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WENDY OR THE GIRL WHO WAS FORCED TO GROW UP

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Resumen

A principios del siglo XX se publicaron varios libros infantiles que se convirtieron en clásicos de la Literatura Infantil Inglesa. Este es el caso de James Mathew Barrie y su trabajo *Peter Pan*. Aunque Peter Pan es considerado como el personaje más importante en el cuento (publicado en 1911) y la obra teatral (publicada en 1928) sería muy difícil entender tanto el comportamiento de Peter como su desarrollo en la historia sin Wendy. El objetivo de mi artículo es analizar el personaje de Wendy como representación de la tradicional mujer victoriana, que desea ser "la mujer perfecta". Quiere ser una madre abnegada y esposa, con la figura patriarcal como centro de su vida. Trataré de mostrar que tanto en el cuento como en la obra teatral, en el País de Nunca Jamás (el mundo fantástico) Wendy construye su propio modelo familiar. Wendy toma el control en el mundo de la fantasía; impone sus propias reglas, unas reglas marcadas por el victorianismo. Wendy cuida a los niños e incluso realiza las tareas del hogar. Su intención es ser una buena madre, y encontrar al "marido perfecto"; cumple con los estereotipos victorianos y ansía encontrar en Peter al "marido perfecto". Por eso, Wendy intenta conquistar a Peter, pero él no se muestra interesado porque ve a Wendy como una madre. Esto hace que Wendy reprima sus impulsos sexuales transformándose en un ejemplo de mujer victoriana sexualmente pasiva.

Palabras clave: infancia, crecer, maternidad, oposición masculino/femenino, sociedad patriarcal, mujer victoriana.

Abstract

At the beginning of the 20th Century, several children books were published becoming classics in English Children Literature. This is the case with James Mathew Barrie, and his work *Peter Pan*. Although Peter Pan is considered the most important character both in the fairy tale (published in 1911) and in the play (published in 1928), it would be hard to understand Peter's behaviour as well as his development in the story, without Wendy. The aim of my paper is to analyse Wendy's character. She represents the traditional Victorian woman, who wishes to be the perfect woman. She wants to be an abnegated mother and wife, being the centre of her life the patriarchal figure. I will try to show that both in the fairy tale and the play, Wendy reproduces her own Victorian family pattern in Neverland –the fantastic world. In the fantasy world, Wendy takes control; she imposes her rules, that is, Victorians' rules. She even takes care of the children, and household duties. Her intention is to be a good mother, but she also looks for the 'perfect husband'. In her search Wendy fulfils the Victorian stereotypes, and she craves to find in Peter the 'perfect husband'. Therefore she starts to seduce him, but he is not interested. He only sees her as a mother, not as a woman. Wendy suppresses her sexual desires in order to follow Victorian conventional roles where women are sexually passive.

Key words: childhood, to grow up, motherhood, male/female opposition, patriarchal society, Victorian woman.



At the beginning of the 20th Century, relevant English writers published several children books which become classics in English children Literature. This is the case of James Mathew Barrie, who is one of the most representative Scottish authors. Through his plays he reflects his personal and ironic way of seeing life. He deals with his view of Scottish society, its traditions, and people. Barrie always refuses to make any distinction between adults and children, and as such the former condescend to the latter. This does not mean that he denies differences, but rather that he strives for a form which comprehends rather than divides. Therefore, the author analyzes

children's minds and their critical attitudes, but he rejects the traditional way of children's entertainment: pantomime.

*Peter Pan*¹, which remains Barrie's masterpiece, both draws and parodies classical writers. It is the culmination of the author's long process of literary creation. Barrie transforms his initial play –entitled *Peter Pan or The Boy Who Would Not Grow Up* (1904) – into a fairy tale –entitled *Peter Pan and Wendy* (1911) – and achieves a great success because he managed to reach to a wider audience, especially children. Both the play and the fairy tale have many similarities, but some differences too. In both, Barrie plays with reality and fantasy, but these two worlds are not opposed; Rodari considers that: "la fantasía no está en oposición con la realidad, sino que es un útil que se debe dominar (...) La fantasía sirve para analizar la realidad (...) para explorar el lenguaje y todas sus posibilidades, para ver qué es lo que resulta cuando se hace que las palabras choquen entre sí" (Rodari, 2003: 70). These statements are related to Barrie's ideas, as he accomplishes a greater achievement, because through both worlds Barrie tells a story where he ridicules about the characters' way of life, and the rules that they are supposed to follow.

