

‘My father told me a nest with eggs in it was one of the most beautiful things in the world’: Gender Construction and Parent–Child Relationships in Roald Dahl’s *Danny Champion of the World* and J.M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan or the Boy Who Would Not Grow Up*

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Abstract

In this essay, I compare Roald Dahl’s 1975 novel, *Danny Champion of the World*, and J.M Barrie’s 1904 play text of *Peter Pan or the Boy Who Would Not Grow Up*. I argue that, despite appearing to subvert patriarchal familial structures at first reading, neither text ultimately achieves this subversion. Both texts romanticise the role of the mother, to the extent that the concept of ‘childhood’ is defined in relation to maternity. This prevents either text from subverting hegemonic gender constructions.

Introduction

Both J.M Barrie’s *Peter Pan or the Boy Who Would Not Grow Up* (1904) and Roald Dahl’s *Danny Champion of the World* (1975) offer us intriguing depictions of parent-child relationships. In this essay, I plan to compare these depictions and explore what they reveal about the construction of gender in each text. I will argue that

while each text presents us with spaces that have the potential to be subversive, neither author ultimately subverts hegemonic gender roles. The texts offer deconstructions of the divide between adults and children and of general societal norms, but these deconstructions never go so far as to dismantle patriarchal ideals of the family. These ideals are highly relevant to the exploration of gender roles in each text, because the family unit is such an historically gendered construction. *Peter Pan or the Boy Who Would Not Grow Up* (which from this point I will abbreviate to *Peter Pan*) was published as play text in 1904 and as a novel in 1911. This paper will focus on the play text. It tells the story of Peter, a magical little boy who never grows up, convincing the Darling children – Wendy, Michael and John – to fly away from their nursery in Bloomsbury, back to Never Land with him and his lost boys. In Never Land, Wendy takes on the role of mother to Peter, her brothers and the lost boys, before becoming so worried about her own mother that she decides they need to return home. After a fight, in which the menacing Captain Hook and his gang of pirates attempt to capture Wendy and make Peter and the lost boys walk the plank, the children return home where Mr. and Mrs. Darling adopt the lost boys. Peter returns to Never Land, refusing to be adopted so that he can remain a child forever.

Danny Champion of the World (which I will abbreviate to *Danny*) concerns a father and son who live in a caravan and work as mechanics in a small English town. Danny, whose mother died when he was a baby, adores his father and believes he is ‘the most marvellous and exciting father any boy ever had’.^[186] One day, however, he discovers that his father is part of an underground network of poachers, consisting of the townsmen, who target the mean aristocratic Victor Hazell’s pheasants. He introduces Danny to poaching who comes up with an idea for catching hundreds of pheasants at once by lacing raisins with sleeping pills. They manage to steal nearly all of Victor Hazell’s birds.

These texts offer interesting points for comparison. Despite the contrast between their forms and the eras in which they are set,

they both feature a space (Never Land and the forest in which the men of Danny's town go poaching) which is almost exclusively masculine and in which the divide between adults and children breaks down. Both also represent a social 'reality' against which these alternative realities can be compared.

Gender and Hegemony

Before going any further, I will briefly note some theories of gender and hegemony which I will be applying to each of these texts. I will be treating gender as a socially constructed phenomenon and a performative process, following from the theories of Judith Butler. As Butler puts it: 'There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" which are said to be its results.'^[187] Gender is only the expression of itself; all gendered activities are only performances. R.W Connell has applied this theory of gender as performance specifically to constructions of masculinity. He believes that both masculinity and femininity can be considered to be 'gender projects', and that even linking gender roles to roles in reproduction is a socially constructed activity.^[188] Connell also describes the concept of hegemony, following the theorist Antonio Gramsci. Hegemony, as the process of orchestrating cultural consent to systems of power like patriarchy, guarantees the dominant position of men.^[189]

These theories are pertinent to exploring *Peter Pan* and *Danny*. Both texts deal with wholly different class contexts and are written in contrasting forms. The Darling children are upper class and the text is not realist. We are never entirely sure whether what we are reading, or seeing on stage, is part of the world as we understand it or whether it belongs to a magical dream realm. The end of the play states that Peter 'plays on and on until we wake up'^[190], but we know we have not been asleep; the ambiguity of the reality of the piece is never resolved or answered. *Danny*, in contrast, is based in a more working class context and is almost entirely realist. The only elements of the fantastic that enter the

novel are in the stories Danny's father tells him, such as that of the BFG.^[191] However, despite these large contextual and textual differences, there are many striking similarities in terms of the construction of gender in each.

