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***Peter Pan*: Disney's Adaptation of J.M. Barrie's Original Work**

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Abstract

Points to the differences between Barrie’s original *Peter Pan*, and Disney’s animated version of 1953. Contends Disney did the most damage to the character of Mr. Darling and thus “disregard[ed] Barrie’s primary motive for creating *Peter Pan*.”

Additional Keywords

Barrie, J.M.—Characters—Mr. Darling; Barrie, J.M. *Peter Pan*; *Peter Pan* (film, Walt Disney)

PETER PAN

Disney's Adaptation of J.M. Barrie's Original Work

BRETT T. MCQUADE



n animated little boy dressed in green who darts through the air followed by a gleaming miniature fairy named Tinker Bell. This is what many people envision when they hear the words *Peter Pan*, and much of their knowledge about the story and its characters is, unfortunately, a result of Walt Disney's 1953 animated version of the original tale by J.M. Barrie. Many versions of *Peter Pan* have been written or performed, but the one that has enlightened the most people about the story of Pan is Disney's version. This is why it's important to evaluate the changes Disney made; to look at, as Martin Green says "how very badly Disney handles such stories, how crudely and clumsily he draws such figures and renders their charms."¹ The character Disney disfigures the most is the father in the story, Mr. Darling. By manipulating the father persona, Disney destroys the family structure in the work which nullifies much of the original humor caused by the inadequate male adult. It thus disregards Barrie's primary motive for creating Peter Pan.

A quick glance into the background of *Peter Pan* is necessary in order to shed light on what kind of people Barrie wished his characters to emulate. Barrie introduced the story of *Peter Pan* to the world as a play. Its first performance was in December 1904 in London, almost fifty years before Disney's adaptation. The Peter Pan tale was a result of the stories Barrie told to and the games he played with the five children of Arthur and Sylvia Llewelyn Davies. Barrie based a lot of the characteristics of the fictional Darling family on the Llewelyns Davies. Mr. Darling is one example. He is the father of Wendy, John, and Michael, the owner of the house Peter Pan enters via the famous third floor window, and is derived from Arthur Llewelyn Davies. Margaret Hodges describes Arthur as "a struggling young barrister of impeccable family background but limited income."² This helps to explain why Humphrey Carpenter and Mari Prichard write that Mr. Darling's "precarious financial position and irascibility were both drawn from Arthur Llewelyn Davies."³ This background helps to explain why in J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* the character is described as a "tornado" who at the beginning of the play "rushes into the nursery" in search of his wife Mary. Throughout the play, much of Darling's behavior is immature and standoffish, but some of it may be a result of this strained financial position.

Mary Darling is a far different character than her husband. In Barrie's *Peter Pan*, Mrs. Darling is the stalwart adult who takes care of the house, the dog, the children and her husband whom she "uncomplainingly manages."⁴ Barrie had a special place in his heart and in his

creative works for mothers. In *Peter Pan*, "Mrs. Darling's character [is] an amalgam of Sylvia Llewelyn Davies and Barrie's own mother, about whom he had written a book, *Margaret Ogilvy*" (87).

In contrast to Mr. Darling, who is based on a poor barrister, Mrs. Darling is partly based on a woman Barrie greatly admired and described as "the most beautiful creature he had ever seen" — Sylvia Llewelyn Davies (C 47). The other qualities of Mrs. Darling come from Barrie's mother who, of course, was very special to him and had been a major influence in his writing career. Thus, it is easy to see that Mrs. Darling, a mixture of the two women Barrie regarded the most, would be the greatest individual in the Darling family and the strongest moral character in the play.

The difference between the two adult figures can be seen early in the first act of Barrie's play. Scene one of *Peter Pan* takes place in the nursery where all three children sleep. The family nurse, a dog named Nana, carries out specific duties such as getting the children's beds ready, making certain they bathe and bringing in the medicine for them to take before bed. It is here that we first discover the character of Mr. Darling.

When George Darling comes into the nursery, Mary is already there with the three children and Nana. Both parents are getting ready for a dinner party and Mr. Darling is having trouble dressing himself.

This tie, it will not tie. Not round my neck. Round the bed-post, oh yes; twenty times have I made it up round the bed-post, but round my neck, oh dear no; begs to be excused. (PP 21)

Mrs. Darling takes the tie and with only one try she is successful and "they are wildly gay, romping around the room on each other's shoulders" (PP 22). Mr. Darling is playing with the children, tossing them onto their beds, thrilled to have his tie finally around his neck. Mrs. Darling's patience in managing the family becomes clear; not only has she to keep the children from arguing, get them to change and bathe, but she has to help their father dress himself.

