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# "Think Happy Thoughts": Peter Pan as a Tragic Hero

## **Abstract**

Using Aristotle's definition of the "tragic hero," this work will explore J.M. Barrie's novel, *Peter and Wendy*, and how Peter is a tragic figure. In this paper I argue that Peter Pan is not only a tragic hero whose human frailty—in Peter's case, his fear of growing old—causes him to make the terrible mistake of rejecting his own development of humanity and the opportunity for redemption through maternal love, but that Barrie uses Peter to emphasize that, contrary to the Romantic conception of childhood, children need the guidance of parents in order to live a fulfilling life.

## **Keywords**

Peter Pan, tragic hero, J.M. Barrie, children's literature

## **Disciplines**

Children's and Young Adult Literature | English Language and Literature

## **Comments**

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## “Think Happy Thoughts”: Peter Pan as a Tragic Hero

The legacy of J.M. Barrie's Peter Pan is monumental, with countless interpretations and adaptations of the original work, yet none of these interpretations live up to the tragedy inherent in the story. Barrie himself began toying with his work through the constant revisioning of the original play version and his later creation of a book adaptation, entitled *Peter and Wendy*. In the many versions of Peter's adventures, but especially in modern depictions, Peter is a lovable hero with charisma, leadership, and severely lacking the many flaws of character that Barrie wrote in the book. The watered-down, temperate, and child-friendly image of Peter Pan that modern movie producers construct completely dilutes the danger that underlies the story and, in turn, disregards Peter's portrayal as a tragic hero. According to Aristotle's definition, a tragic hero must fulfill two requirements: 1) a great or noble figure who, because of a fatal flaw, 2) makes a mistake (hamartia) that causes a turn in his fate, or downfall (peripeteia). Tragic figures do not necessarily die at the conclusion of the story, but they generally reach a grander recognition of human fate and experience. I will argue in this paper that Peter Pan is not only a tragic hero whose human frailty-- in Peter's case, his fear of growing old-- causes him to make the terrible mistake of rejecting his own development of humanity and the opportunity for redemption through maternal love, but that Barrie uses Peter to emphasize that, contrary to the Romantic conception of childhood, children need the guidance of parents in order to live a fulfilling life.

From the very beginning of the work, Barrie makes it clear in the opening line, “All children, except one, grow up” (1), that Peter's story is set apart from others resolutely, but without the promise of positivity. With this statement of fact, the author is setting Peter up to be special from other children, singling him out as a ‘great figure,’ in a way that leaves Peter stranded and lonely. Nearly all children have no choice but to grow up; however, normal

children also use growth as an *opportunity*, something that Peter will never be able to do. When Wendy first meets Peter in the real world, she immediately sees that he is missing something that is more important than his shadow: “[n]ot only had he no mother, but he had not the slightest desire to have one. He thought them very over-rated persons. Wendy, however, felt at once that she was in the presence of a tragedy” (25). Although Peter does not realize the sense of love and belonging that he is missing, Wendy has a maternal intuition that foreshadows Peter’s inability to sacrifice his childhood for the sake of real, familial love.

When one reads this story through the lens of a tragedy, Peter’s character flaws become more evident; specifically the flaws left unchecked for want of a mother such as forgetfulness, violence, and cruelty. Peter is still an attractive character, with his hunger for adventure and fearlessness in the face of ‘evil,’ but to an audience, Peter’s bloodlust is disconcerting. For example, before Peter’s battle with Hook in the Mermaid Lagoon, the narrator interrupts, saying that, “[h]e was a lovely boy, clad in skeleton leaves and the juices that ooze out of trees but the most entrancing thing about him was that he had all his first teeth. When he saw she was a grown-up, he gnashed the little pearls at her” (12). The image of Peter’s gnashing teeth is an echo from his action toward Mrs. Darling when she first caught him in the nursery. Peter considers mothers to be as much of an enemy as pirates are.