Paternity

Parent-child relationships in each of these texts are complex. Paternity, in particular, is a complicated construction. At first glance, these texts seem to offer wildly different views of paternity. The three primary paternal figures in *Peter Pan* (Peter, Mr. Darling and Hook) are all essentially failures. Peter is only a father in the eyes of the lost boys, only for as long as the pretence lasts^[192]; he refuses to accept the title for himself, insisting to Wendy that his feelings for her are 'those of a devoted son'^[193] and that 'no one is going to catch me... and make me a man. I want always to be a little boy and to have fun'.^[194] He is a father by virtue of his association with Wendy, and by being the wisest of the lost boys. It is not a title that is natural to him. Mr. Darling is presented as consistently inadequate; this is made absolutely clear in the final scene when he sits on the floor by the dog kennel and asks Mrs. Darling to close the nursery window because of the draft.^[195] He fails to see the significance of the open window as the only hope of their children returning and his wife is appalled that he would even ask such a thing of her. Responsible parenting is impossible from his degraded position. Mr. Darling's incompetence is often configured as not only hapless, but in fact threatening, especially in the performance of the play text. Since 1904, beginning with Gerard Du Maurier's performance, it has been traditional that Captain Hook and Mr. Darling are played by the same actor^[196]; paternity is configured as useless to the point of being damaging or threatening to children. Hook is described as seeming barely even alive; he is 'cadaverous and blackavised'^[197]. His presence suggests death, rather than safety or comfort. He is a warped inversion of a paternal figure.

Danny, by contrast, appears to present us with the perfect father. We are told very early on that his father can in fact perform the roles of both parental figures, following Danny's mother's death:

While I was still a baby, my father washed me and fed me and changed my nappies and did all the millions of other things a mother normally does for her child. That is not an easy task for a man.^[198]

Danny adores his father and their relationship seems exceptionally close. At one point, Danny thinks that the most wonderful feeling was that 'when I went to sleep, my father would still be there, very close to me, sitting in his chair by the fire, or lying in the bunk above my own'.^[199] His father, however, falls from grace to an extent for Danny, when he finds out about his secret poaching habit ('I was shocked. My own father a thief! This gentle lovely man!'^[200]). From this point on, their relationship changes, so that it is closer to that of friends than of a father and son. This can be demonstrated in two ways in particular. Firstly, we can get a sense of Danny's father's immaturity in the food he prepares for him; Danny is always eating midnight snacks, hot chocolate, and jam or cheese sandwiches. We rarely see his father give Danny any hot food, and even when he does it is only baked beans.^[201] His father reminisces to Danny about the food he ate in his childhood, especially the Toad in the Hole his mother used to make for him. The only time we see Danny eat anything of a nutritional standard is when Doc Spencer's wife leaves a pie for him after Danny's father forgets to give him any food at all.^[202] His father promises that if the plan Danny hatches works, they will be able to eat roast pheasant every day. Danny, however, quickly realises that they do not have an oven, and so this plan would never work.^[203] While his father promises to go and buy an electric oven, we never actually see this happen.

Secondly, we gather the change in dynamic of their relationship from Quentin Blake's illustrations of the novel. The first image we see of Danny is of him as a four-month old at the time

of his mother's death. The accompanying image is a photograph, an absolutely realistic depiction of Danny.^[204] After this point, every image is a distinctively stylised illustration. As soon as his mother dies and he is left to the care of his father, life becomes less real, more like an adventure story, illustrated rather than photographed. His father may be 'the most marvellous and exciting father any boy ever had'^[205], but this does not necessarily equate with being a successful paternal figure. In both texts, fathers are ultimately shown to be unhelpful, non-nurturing, and even dangerous.