Barrie goes to some length to impress upon the audience that despite what Mr. Darling may think, Mrs. Darling is the leader of the household. Not only does she watch over the family, she has had much to do with the care and maintenance of the home itself. She has constructed "the coverlets of the beds out of her wedding gown" and the mantel shelf in the nursery is supported by "two wooden soldiers, home-made, begun by Mr. Darling, finished by Mrs. Darling" (PP 18). The social setup of the family in Barrie's play is primarily matriarchal.

In Disney's animated film, scene one begins with the boys, John and Michael, in the nursery playing "Peter Pan." The boys already know about Hook, Never Land and Pan's adventures from the stories Wendy tells. How Wendy knows about such things, having never been to Never Land, the audience does not know. When Mr. Darling enters the nursery, he's looking for his cuff-links, not Mary to manipulate his tie. This Mr. Darling does enter in a huff, trying to ready himself for the dinner, but he is in no way as childish as the Darling from Barrie's play, who entered like a young boy complaining about what he must wear. The scene is not humorous. There is no horse romping around the room. In fact, when Mr. Darling finds a "clean" shirt front on Michael's bed — it actually has a map of Never Land chalked on the front — and Michael runs over and tries to jump up on his father, Mr. Darling yells "Don't paw me, Michael, this is my last shirt front."

In contrast to the play, Mrs. Darling says much less in the film. Her longest lines are after Wendy compliments her on her evening gown, and these are rudely interrupted by Mr. Darling when he yells at Wendy. He is angry because the boys have hid his cuff links as buried treasure and scrawled across his shirt. They have done all this to replicate the stories of Peter Pan's adventures that Wendy tells them. To this, Mr. Darling says "Wendy! Story! I might have known."

Disney, perhaps not recognizing the importance Mrs. Darling held for Barrie, or in the belief that the audience would be more likely to accept a strong father figure did not, as R.D.S. Jack concludes, assign Mr. Darling "a comparatively minor role" as did J.M. Barrie.⁵

The Mr. Darling in the film is not managed or controlled by anyone. After he becomes upset with Wendy for telling the tales that have now resulted in lost cuff links and a dirtied last shirt front, Mrs. Darling tries to control his temper with "Now, now, now." But in direct contrast to the play, he steps back from her as she tries to fix his tie and loudly says, "Now, now, George will have his say," and the nursery falls completely silent, even Nana giving full attention with uplifted ears.

Another example of his dominating manner is when the Darling couple leave for their dinner party. Mrs. Darling mentions her fears about the fact that Wendy keeps talking about Peter Pan and that maybe they should do something to make sure the children are safe. Mr. Darling gives a compulsive, jittery shiver that ruffles his whole body and yells out "Peter Pan!"

Then in a mimicry, squeaky voice he says, "Sound the alarm, call Scotland yard, of all the childish fiddle fatter." The next line is perhaps one of the most important to separate the Mr. Darling in the film from Barrie's Mr. Darling in the play. As they walk down the street, away from the house and right after the "fiddle fatter" line, he says, "How can we expect the children to grow up and be prudent when you are as bad as they are. No wonder Wendy gets these idiotic ideas."

Mrs. Darling with idiotic ideas? Mr. Darling speaking to Mrs. Darling with such words? In a Barrie play? Never. The Mrs. Darling of the Barrie play is the "matrue, motherly figure" opposed to the "inadequate, selfish, doglike creature" of her husband. (J 109) In the play, all of Mrs. Darling's ideas are sensitive and sensible, most of them concerned with the welfare of her family. Mr. Darling's ideas and worries, however, are all based solely on himself and his image. In the play, he is concerned with his dress, his image as a real man, his role as boss of the house and his right to receive consoling attention; all of which are exemplified by his actions in the rest of scene one after Mrs. Darling succeeds in manipulating his tie.

It all begins when the youngest boy, Michael, refuses to take his nightly dose of bad tasting tonic Nana has readied for him. After Michael refuses to take the medicine, Mrs. Darling leaves to get some persuasive pieces of chocolate; Mr. Darling, however, sees a chance to be the man of the house and impress his children.

Mr. Darling: "Be a man Michael."

Michael: "Won't." (PP 25)

After some chiding and a warning to Mrs. Darling that she's only spoiling the boy by getting chocolate for him, Mr. Darling says "When I was your age, Michael, I took medicine without a murmur. I said 'Thank you, kind parents, for giving me bottles to make me well'" (PP 25).