In *Peter Pan*, Barrie explores, analyzes and (de)constructs Victorian family values. The Victorian era is defined "as the domestic age [...] epitomised by Queen Victoria who came to represent a kind of femininity which was centred on the family, motherhood and respectability" (Abrams, 2001). In this era male and female roles were strongly marked in the familiar sphere: while women belonged to the private sphere of the hearth and home, men belonged to the public sphere of business, politics and sociability. According to this role division, Lévi-Strauss points out that:

The sexual division of labor ... has been explained as a device to make the sexes mutually dependent on social and economic grounds, thus establishing clearly that

¹ The character of Peter Pan appeared by name in Barrie's adult novel *The Little White Bird* (1902). This was a first-person narrative about a wealthy bachelor clubman's attachment to a little boy, David. Taking this boy for walks in Kensington Gardens, the narrator tells him of Peter Pan, who can be found in the Gardens at night. The six chapters, in which Peter appears, would be published later in 1906 in a book titled *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*. Before this year Barrie produced his play *Peter Pan or The Boy Who Would Not Grow Up* in 1904 (Ormond, 1987).

marriage is better than celibacy [...] The principle of sexual division of labor establishes a mutual dependency between the sexes, compelling them thereby to perpetuate themselves and found a family. (qtd. in Chodorow, 1987: 35)

As for the Darlings –Wendy’s family– reflect the social rules and values derived from the affinity of the traditional capitalism. Victorian morals set and perpetuate the dual scheme of dominator-dominated, the powerful and the powerless that capitalist morals extend. Mr Darling –the man of the family– works in an office, the public sphere, and Mrs Darling –the lady– deals with house labours and child care. As in the majority of middle-class households, Darling’s family “has just one servant [Liza] –sufficient to give the woman of the house a certain status but insufficient to allow her to spend days doing embroidery and playing piano” (Abrams, 2001). Barrie ridicules Darling’s pretensions to belong to an upper class. He shows a family obsessed in maintaining a good status; and pretending to be a distinguished family. In Victorian era, most mothers and fathers of the upper and middle classes approached child rearing in a strictly hands-off-manner. The children spent most of their time in the nursery and were brought up by their nanny. However Mr. and Mrs. Darling have a dog (Nana) as a nurse, a fact that Mr. Darling is ashamed of, he views it as a loss of prestige. This is the reason why Mr. Darling is not pleasant with Nana.

Wendy² –the oldest child of the Darling family and the main female character–, following the principles and thoughts imposed by her family, represents the nineteenth-century woman who was defined by her adherence to submission and resistance to sexuality. Victorian culture portrayed her as a woman who was only worried about living according to the social rules and values of the time. This can be defined, as Welter did in 1966, as the ‘cult of the womanhood’, creating a woman to whom “purity, piety, and submission are identified as her ‘cardinal virtues’; she is living out of her nature. Asexual and frail (...)” (Maeda, 1996: 281). Although Wendy is only a child, the education received by her parents and the rules imposed by Victorian society compel Wendy to grow up quickly: assuming the obligations and duties of a Victorian woman.

² The origin of the name of Wendy’s character is related to a Barrie’s personal anecdote; his friend the poet William Henley called Barrie ‘My Friend’, but Henley’s daughter Margaret aged 4 could only pronounce that as ‘My Friendly’. She could not pronounce her ‘r’, and the word ‘friendly’ often sounded like ‘fwendy’ or ‘wendy’. Margaret died when she was 6, but Barrie immortalised her in *Peter Pan* by calling his heroine Wendy (Ormond, 1987).

Wendy Moira Angela Darling –her complete name– only thinks about how to be the ‘perfect wife’. She intends to mimic the figure of her mother, because for Wendy Mrs Darling is a ‘perfect lady’. Wendy wants to become a woman, forcing herself to mature. According to Chodorow, in psychology many analysts assume that “girls naturally identify with their mother as they grow up, and that this makes them into mothers” (1987: 89). Indeed, Wendy plays at being married to and being a mother with John, and she always adopts her own parents’ roles. That is, Mr Darling and Mrs Darling. Thence, in the play the dialogue between John and Wendy is a good and clear example:

JOHN (*histrionically*). We are doing an act; we are playing at being you and father. (*He imitates the only father who has come under his special notice.*) A little less noise there.

WENDY. Now let us pretend we have a baby.

JOHN (good-naturedly). I am happy to inform you, Mrs. Darling, that you are now a mother. (Wendy gives way to ecstasy.) You have missed the chief thing; you haven’t asked, ‘boy or girl?’

WENDY. I am so glad to have one at all, I don’t care which it is.

JOHN (crushingly). That is just the difference between gentlemen and ladies. Now you tell me.

WENDY. I am happy to acquaint you, Mr. Darling, you are now a father.