Peter’s emotional calmness going into battle holds up against “some of the greatest heroes” (82) because his unadulterated sense of violence and adventure is incomparable to those who have developed empathy through human interaction. Peter might have been able to develop compassion and a understanding of the value of human life if he did not forget every adventure after he finished them. When Hook stuns Peter through the use of an underhanded attack, Peter freezes, as “[e]very child is affected thus the first time he is treated unfairly.... No one ever gets

over the first unfairness; no one except Peter. He often met it, but he always forgot it. I suppose that was the real difference between him and all the rest” (82). Peter’s forgetfulness— a cognizant decision to avoid any advancement in character, age and maturity— acts as the surrogate to his tragic downfall. Instead of one fall from grace that a tragic hero needs to meet in order to learn about human nature, Peter’s tragedy is constantly occurring, to the point where he forgets that he is tragic. The peripeteia that results from his forgetfulness does not climax until the end of the story, when Wendy and the Lost Boys leave Neverland, but one can see the warning behind Peter’s story: without a home and without guidance, we are vicious and, inevitably, heartbreaking.

The characterization of Peter as an attractive yet violent child is not unreasonable in terms of child psychology, although it was unusual in the light of Romantic notions of childhood. The Romantics conceptualized children as the closest to God because of the natural goodness and innocence. However, Barrie writes children in more realistic terms, because although they do have an aura of purity about them, they are also still in the developing stages of brain function. Empathy, arguably one of the most important emotional abilities for the continued state of humanity, does not develop in children until they reach ages six or seven. Peter still has his baby teeth-- the ones that gnashed at Mrs. Darling and Hook in a stark image of ferocity in innocence-- placing his age around five years of brain development, regardless of his timeless existence. Many examples within the text illustrate the horrifying ‘purity’ of children; for example, when Tootles says directly, “I am so afraid of Peter” (57), and how Peter, “always waited til the last moment [to save John and Michael], and you felt it was his cleverness that interested him and not the saving of human life” (38). The danger of being friends with Peter is always in the background for the other characters because even though Peter will always face an adventure

without fear, if there is nothing from the fight that will benefit him, he would not think twice about finding something more fun to keep his attention. In fact, when Wendy asks in the final chapter about Peter's battles with Hook, his response is, "'I forget them after I kill them,' he replied carelessly" (146). The sociopathic nature of children, coupled with Peter's strategic forgetfulness, is terrifying and emphasizes the fact that Peter is living an inhuman life without morals and values or any other societal impediments. Through this rejection of humanity, which stems from his tragic rejection of development, Peter becomes less sympathetic; he wields childhood as if it were a weapon, with 'fun' as the only motive.

In the assumption that Peter is a tragic hero, one must also acknowledge the parallels between Peter and his counterpart, Captain James Hook. Captain Hook is undoubtedly a tragic hero, although Hook is at a very different point in his story than Peter is or ever will be. After Hook believes that he has killed Peter and returns to the Jolly Roger, he exclaims to himself, "'Better for Hook,' he cried, 'if he had had less ambition!' It was in his darkest hours only that he referred to himself in the third person" (118). Ambition is generally the driving flaw in a tragic hero, implying that Hook's fall from grace happened much earlier than the narrator's glimpse into Neverland. The audience learns that Hook was from a well-respected, aristocratic family, that he once was tormented at a famous English 'public school,' Eton, and that he feels, "so terribly alone. The inscrutable man never felt more alone than when surrounded by his dogs. They were socially so inferior to him" (117). Barrie leaves the means from which Hook fell from such high social standing to a base life in piracy for the audience to imagine, but it is enough to understand that Hook, although the antagonist, is a "not wholly unheroic figure" (132). The parallels between Peter and Hook are distinct, between youth and age, innocence and experience, levity and cynicism, adventure and struggle. Peter is in the beginning of his fall as a tragic hero,

and Hook has already passed his. Yet, while Hook's mistake ruined his happiness forever, Peter does not consciously know the fulfillment that he is missing. When Wendy and the Lost Boys are gone from their home, Peter, "nearly cried; but it struck him how indignant she would be if he laughed instead; so he laughed a haughty laugh and fell asleep in the middle of it" (110). In this moment, Hook seems to be more fortunate than Peter, considering that Peter cannot accept his emotions or what he has lost because of his childish spite and inability to cope. Hook, at the least, has known love in a way that Peter never will.