Wendy then joins in and reminds Michael that Mr. Darling still takes medicine and that it is far more horrid in taste to the concoction Michael must swallow, to which their father replies "Ever so much nastier" (PP 25).

Mr. Darling tells his son that he would gladly take a dose of his own medicine if in fact he hadn't lost the bottle, after which Barrie writes "(thankfully)" (25). But Wendy leaves the room, yelling back that she knows where the bottle is and returns soon afterward to get a disappointed glare from her father and a sarcastic "You have been wonderfully quick, precious quack!" (25).

Now the true childish Mr. Darling takes over. It is very appropriate that the entire scene occurs in the nursery. Wendy, faithful in her father's pledge to exhibit strength in taking the medication says, "Michael, now you will see how father takes it" (PP 26).

But Mr. Darling is bound to disappoint her. Perhaps if Mrs. Darling had reappeared, she could have saved her husband's credibility, but her continued absence leaves Mr. Darling, ironically, in the precarious situation of showing his son "how to be a man." Unfortunately, he does not live up to his words because the next thing he says is "Michael first" to which his youngest son retorts "Father first" (PP 26).

This goes on until Wendy finally reminds her father of the "Thank you, kind parents" idea, to which Mr. Darling says, "The point is that there is more in my glass than in Michael's spoon. It isn't fair, I swear though it were my last breath, it is not fair" (PP 26). It begins to become difficult

to distinguish the parent from the child, and if it were not for the tag lines, one might think there was not an adult in the room. But Mr. Darling stoops lower than his boy when he calls Michael a "cowardly custard" for not drinking the medicine (PP 26). All of the words and actions are very funny, but what makes the humor even more poignant is the fact that a grown man, an adult and father of three, is the real instigator of the whole scene.

Wendy, the only female in the room, has quickly become a substitute for the absent Mrs. Darling and creates a solution. They will both drink at the same time. Both agree, — and on three they swallow, only Mr. Darling fakes it and doesn't take the medicine. He is immediately chastised by the yells of the children and even Nana "shakes her head sadly over him, and goes into the bathroom" while the children all look as if "they did not admire him" (PP 26).

Mr. Darling quickly tries to make a joke of the situation and pours his medicine into Nana's bowl. Then he calls Nana to drink and at the same time Mrs. Darling returns. Nana "begins to lap, only begins," then goes into her kennel. Mrs. Darling smells the bowl and says, "George, it is your medicine!" (PP 26).

Everyone goes to Nana's aid, which brings a fresh temper tantrum to Mr. Darling:

Coddle her; nobody coddles me. Oh dear no. I am only the breadwinner, why should I be coddled? Why why why? (PP 27)

By now George Darling has lost the respect of his wife, the children, and the family dog as well as the audience. Without a doubt, these scenes are very humorous because they portray the man of the house as a child in grown-up clothes. Darling is loud, immature, complaining and jealous. He is a minor character who adds to the humor of the play and illuminates the fact that the only real adults in the house are Mrs. Darling and Wendy. In fact, Harry Geduld actually compares Darling to a dog, and sees Nana as his equal counterpart when he says, "Mr. Darling uses the dog as a substitute for himself by feeding it his own medicine."⁶

How does Disney deal with this great amount of adult male immaturity? He nullifies almost the entire scene. In the film, the medicine "stand off" along with the placement of the tonic in Nana's bowl is eliminated. Marilla Freeman reviewed the film at its release in 1953 and said, "The delicious tomfoolery . . . has lost color or is omitted entirely in favor of the broad familiar comedy of animation."⁷ Even though the *Newsweek* review in 1953 said, "Disney's men didn't find it necessary to tamper with the plot," almost everything that was tampered with works to destroy what Barrie intended Mr. Darling to be.

With the reduction of the first act, Disney's film never gives the impression that "Mr. Darling is full of bluster" (Gr 22). Mr. Darling is the father, he is the head of the house and he never receives any looks or challenges that might show the children "did not admire him." In fact, he receives almost no opposition at all besides the few calm-

ing words from Mary. Disney's Mr. Darling comes across as a normal, if not strict father; the effigy of a respected, mature adult in full control. The only attempt by Disney to create humor in the first scene is an extended spin-and-crash episode with Nana. But it is not nearly as effective for gaining humor as Barrie's scene. In fact, Green believes such scenes just show:

a love of exaggeration, particularly of size and speed ... with aggression and violence — everything gets smashed into a pulp, everyone skids at top speed into a wall or over a cliff, or gets scalped or flayed or dropped into wet cement. (Gr 19)

It is action, but it is not Barrie's *Peter Pan*.