(Barrie, 1942: 506)

John speaks about the chief thing, and this entails the connection between the real world and binary categories as a categorical form of division. Patriarchal society needs to set the category in which men have to register their son/daughter. In this society, children are integrated early into the adult world of work, and men take responsibility for the training of boys once boys reach a certain age. So men pass their learning on to their sons –and less often their daughters. Men have to know how to educate children following the rules and the values of the patriarchal society, and to fulfil the ‘expected man’ the way Bourdieu pointed out:

La virilidad, incluso en su aspecto ético, es decir, en cuanto que esencia del *vir*, *virtus*, pundonor (*nif*), principio de la conservación y del aumento del honor, sigue siendo indisociable, por lo menos tácitamente, de la virilidad física, a través especial-

mente de las demostraciones de fuerza sexual –desfloración de la novia, abundante progenie masculina, etc– que se esperan del hombre que es realmente hombre. (2000: 24)

Following patriarchal value system, men tend to be associated with a higher level of organization with society and its activities, namely ‘culture’, whereas women are associated with the domestic sphere that is with their ‘nature’. According to this social division between men and women, Nancy Chodorow argues that while women are not identified with nature they are seen as *closer* to nature than men because of their procreative functions and their traditional domestic and child care role (1987). Women, then, are widely perceived as subordinate to men that is, women have internalized a sense of their inferiority, while men have learnt to disdain the doings of women because that is the way they define their masculinity.

Wendy idealises and idolizes her own parents, who she sees as being the epitome of ‘perfect parents’. She clearly distinguishes, despite being a child, the roles the society of the time imposes, forcing her to mature faster according to the social convictions of the time, and therefore to be submissive. Her father –as an ‘intelligent gentleman’– works outside the house to earn money and to protect his family economically and socially. And her mother –as a ‘loving lady’– takes care of her home, and tries to create a place of peace, order and tranquillity, where all members of her family would be happy. Each member of the family has its own place and role within the capitalist society, which creates specific personality characteristics in men that reproduce an ideology of male superiority and submission to the requirement of production. It prepares men for participation in a male-dominant family and society. In Victorian society, women are confined to the ‘domestic family group’, in other words ‘woman’s place is in the home’. Thus, there is an opposition between the ‘domestic’ and the ‘social’ or ‘culture’. So the domestic is always subsumed by the social, and the family is identified with nature pure and simple, as opposed to culture. Since men lack a natural basis for a familial orientation, their sphere of activity is defined not only with culture, in the sense of all human creativity, as opposed to nature; they are identified in particular with culture in the old-fashioned sense of the finer and higher aspects of human thought –law, religion, art... Regarding the roles established inside the family:

Children identify with a parent of a particular gender because they have already learned that this is how to be appropriately feminine or masculine. Identification

is a product of conscious teaching about gender differences, that is, a learning phenomenon. Psychoanalytic clinical studies illustrate particularly vividly how parents teach children about what biological gender differences are supposed to mean, and what their biology is supposed to entail for their adult role. (Chodorow, 1987: 89)

According to the previous Chodorow’s quotation, it is important to state that biological sexual differences are the basis of social gender ones; the latter acquiring clear implications. As a result, social gender differences give more importance to man than to woman and that is what children –as Wendy– learn to accept from their childhood. When Wendy meets Peter she feels very comfortable, because in spite of being Peter a bit rude and with a childish behaviour, she sees in his figure a perfect gentleman, above all when Peter says her:

PETER. Wendy, don’t withdraw, I can’t help crowing, Wendy, when I’m pleased with myself. Wendy, one girl is worth more than twenty boys.

WENDY (*peeping over the sheet*). You really think so, Peter?

PETER. Yes I do.

WENDY. I think it’s perfectly weet of you, and I shall get up again.

(Barrie, 1942: 516-17)

Through this conversation Wendy –thinking as a Victorian adult not as a child– feels herself praised, and she sees how Peter –a man– fulfils the figure of the traditional gentleman. She is flattered because Peter treats her with attention and gallantry. Wendy sees in Peter the typical figure of an English gentleman who acts politely and ‘respects’ women. In this society women are considered passive and weak creatures whose main values are “based on evangelical beliefs about the importance of the family, the constancy of marriage and woman’s innate moral goodness” (Abrams, 2001). In this way Wendy due to her mentality and education, wishes to feel protected and loved by men; following the roles imposed by society since her infancy. So until Peter tells her that women are better she does not conceive such a possibility.

However, the previous conversation is not the only one which deals with Peter’s opinions about women. He wishes Wendy to go to Never Land with him, but she doubts about it and asks him if there are girls in Never Land and Peter answers:

PETER (*craftily*). ... we are rather lonely. You see, Wendy, we have no female companionship.

