuated within Barrie’s womanly definition of Wendy. Her actions, her tendencies, and her instincts are all categorized and exalted as Victorian as well as heavily feminine. Another character that is highly feminized within the novel is Wendy’s mother, Mrs. Darling, as well as Wendy’s future generations at the end of the novel.

Due to the close examination of Wendy’s feminine actions there are similarities that can be seen in other female characters such as Mrs. Darling and Wendy’s granddaughter, demonstrating the emergence of a cyclical link between the English women that is perpetuated within the story. This cycle presents the idea of a perpetuation of patriarchal-regulated actions of women from generation to generation in Barrie’s novel. The description of Mrs. Darling at the beginning of the novel, the encounter that Peter has with Wendy’s daughter Jane and eventually her granddaughter Margaret at the novel’s conclusion strongly supports the idea that Wendy is perpetually confined within the barriers set forth by cultural expectations. Mrs. Darling’s character is introduced with a layer of mystery:

She was a lovely lady, with a romantic mind and such a sweet mocking mouth. Her romantic mind was like the tiny boxes, one within the other, that come from the puzzling East, however many you may discover there is always one more; and her sweet mocking mouth had one kiss on it that Wendy could never get, though there it was, perfectly conspicuous in the right-hand corner. (Barrie 13)

In this depiction of Mrs. Darling it is evident that her character holds a withheld depth behind her Victorian façade. It is something in that right-hand corner that cannot necessarily be explained or even ignored. Another quite perplexing scene demonstrates the complexity of Mrs. Darling’s existence:

At first Mrs. Darling did not know, but after thinking back into her childhood she just remember a Peter Pan who was said to live with the

fairies... She had believed in him at a time, but now that she was married and full of sense she quite doubted whether there was any such person. (Barrie 22)

It can be said that Mrs. Darling was once in Wendy's position, lured by Peter to Neverland and its promises, and also like Wendy she returns home to grow up. Inevitably, Mrs. Darling came to her senses, in accordance to her societal expectations and duties and she forgot all about Peter. Marriage and societal duties are what keep Mrs. Darling from indulging in what seems to be more than fantastical thoughts, but perhaps modern tendencies. This interpretation solidifies the idea that the Victorian patriarchal structure is somewhat of a self-correcting mechanism when discussing the psychological struggles and transitional journey for Wendy. Rachel Prusko explores an idea that Kathryn Bond Stockton states as: "the child who by reigning cultural definitions can't 'grow up,' grows to the side of cultural ideas" (Prusko 107), which marks an essential point in this discussion. Children are a product of cultural norms, or cultural ideas that are impressed upon them by adults and their actions. This fact demonstrates the effect of Barrie's fixed depiction of Wendy. Prusko states that "Barrie fixes Wendy, like her mother before her, within a conventional version of motherhood" (Prusko 116). This limitation leaves Wendy without the agency or capability to break out of her traditional definition that holds her in place. Wendy is a product of her mother's actions. She conducts herself in the same manner and respects that her mother unassumingly influences. This transfer of behavior then transfers itself from one generation to another. When the novel comes to an end, the cycle continues to take shape. Barrie presents the reader with a scene with both Wendy and Jane as Peter comes to take Jane to Neverland:

"It is just for spring-cleaning time," Jane said, "he wants me always to do his spring-cleaning."

"If only I could go with you," Wendy sighed.

"You see you can't fly," said Jane. (Barrie 186)

Jane is used by Peter to fulfill the motherly, doting duties of a housewife and then returned home after she has completed her tasks. Then after Wendy grows older and so does Jane, Margaret is then taken away by Peter "where she tells him stories about himself, to which he listens eagerly" (Barrie 187). The story as well as the exploration of the perpetuated cycle of patriarchal social restraints is highly emphasized. Though they appear briefly to struggle between becoming more modern and succumbing to the expectations of this era, Mrs. Darling, Wendy, and her future generations all eventually succumb.