The one real similarity between scene one of Barrie's original and Disney's version occurs in the expulsion of the nursedog Nana, and even this "similarity" effectively contrasts the two Mr. Darlings and shows Disney's creation to be unfaithful to the humor of Barrie's.

In the Barrie play, the expulsion takes place immediately after Nana gets the coddling for having taken George's medicine. Barrie describes George as a "desperate man . . . who has now lost all self control" (PP 27). His jealousy is at its height when he says "I refuse to allow that dog to lord it in my nursery for one hour longer" (PP 27).

Mrs. Darling tries to quickly remind her husband that a small boy named Peter may try and visit the children that night while he and she are at the dinner party. Perhaps Nana should remain in the nursery. Mr. Darling pays her no attention and asks, "Am I master in this house or is she?" (PP 28). The humor here arises from George's absurdity. He has turned a situation from a spat of jealousy, because Nana got attention he deemed himself worthy of, into a loud argument about who reigns as lord of the house — Nana or himself. The immaturity is hilarious in its depth. The audience realizes by this time that the true "lord" of the house, the real caretaker in all senses of the word, is Mrs. Darling.

Mr. Darling passes quick judgement, and despite his wife's warning, says to Nana "the proper place for you is the yard" and with that "seizes her collar in an iron grip and amid the cries of his progeny drags her from the room" (PP 27, 28). The nursery is now unguarded; Peter Pan will be free to enter and convince the children to leave their parents and fly to Never Land. Mr. Darling has "unwittingly shackled his own guardian instincts" (Ge 58).

In Disney's version, Mr. Darling also ties up Nana. After the stumbling, falling scene which is dramatic but not funny, the children ignore the fall of Mr. Darling and sympathize with Nana, now crumpled in a corner where she landed after her run-in with Mr. Darling. With an incredulous look, Mr. Darling says, "Poor Nana? This is the last straw — out!" He also grabs her by the collar and drags her out saying "There will be no more dogs as nurse maids in this house."

In both versions, Nana finds her exit by upsetting Mr. Darling. In Barrie's play, Mr. Darling's immaturity and fear that he is losing his position as "lord" of the house to

a dog initiates the expulsion scene. In the animation, Nana does capture the brunt of Mr. Darling's anger; however, when he ties her up, we discover his true motive for separating the dog from the children.

You're not a nurse, you're a dog and the children are not puppies, they are people, and sooner or later Nana — people have to grow up.

Nana may have upset him, but his reasons for taking her from the nursery has nothing at all to do with jealousy or fear that he is compromising his position as household king. He seems to have a genuine interest in his children's future and maturation; he doesn't want their heads filled with fiddle fatter. Having a dog as a nurse maid may be extending the children's imaginations too far, and this Mr. Darling seems to doubt the ability of a dog to care for his children, as any realistic father would undoubtedly do.

Therefore, in creating such a realistic father, Disney is forced to leave out all of the scenes that give the original tale humor. Without these scenes, the animated version fails to capture the spirit and mood of Barrie's tale; that of fun and humor. Because Disney's Mr. Darling is such a serious and important character, his discovery at the end of the play merits special attention for its disappointing allusion.

This final difference between Barrie's character and the Mr. Darling of Disney's animation comes in the final scene and is, perhaps, the most important disparity. In the play, the children leave for Never Land and are absent for several months. This gives Mr. Darling the opportunity to find his mistake in chaining up Nana, thus allowing Peter's invasion, and for his error he creates his own punishment — he lives in Nana's kennel until the children return.

Throughout the play, Mr. Darling does not believe in Peter Pan. He knows his children are gone and that they have supposedly "flown away," but to where and by whom they were taken he does not know. One thing that is easily apparent is Mr. Darling's notoriety since the children left. His self-inflicted punishment has brought him attention and fame.

A cab takes him to work, and he rides both ways crouched in Nana's kennel. All the way people cheer him for his sacrifice and remembrance of his children. Upon returning from work one day he says to Mary, "There were never less than a hundred running around the cab cheering, and when we passed the Stock Exchange the members came out and waved" (PP 87).