WENDY. Are none of the other children girls?

PETER. Oh no; girls, you know, are much too clever to fall out of their prams.

WENDY. Peter, it is perfectly lovely the way you talk about girls.

(Barrie, 1942: 518-19)

Peter's patriarchal values are clearly reflected in affirmations like 'girls are much too clever to fall out of their prams.' He believes that it is positive for women that they always want to be protected by other figures –namely men–, while men are less intelligent because they cannot count on anyone. Once again, Wendy is fascinated with Peter's gallantry and she reaffirms that Peter is a 'perfect gentleman'. So, she believes that her presence in Never Land would be essential and very helpful for Peter and the Lost Boys. Thence she decides to become their mother.

Wendy is characterized on the basis of socially-constructed gender roles in which women become the icon of the "nurturing mother" (Gifford, 2002: 467). Whence, following the socially-constructed gender roles and as stated by Bourdieu:

El trabajo de construcción simbólico no se reduce a una operación estrictamente *performativa* de motivación que orienta y estructura las representaciones, comenzando por las representaciones del cuerpo (lo que no es poca cosa); se completa y se realiza en una transformación profunda y duradera de los cuerpos (y de los cerebros), o sea, en y a través de un trabajo de construcción práctico que impone una *definición diferenciada* de los usos legítimos del cuerpo, sexuales sobre todo, que tiende a excluir del universo de lo sensible y de lo factible todo lo que marca la pertenencia al otro sexo –y en particular todas las virtualidades biológicamente inscritas en el «perverso polimorfo» que es, de creer a Freud, cualquier niño–, para producir ese artefacto social llamado un hombre viril o una mujer femenina. (2000: 37)

Wendy represents all those women who, in Victorian times, are symbols of their social function: mother, domestic manager and the bearer of children, principles that society made children believe in. Women's child-care and productive responsibilities include extensive training of girls –daughters, servants, apprentices– for work. Women carry out productive and reproductive responsibilities, as they have in most societies and throughout history. Thus women –as Wendy– are taught that they are born to be &feminine& and they accept being submissive. While men must be 'virile',

women have to be docile and obedient. Wendy, despite being a child, functions as the ideal of an abnegated mother, she is so worried about her &imaginar& family that even when she has some spare time she still thinks she must take care of them. The only thing she thinks about is in making them happy and being useful for them. This is exemplified in the fairy tale "Wendy's favourite time for sewing and darning was after they had all gone to bed. Then, as she expressed it, she had breathing time for herself; and she occupied it in making new things for them, and putting double pieces on the knees, for they were all most frightfully hard on their knees" (Barrie, 1993: 78). In spite of being very useful and essential for them, Wendy perceives the masculine figure –either a father or a husband or a brother – as the head of the family and the most important figure in it due to patriarchal schemes:

Wives focus energy and concern on their husbands [...] They usually consider [...] that they love these husbands. Mothers may present fathers to children as someone important, someone whom the mother loves, and may even build up their husbands to their children to make up for the fact that these children cannot get to know their father as well as their mother. They may at the same time undercut their husband in response to the position he assumes of social superiority or authority in the family. (Chodorow, 1987: 181)

Due to these patriarchal beliefs about the importance of the father in the family, when all the boys except Peter are sitting round the table with Wendy, she takes the head of the table –the suitable place as a mother. Obviously Peter's place is empty and when John asks Wendy, in the fairy tale: "May I sit in Peter's chair, as he is not here?" (Barrie, 1993: 104), and she answers him: "Sit in father's chair, John!" Wendy is scandalised. 'Certainly not'" (Barrie, 1993: 104). Wendy sees this fact as an aberration, because it degrades the figure of the mighty father. So, in line with Wendy's beliefs, the father's figure is of great importance, and therefore he deserves respect. Because of this, all the members of the family must offer the father figure certain respect and submission.

Since early in the 19th Century the role of the mother had been idealised. Motherhood was no longer simply a reproductive function, but was imbued with symbolic meaning (Abrams, 2001). Motherhood was seen as an affirmation of a woman's identity. Hence "for a woman not to become a mother meant she was liable to be labelled inadequate, a failure or in some way abnormal" (Abrams, 2001).