If the rejection of love and growth is Peter's hamartia, then his fall had begun from the very beginning of his life when he ran away from his parents to avoid growing up. When Wendy tells the story of her mother and father waiting with the window open, Peter dismisses the thought violently, saying "'Long ago,' he said, 'I thought like you that my mother would always keep the window open for me, so I stayed away for moons and moons and moons, and then flew back; but the window was barred, for mother had forgotten all about me, and there was another little boy sleeping in my bed'" (98). In this story, whether it is true or not, Peter reveals that his hatred of mothers stems from an unresolved feeling of abandonment. From the fear of abandonment comes Peter's rejection of love; if his own mother could abandon him like that, then nobody will stay for long, give love to him, or deserve to be loved in return. Wendy is the only character that is close enough to Peter that he tries to remember her after she has left the Neverland, but it is not the love that Peter needs to find his humanity. The major turning point in Peter's fate is when, "Mrs. Darling stretched out her arms to him, but he repulsed her" (144). Peter was being offered salvation from loneliness, and by rejecting it, his identity as a tragic hero is set. Barrie hints at an unhappiness within Peter's psyche, a sorrow that gives him nightmares: "[s]ometimes, though not often, he had dreams, and they were more painful than the dreams of

other boys. For hours he could not be separated from these dreams, though he wailed piteously in them. They had to do, I think, with the riddle of his existence” (110). Peter might have made a conscious effort to be forgetful, or perhaps whatever magic keeps him young also works on his mind, but he knows, if only on a subconscious level, that his life is missing the love of a family. Wendy offers that love— both from her play as his mother and wife, and her invitation for Peter to join the Darling family— but Peter prioritizes superficial happiness over a sense of belonging, ending his tragic turn of fate with the loss of his ‘family.’

After the fall of tragic heroes comes the anagnorisis, but for Peter, he cannot reach that moment of revelation because he cannot remember moments for long enough to resolve any personal struggle that would have evolved otherwise. The forgetfulness that blocks any advancement in character makes him special from other children and keeps him young, but that flaw leads to some of the most poignant moments in the story, like when Wendy realizes that Peter forgot who Tinkerbell was after Tink’s death. Throughout the story, the narrator lauds Peter’s negative and positive traits, but of all Peter’s misdeeds, forgetting Tink is the most unforgivable. The lack of humanity within Peter, due to his own self-centered, childish world, is the reason why Peter is so alone; he cannot connect with other people on a level of compassion and understanding, being left to stare into the window of the Darling’s nursery rather than standing inside the room to be loved. Peter “had ecstasies innumerable that other children can never know; but he looked through the window at the one joy from which he must be for ever barred” (141). The only reason Peter is “for ever barred” from love is because he is too afraid of maturity to take the salvation Mrs. Darling offers, defining his own tragic fall through that fear. Although Peter returns generation after generation to have adventures with Wendy’s children,



the make-believe of children will never amount to the love that the Darling family shares for each other.

In the final chapter, the narrator takes on Peter's tone when s/he describes the Lost Boys as being "done for" (148), but the focus of the chapter is filtered through Wendy's eyes. Wendy, in fact, still saw Peter as a sad little boy, just as she had in their first meeting, "[s]he let her hands play in the hair of the tragic boy. She was not a little girl heart-broken about him; she was a grown woman smiling at it all, but they were wet smiles" (151). As a maternal figure, Wendy has always known that Peter is not as content as he seems, that he wants for something that he does not remember or else has never known. Because "Peter had seen many tragedies, but he had forgotten them all" (76), he does not attribute his own life to tragedy. When Peter changes his mind and leaves open the window to the Darling's nursery, he enacts the one triumphant moment of character development in the story; his selfishness is not great enough to deny Wendy and the Lost Boys a chance for happiness, even if that happiness is unattainable for him. The fact that Mrs. Darling's sleeping face was the cause for changing Peter's mind implies that his need for the completion that a mother would bring is something he recognizes but cannot bring himself to change.

Overall, Peter Pan's story is tragic; even with the adventures, games and fun he experiences, he cannot remember the things he has done because of his constant search for new things to keep him occupied. Peter is filling his life with fun because that is all he knows, all he wants to know, and the only thing he has. Without the love of a family, which he found briefly in Wendy and the Lost Boys, Peter is not a complete person. He may be an amalgam of all that is youthful, but he is not human enough to be sympathetic. Peter's lack of empathy and unchecked violence are a result of his refusal to mature in any way, leading to his failing as a hero: the

rejection of the love and change that could have saved him from his constant need to run away from memories and nightmares. Even at the most heightened point of Peter's morality, when he lets Wendy and the boys return to the Darling's nursery, Peter still chooses to run from a welcoming family because all children, but him, grow up.