Perhaps as a result of the ineffectiveness of the paternal figures, both texts romanticise the mother and maternity. They appear to tell the story of a young boy with an extraordinary amount of freedom. However, it is suggested in both that in order to actually retain their youth and childhood, children require at least 'a period of mothering'^[206]. This is to the extent that it could be said that the children in both texts only really exist in relation to their mothers. Away from the influence of the mother, children begin to struggle to understand or define themselves properly. Take, for instance, the lost boy Slightly in *Peter Pan*. He is so called because he was found in a baby romper suit labelled 'Slightly Soiled' and believes this to be the name his mother gave to him.^[207]

We can see that a similar confusion befalls Danny which means that he does not conform to the standard image of a child. He dislikes having friends his own age around to his house; he is more of an equal to his father than a child, and his activities are not those usually associated with childhood - he is a skilled mechanic and he can drive. Because of this, he does not have the ability to respond properly to the idea of his mother when she is mentioned ('I didn't say anything. I never quite knew what to say when he talked about my mother.'^[208]). The only figure in the text who seems to properly acknowledge the ludicrousness and the riskiness of their poaching plan is Mrs. Clipstone. She could hardly be represented in a more maternal manner, hiding the drugged pheasants under her own sleeping baby in a pram. When the ordeal with Victor Hazell is over, she exclaims 'Well thank goodness that's over at last!... Never in my

life have I seen such a shambles as that!'.^[209] We see her concern and protective instinct for her own child which contrasts directly with the relationship of camaraderie between Danny and his father.

Peter Pan himself seems to be an obvious contradiction of this, as an eternal and motherless child. As Ann Alston puts it:

The depiction of the mother is particularly complex, as the conflict between the child's desire for freedom and the need for security and love is symbolised in the opposition between the home/mother and Peter Pan.^[210]

He offers children the opposite of the mother, the possibility of existing without one. However, I would argue that, partly by virtue of being motherless, he ceases to be a child in any real sense. An eternal child is no longer a child, but a different entity altogether, a magical being. Peter Pan is, as Jonathan Padley puts it, 'defined above all else by his resistance to definition'.^[211] He rejects the idea that he is an 'ordinary boy'^[212], but instead says 'I'm youth, I'm joy, I'm a little bird that has broken out of the egg'.^[213] Hook has a particularly interesting view of Peter, which I believe is very revealing about his indistinct nature:

He does not, especially in the most heated moments, quite see PETER, who to his eyes, now blurred or open clearly for the first time, is less like a boy than a mite of dust dancing in the sun.^[214]

His vision has either been blurred or cleared; we cannot know which, and ultimately it does not matter. He also appears to Hook not as a mite of dust, but more specifically less like a boy than a mite of dust is. He is more transient, less easy to describe or portray than something so ethereal as to be almost invisible. Peter cannot be said to be a motherless child, because he cannot really be described as a child, or even as a person or a real entity at all. All the children in

these texts who are, in a real sense, children, rely on the mother-child relationship for their own sense of self and understanding of their being.

Parent - Free Spaces

Both texts contain spaces which are remarkably parent-free, and both are in some sense spatially separated from the rest of the children's lives. These are Never Land and the forest in which Danny and his father go to poach pheasants. These spaces provide an alternative vision of reality for child readers. Ann Alston has pointed out the significance of the nursery in children's literature. The existence of the nursery meant that children's spaces were specially designated and separated from their parents' worlds. Never Land in *Peter Pan* is then, a culmination of this process of separation, since it depicts 'childhood situated on its own island'.^[215] In Never Land, Wendy attempts to take on the role of the mother, but is ultimately too attached to her own mother, and by extension her own status as a child, to fully realise this role. This is demonstrated when the children return to their family home, and she insists to Mrs. Darling that Peter 'does need a mother', to which Mrs. Darling replies 'So do you, my love'.^[216] This is the first time she has been permitted to let down this maternal pretence in the whole play; her very first line was 'Now let us pretend we have a baby'.^[217] However, it has always been exactly this: a pretence or a performance. Never Land has remained parent-free.