With the rigid structure of Barrie's developed confines that hold Wendy firm in the role of Victorian woman, Wendy attempts to retreat to Neverland, only

to realize that it is a continuation of the social structure of England. Neverland is ultimately masked as an escape to a world apart from the adult world, demonstrating the idea that Wendy is unable to deal with the reality of the transition into adolescence: it is unavoidable. In Nell Boulton's essay he explains that Peter lures her to Neverland to become a mother figure, to tell Peter and the Lost Boys stories, and to care for them the way a mother should. Wendy is then caught at an impasse while in Neverland, the place where adult law does not exist, but being a woman and doing womanly things in regards to being a mother is highly encouraged. She originally had decided to escape to Neverland in order to escape from the gender roles of society that began to weigh on her due to her coming of age, but in Neverland we see Peter thrust the perpetual role of womanhood upon her. Boulton explains that "Peter's cautionary tale is a reminder that the flight to Neverland is desirable only in so far as it is temporary" establishing the mimicking structure of Neverland that is enlightened by Wendy's journey (Boulton 309). With Wendy's attempt to escape from home and explore the possibilities of a different type of social structure between men and women, and a new definition of gender roles, the retreat to Neverland turns out to be relatively fleeting, only satisfying her temporarily. Her attempt to rebel from her tendencies of passivity and ignorance toward her placement with the confined category of woman or mother from the idealized version that Victorian society presses upon her, ultimately backfire when she reaches Neverland. Peter and the Lost Boys immediately place their expectations upon her:

"Then all went on their knees, and holding out their arms cried, "O Wendy lady, be our mother."

"Ought I?" Wendy said, all shining. "Of course it's frightfully fascinating, but you see I am only a girl. I have no real experience."

"That doesn't matter," said Peter, as if he were the only person present who knew all about it, though he was really the person who knew least.

"What we need is just a nice motherly person." (Barrie 86)

Initially Wendy questions the idea of becoming the Lost Boys' mother, but with Peter's reassurance Wendy cannot refuse. Her face is shining with a sort of pride and reassurance in her ability as a mother and as a woman. She unflinchingly accepts her role as a caretaker to the Lost Boys. This social dynamic within Neverland shifts to mirror that of Wendy's Victorian patriarchy. Prusko states that while studying the critical writing of Morse on this subject, she asserts that:

Situating the novel within its Victorian context, Morse examines the ambivalence surrounding women and mothers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, contending that the tension between the powerful sexual and domestic authority of the Victorian wife and the

parallel stipulation of her submission and passivity operates in maternal figure of Peter and Wendy. (Prusko 116)

With the ambiguity surrounding the possible power of femininity and the female's political role within the home, the Victorian woman's submission to the paternal authority is illuminated more than her domestic authority that she only possesses over her children. This weak focus on a woman's authority can be seen as the glossing over of a potential threat to man's authority within the patriarchal realm. Therefore with this limitation of exploring the topic Prusko demonstrates the idea that Wendy had no choice in her fate; she ultimately couldn't help that she grew up and became a motherly figure. Her passivity and submission to Peter Pan, along with her structured gender role places her in the same situation as when she is under the direction of her paternal authority figure, Mr. Darling. Mr. Darling and Peter hold great weight with Wendy's fate within the story; Mr. Darling demands that she grow up and Peter demands that she become a mother to him as well as the other masculine characters.

The treatment or regulation of women in Neverland by paternal or masculine figures, such as Peter, is an imitation of the treatment that Wendy receives within Victorian society. Women of Neverland and in Neverland are merely wish fulfillers for Peter and his adventures. These female figures seem to lack real agency, including Wendy. According to Shipley's examination of the subject, "women are regulated to the role of male prescription fantasy" (Shipley 150). This discourse between men and women can be seen paralleled in Peter and Wendy's adventure together in Neverland. Heather E. Shipley considers the exploration of the ordering of gendered relationships between men and women, demonstrated through Peter's interactions with the female characters, as well as the interactions between women, in order to critique the idea of structured economies and societies. Wendy's actions are mandated by Peter's wishes and definition of her role for his benefit. Wendy's role as a product of the male characters' necessity of a mother reveals Wendy's true or instinctual nature as a female. Along with Wendy, the women of Neverland fully subject themselves to the demands of the male figure. First, Wendy is introduced to Tinker Bell, a highly sexualized and independent female, as well as Peter Pan right-hand woman. Tinker Bell's jealousy of Wendy's closeness to Peter encourages her to lash out:

Tinker Bell answered insolently.