This is the reason that explains Wendy's obsession reflected through the play or the fairy tale. Wendy's fantasy to be mother to the Lost Boys is motivated by their own necessity of having one. Wendy enjoys reading bedtime stories to the boys, cleaning, cooking meals, mending socks, dispensing medicine and supervising bath time. She reaches to such point that she embodies a real mother, as we see in the play: "Dear boys, I feel that I have a message to you from your real mothers, and it is this, 'We hope our sons will die like English gentlemen'" (Barrie, 1942: 562). Wendy appears as the representative in the Never Land of Mrs. Darling who presides in the domestic world of home. She embodies gentleness and affection and eventually adopts the Lost Boys, welcoming them into a seemingly limitless maternal embrace. However, Wendy's portrayal as a mother is incomplete as she lacks the figure of a husband. Wendy wants to grow up and be a typical Victorian girl who follows the rules of the patriarchal society. She wishes to form a family with Peter and become the mother of the lost children. But she is disillusioned when she discovers Peter's true feelings:

WENDY (*knowing she ought not to 'probe but driven to it by something within.*) What are your exact feelings for me, Peter?

PETER (*in the class-room*). Those of a devoted son, Wendy.

WENDY (*turning away*). I thought so.

PETER. You are so puzzling. Tiger Lily is just the same; there is something or other she wants to be to me, but she says it is not my mother.

WENDY (*with spirit*). No, indeed it isn't.

PETER. Then what is it?

WENDY. It isn't for a lady to tell.

(Barrie, 1942: 550)

Wendy is angry because her seduction towards Peter does not work. Although she hints at her desire to be transformed into lover, her appropriation of "the role of mother precludes the overt declaration her own sexuality" (Gifford, 2002: 467), because the traditional patriarchal conception of sex is built upon the masculine pleasure. Men, in patriarchal society, are the active figure, the only one with permission to openly speak of sex, or even utter it. Somehow Wendy breaks with her own social prejudices, as she wishes Peter to see in her a woman, a wife, not his mother.

At the end, Wendy is the only feminine character who grows up. After leaving Never Land, she returns to London –the real world. In the play, we know that she returns to Never Land for a week every year to do Peter's spring-cleaning, and after several years she grows up, but she cannot admit this in front of Peter, when she says: "If another little girl –if one younger than I am– (*She can't go on*)" (Barrie, 1942: 576). However in the fairy tale Wendy's development is more explicit, because Barrie tells us that: "Wendy was married [...] and had a daughter [Jane]" (1993: 169). At the end Wendy gets her desire of being mother, and her daughter Jane will be Peter's new mate. Barrie gives to the fairy tale a circular structure, first Wendy then Jane and afterwards Margaret and so on. As a cycle that cannot be closed due to Peter's wishes to remain young.

After analyzing gender and the social constraints regarding gender roles in Wendy's feminine character, the reader sees how Barrie reveals through her not only the fears, but also the prejudices of the Victorian and Edwardian society concerning female sexuality. Barrie's aim is to tempt Victorian and Edwardian femininity to transgress society's rules and conventions. To consider that *Peter Pan* is a children-only story implies an oversimplification of the idea of childhood. Barrie demonstrates all kinds of audience –both infants and adults– what is admitted and forbidden in a society where women are devalued and men enjoy all privileges. For this reason *Peter Pan* addresses children, but the text treats youth neither sentimentally nor as a condition separated from adulthood. According to Jack, children and adults are not so far away: "Children are faced with the unknown terrors of the adult world, its sexual awareness and responsibilities; adults are confronted with their own oversimplifications of type and gender as well as the dangers of doomed shortcuts which lead to narcissism and bisexuality" (1991: 177). Indeed, Barrie wants children and adults to understand that Wendy's character represents a lack of women's sexuality, marked by the acute injustice of the patriarchal society. These beliefs provoke in women a feeling of inferiority and passivity with regards to men, because women have been taught ever since their girlhood that the man is the active figure, and he is valued to a higher extent than a woman.

To sum up and on authority of the Aberdeen History "*Peter Pan* is essentially a story for children in it can be seen Barrie's attraction to the power of a world beyond the material one [both worlds complimenting each other], a world of dreams and fantasies" (qtd. in Jack, 1991: 156). In Barrie's play and fairy tale –where the

author plays with reality and fantasy— he tries to present (to both infants and adults) a weak woman. The author uses irony and paradox to represent through Wendy, a child who embodies the common stereotypes of patriarchal culture. So Wendy is a character that symbolizes mothering, caring, loyalty and undying friendship, however she reveals the prejudices and fears of Victorian and Edwardian societies in relation to the sexuality of women. Wendy's infancy is marked by Victorian society's prejudices. Her strict education obliges her to grow up faster and to behave the way required by her society and time. Consequently this education does not allow her to grow up as a non conditioned child, so she —the culture of time expects— develops into the woman her culture expects: the traditional Victorian woman.

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