The woods in which Danny and his father go to poach is a less obvious example of this same effect. As, again, Ann Alston has pointed out, 'in Dahl's texts the sweetness of family is confused, abstract and often discarded as cultural myth'.^[218] As I touched on earlier, Danny and his father have less of a parent-child relationship than a relationship of equals, of friends. His father brings him to the forest, but once they are there, the boundaries of the parent-child divide break down. On his first visit, Danny is coming to save his father, physically supporting him when he has been injured. The

experience is terrifying and unfamiliar, and the lengths Danny goes to are far beyond what should be expected of a child. He appeals directly to the child reader in his description of this experience, saying ‘I cannot possibly describe to you what it felt like to be standing alone in the pitchy blackness of that silent wood in the small hours of the night.’^[219] In this dark and dangerous space, we see Danny’s transition from uncomplicated boyhood to a more inverted, responsible role in relation to his father. When they next return to the woods, it is to carry out Danny’s plan for pheasant poaching, and again there is the same sense of threat and danger, of which his father seems frustratingly unaware. Danny thinks at this point ‘I was very grateful to him for holding my hand. I had wanted to take hold of his the moment we entered the wood, but I thought he might disapprove.’^[220] There is no clear authority figure in this relationship; the imbalance is clear from the fact that Danny is nervous of showing weakness in front of his father, despite being such a small boy in such a dangerous situation.

The children travel to Never Land and Victor Hazell’s forest in very unorthodox and potentially dangerous ways. This emphasises the spatial and ideological distance of these locations from the real world. The Darling children have to fly out of their nursery window to reach Never Land, and Danny has to drive a car to the forest. This means that these spaces seem inaccessible to most child-readers; they are otherworldly, containing the potential for an alternate reality, one free from the bounds of traditional familial structures and ideologies, in which children would be prevented from performing dangerous acts like these. I also believe the fact that they are both natural settings is significant. Never Land is described as containing ‘masses of trees’ in which wild beasts hide, as well as having a lagoon filled with mermaids.^[221] This is in stark contrast with ‘the rather depressed street in Bloomsbury’^[222] where we first meet the Darling children. While Danny and his father do not live in a city, they live surrounded by machinery and tools and man-made contraptions in their workshop, so the woods are still in sharp contrast to their normal habitation. Both spaces are also,

significantly, introduced to us in the dark. The stage directions for our introduction to Never Land specify that when the curtain goes up we should scarcely even know it has, because all is so dark behind it.^[223] The wood is first introduced as being ‘like some gigantic black creature crouching on the crest of the hill’^[224]. We need stars or torches to guide us through these spaces. They are nebulous, unknowable and unwelcoming to all but the bravest children.

Gender Construction

What can this attitude to mothers and fathers and these potentially subversive spaces tell us, then, about the construction of gender in these texts? I will look first at what these depictions of mothers tell us about constructions of femininity in each text. By foregrounding and necessitating the presence of the mother, both texts seem to reinforce the hegemonic ideal of a woman’s role in the family. While boys are permitted to have adventures or to commit illegal or illicit acts, women are forced to care for them or to scold them. Jacqueline Rose has pointed out that the boys’ adventure story is supported by political hegemony, in that it is ‘part of an exploratory and colonialist venture which assumed that discovering or seeing the world was the same thing as controlling it’.^[225] Women and girls cannot participate in this adventuring, and are confined to the domestic sphere, so much so that they often come to define this sphere. As Alston puts it:

Mother and home, like mother and family, are constantly linked, and as a result the motherless home is something of a contradiction in children’s literature.^[226]

When Wendy first arrives in Never Land, the lost boys literally build a house around her, so strong is the association of mother and home. The idea of Mrs. Darling keeping the window in the nursery open for her children also reinforces this connection; access to the home is explicitly linked to maternal love.^[227] The home Danny and his father live in is a caravan; the space is potentially moveable,

impermanent. Without the presence of a woman, there is no fixed domestic space in the text.