"What does she say, Peter?"

He had to translate. "She is not very polite. She says you are a great ugly girl, and that she is my fairy." (Barrie 43)

Tinker Bell punishes Wendy emotionally, per her harmful words, and physically through the manipulation of the Lost Boys, whom she tricks into shooting Wendy down from the sky. Tinker Bell's actions are highly regulated by Peter's attention to Tinker Bell and his command when she misbehaves. With Tiger Lily, Peter is a facilitator in the relationship between Wendy and Tiger Lily, demonstrating the physical limitation of communication that each woman possesses. While Peter attempts to save Tiger Lily from the crew of the Jolly Roger, Peter physically removes Wendy from the situation by tying her to Michael's kite:

Already he had tied the tail round her. She clung to him; she refused to go without him; but with a "Good-bye, Wendy," he pushed her from the rock; and in a few moments she was borne out of his sight. (Barrie 107)

Ultimately because of this divide, Wendy is unable to have a civil discourse with Tiger Lily. Peter had become the wall that separated the two. Therefore Wendy could not interact with Tiger Lily, though she planned to help Peter save her. After the rescue, Tiger Lily thanks Peter and when the Lost Boys and Wendy attempt to interact with Tiger Lily and the other member of her tribe, Peter asserts his dominance:

"It is good. Peter Pan has spoken. Always when he said, "Peter Pan has spoken," it meant that they must now shut up, and they accepted it humbly in that spirit... Secretly Wendy sympathized with them a little, but she was far too loyal a housewife to listen to any complaints against father. "Father knows best," she always said, whatever her private opinion must be. (Barrie 115-116)

Regardless of her secret thoughts concerning Peter's demands, Wendy always falls into her designated role. Her communication with Tiger Lily is incredibly censored by Peter, but she understands her place and follows his orders. Another one of Wendy's encounters with women is with the mermaids. It can attest to the idea that the actions between women are regulated through Barrie's portrayal of a male dominant society:

Wendy's lasting regrets that all the time she was on the island she never had a civil word from one of them. When she stole softly to the edge of the lagoon she might see them by the score, especially on Marooner's Rock, where they loved to bask, combing out their hair in a lazy way that quite irritated her; or she might even swim, on tiptoe as it were, to within a yard of them, but then they saw her and dived, probably splashing her with their tails, not by accident, but intentionally. (Barrie 95)

Wendy's experiences with the mermaids are seemingly regulated by their distinct differences in femininity and social construction. The mermaids are independent,

radical creatures and Wendy is a highly charged Victorian woman that views their actions as lazy, petty, and crude. Shipley states that “in this patriarchal ordering of society it is necessary to keep women apart from one another and removed from the direct function of trade relations” (Shipley 151). This necessity of lines drawn between the women with the novel in order to keep the paternal or male figures in power demonstrates an explanation for the jealousy and bitterness passed between the Neverland women and Wendy during her time in Neverland.

This development of a social divide within the tale, consisting of corrupted encounters between Wendy and each of these female figures, uncovers the importance of keeping relationships that are woman to woman separated in Peter and Wendy, to preserve the traditional nature of Wendy. The relationship between the women are seen as best when kept separate by either physical distance or by emotional disconnect within the borders of Neverland. This disconnect is an example of a patriarchal order that has been planted in this “free” society that regulates contact between women to keep the males dominant. Peter demonstrates his patriarchal power by dividing the space shared with the female characters. Only Peter is able to approach the mermaids without harmful or threatening discourse. He maintains the distance between Wendy and the mermaids by establishing boundaries:

They [the mermaids] treated all the boys in the same way, except of course Peter, who chatted with them on Marooner’s Rock by the hour, and sat on their tail when they got cheeky. (Barrie 96)

Peter is the only boy that the mermaids treat differently, with humble attention and tentative affection. So throughout the novel it seems that Peter uses this attention and loyalty to keep the women in his life separated and defined by the different uses they have. Tinker Bell is the exalted right-hand man, Tiger Lilly is the warrior and comrade in arms, the mermaids are majestic and used for playing game, and Wendy is the motherly figure that cares for the men of Neverland. Wendy’s overall reaction to every female figure within the Barrie’s novel leads the reader to believe that she is curious about the modern aspects of these feminine creatures, but she ultimately rejects them due to her twisted perception of their modern attributes and their relationships with Peter.