He is, without a doubt, loving the attention. He tells Mary "we should not be such celebrities if the children hadn't flown away" (PP 87). If such talk were not an admission of his disregard for his children and enthused attitude toward his own new fame, his answer to Mary when she says "you are sure you are not enjoying [this]?" explicitly portrays him as self-seeking (PP 87). His response is "Enjoying it! See my punishment: living in a kennel" (PP 88). But it's that "punishment" that is producing his fame — he is not about to stop this incarceration while a single person still pays him notice. Just in

case we may doubt our own feelings that Mr. Darling is not sincere in his answer, Barrie writes in the word "anxiously" before Mr. Darling's response. The author wants to make certain we do not mistake Mr. Darling for being a concerned, sad parent. That is Mrs. Darling's job, for she is the one who sits every night by the window searching the sky for the return of her children; her husband spends his time reiterating the number of autographs he signed and interviews he has done.

When the children finally do return they find the nursery window open, (which Mr. Darling had asked Mary to shut but she had refused) but no one is there. They do see the kennel and notice it's occupied. Wendy looks in and recognizes the sleeping person as their father. Michael then looks in and Barrie describes the boy as "disappointed" when he says, "He is not as big as the pirate I killed" (PP 89).

Mr. Darling is going to awaken and not only be disappointed by having to give up the kennel (and hence his fame), but by finding that his children will have even less respect for him than they did the day they disappeared. Mr. Darling has never voiced any belief in Peter Pan throughout the play, and will undoubtedly grow in disbelief and hatred for the boy as the children's stories about their adventures bury anything interesting their father might ever have done.

Once again, contrary to popular reviews, Disney's film makes a sizable alteration and reduces the children's trip to a single night. By the time that the Darlings return home from their dinner, the children are back safe and sound. Thus, Mr. Darling never has a chance to see his error — therefore he was never really guilty of doing anything wrong by tying up Nana. Through Disney, his pride is saved and his judgement attracts no suspicion.

Upon their return, the Darlings enter the nursery and find Wendy sitting by the open window in a light sleep. Mr. Darling, who threatened to end Wendy's stay in the nursery and force her to sleep in her own room for telling too many Peter Pan stories, tries to apologize. But Wendy is full of excitement and immediately retells the whole adventure of the evening.

Mr. Darling slaps a heavy hand to his weary head and says, "Oh Mary, I'm going to bed" and turns to walk out of the nursery. It is here that Wendy says "See how well he does fly" to which Mary answers "George, George!" Mr. Darling's eyes bulge as he looks out the window to see, amongst the clouds, far up in the sky, Hook's clipper ship sailing smoothly in front of the moon.

As he looks upward, flanked on either side by Mary and Wendy, Mr. Darling says, "You know, I have the strangest feeling I've seen that ship before, when I was very young." To this, Wendy says "Oh, father" and gives him a squeeze around the waist, while Mr. Darling smiles as he watches the ship sail away. Not only has Wendy's love and respect for her father grown, in complete opposition to the play, but Mr. Darling breaks what was in the original work a precious spell; he recognizes Peter Pan's existence.

The recognition of Peter Pan by Darling, along with the restructuring of the family into a patriarchal unit, which eliminates the humor caused by an immature adult figure, all work in unison to create a version of *Peter Pan* J. M. Barrie would no doubt have disliked. Barrie was "a man by nature drawn to children's literature, [who] aimed to attract a young audience and was ready to revise his work over and over again in efforts to increase that appeal" (J 112). All of Disney's revisions have done the exact opposite. He has taken an inherently youth oriented tale and made it much too mature. Disney's ending bridges the gap of disbelief in Peter Pan which once stood between the world of children and adults. No longer is the tale a unique image aimed to ignite the dreams of children. Because Disney's animation is, as Richard Schickel describes it, too "inflexibly realistic,"⁹⁸ the Peter Pan tale is reduced to a simple, if not generic story, which has none of the charm or "tomfoolery" J. M. Barrie mastered in his original *Peter Pan*. ◊

Notes

1. Green, Martin. "The Charm of Peter Pan." *Children's Literature* 9 (1981): 19-27; p. 19. Hereafter cited as Gr.
2. Hodges, Margaret. "J.M. Barrie." *Writers for Children: Critical Studies of Major Authors Since the Seventeenth Century*. Ed. Jane Bingham. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988. 29-35.
3. Carpenter, Humphrey and Mari Drichard. *The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987; p. 136. Hereafter cited as C.
4. Barrie, J.M. *The Plays of J.M. Barrie*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1950; p. 109. Hereafter cited as PP.
5. Jack, R.D.S. The Manuscript of Peter Pan." *Children's Literature* 18 (1990): 101-113; p. 109. Hereafter cited as J.
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7. Freeman, Marilla Waite. "New Films From Books." *Library Journal* Feb. 1953; p. 211.
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