While confined to the boundaries of Victorian societal structure and the role of the idealized, traditional woman and her social disconnect with the women of Neverland and their associations with Peter, the discussion must shift tones in order to address the reconciliation of Wendy’s lack of “agency.” Chris Routh’s study of Peter and Wendy addresses the depiction of mothers. Wendy is cast, inevitably as mother when she lands in Neverland with Peter Pan, John, and Michael. Routh demonstrates this immediate development from child to adult by

Wendy's passive transition into the role of 'Little Mother' (Routh 59). Wendy bravely leaves her home in England, attempting to neglect the reality of adolescence. However, while engaging with the more modern female figures in Neverland her natural tendency is to fall into a motherly role in Neverland, leaving agency unobtainable. Ultimately returning home in order to grow up, leaves Wendy stuck in her traditional definition of womanhood. Following the internal struggle that Wendy appears to have throughout her journey, it is easy to see that Wendy is ultimately unable to break from the mold of traditional gender roles set forth by Victorian England. Her boundaries or limits are inevitably too strict to transcend beyond to the realm of modernity. When Wendy returned home, her transition was complete:

Wendy was grown up. You need not be sorry for her. She was one of the kind that likes to grow up. In the end she grew up of her own free will a day quicker than the other girls. (Barrie 181)

Wendy's fate is sealed, by her feminine temperament that is regulated by her instincts and traditional woman-like tendencies that transform her into a woman, seemingly faster and more eager than the rest. This transition from childhood to adulthood occurs more rapidly within Wendy due to the overwhelming implications of the society in which she belongs that she is a woman, destined to be an idealized mother. Following the internal conflict that Wendy appears to have throughout her journey, it is easy to see that Wendy is ultimately incapable of achieving modernity and removing herself from traditional gender roles configured by Victorian England.

In conclusion of this analysis, J.M. Barrie's novel can be interpreted as a feminist critique of the restrictive cultural and social structures impressed upon women of the Victorian era. In Routh's study on Barrie and his novel, she states that, *Peter and Wendy* is not a book for children; however, Perry Nodelman (1989) suggests that "as history makes clear, there is something of a touchstone story inside it, screaming to get out" (Routh 59). Wendy is an example of the strict enclosure of gender roles and social ranking that a woman is inevitably fated to enter into when transitioning from childhood to adolescence. Her natural or instinctual tendencies, generated by Victorian society, her capitalization on feminine roles when she is oppressed or regulated by Peter to become a motherly figure, and her cyclical fate that is perpetuated with the generations of English women in the novel have all led to her compliance to traditional feminine roles. It seems to be that Barrie's intentions are driven by the interest in examining the societal restraints concerning gender roles and individualistic agency within the female figure of Victorian society. He examines how this develops from the developmental stages of childhood and adulthood. Childhood within this novel is the stepping stone that cultural production of patriarchal society uses to facilitate

and define the limitations of the traditional way of life. This approach to the primary text highlights the idea that the Victorian era focuses on the mandated organization of a societal hierarchy and depletes the growth of modernistic values within its women. The novel *Peter and Wendy* is ultimately a novel that is not entirely for children. Perhaps Barrie's intentions with this novel were to provide an exposition of the oppression of women in the patriarchal system of the era under the mask of a grandiose depiction of a child's fantastical journey to Neverland, where growing up can be ignored, but it is inevitable. With the vast and current circulation of many different pop culture adaptations and publishing of critical editions, it can be said that the context of *Peter and Wendy* is at present worth the exploration of its cultural significance.

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