By confining the women in these texts to domestic spheres, Barrie and Dahl have created worlds with almost no active women in them. In *Peter Pan*, Peter controls the actions of all the female characters as they compete for his attentions, and simultaneously makes no real effort to understand them. He says at one point, when Wendy ask what he thinks of her: ‘You are so puzzling. Tiger Lily is just the same; ‘there is something or other she wants me to be, but she says it is not my mother.’^[228]

Heather E. Shipley believes that community between females is presented negatively and fearfully in the text.^[229] While Tiger Lily and Tinkerbell avoid the fate of being turned into maternal figures to the extent that Wendy has been, their roles in the text are still highly restricted. Neither Tinkerbell nor Tiger Lily speak, and only Peter Pan can really understand what Tinkerbell is trying to communicate. Their existence is therefore mediated through him. Wendy, Tiger Lily and Tinkerbell’s relationships with each other revolve around Peter and their interests in him. The only instances in which Tinkerbell and Tiger Lily have any real autonomy are when they are expressing jealousy of Wendy’s closeness to Peter, or when they are attempting to harm her.^[230] Even Mrs. Darling’s status as an adult grants her no more freedom. She too is invested in pleasing and impressing those around her: she is described as ‘the loveliest lady in Bloomsbury’, and she gets ready especially early to go out to dinner, ‘already wearing her evening gown because she knows her children like to see her in it.’^[231]

Dahl is an author often accused of misogyny, and, as Beverley Pennell says, these accusations are complicated by the fact that ‘two of his narrative preferences, for the comic mode and for the fairy-tale genre, have misogynistic conventions.’^[232] However, even allowing for these modes, the absence of female characters in *Danny* does seem quite striking. The characters that interact with Danny and his father, until we meet Mrs. Clipstone, are almost

exclusively male (Doc Spencer, Sergeant Samways, Captain Lancaster, Victor Hazell). Many of the activities that the story revolves around are activities usually construed as male-dominated, like car mechanics. There is little mention of Danny's mother, and when she is brought up it is in relation to her usefulness or how resourceful she was. At one point, Danny's father says to him, 'Did you know she used to make all my clothes herself, Danny? Everything I wore.'^[233] It is mentioned earlier in the text that when he goes out poaching, he is wearing a navy blue jumper: 'Black was even better, he said. But he didn't have a black one and navy-blue was next best.'^[234] This suggests a lack of clothing, a lack of means for acquiring clothing, a lack that could have been filled by the presence of Danny's mother. In both texts, womanhood is constructed in terms of domesticity, as a role that facilitates the adventuring and exploring that boys can participate. Femininity is intrinsically linked with maturity, whereas masculinity is linked with immaturity and childishness.

Never Land and Victor Hazell's forest then, are sites not fully accessible for girls. They both offer the potential for complete subversion of the patriarchal family unit and societal structures. It seems as if, in these realms where the divide between children and adults has begun to dissolve, and where lawlessness, piracy, adventuring, stealing, even sword-fighting and flying are all possible, even normal, day to day reality is being mocked. Reality, compared to these exciting spaces, is dull and uninteresting. Barrie and Dahl seem to be attempting to subvert the regular, adult world, and to a certain extent they achieve this. However, when we examine the gender construction present in these alternative realities, we can see, as Shipley puts it, that the authors in fact reflect elements of 'the reality they claim is pretend'.^[235] They fail to subvert patriarchal society.

The Function of Children's Literature

However, it must be acknowledged that these stories are extremely popular. Barrie and Dahl are two of the most celebrated

children's writers of all time, and these texts have, to an extent, become part of our cultural consciousness. This raises the question of what we should expect, in terms of deconstructing gender boundaries, or subverting patriarchy, from children's literature. Ann Alston has pointed out that families are a key part of the framework of a hegemonic society, and that children's literature often 'complements this as it functions as a means of disseminating the ideology of family'.^[236] *Peter Pan* and *Danny* seem to be particularly complex examples of this tendency. They create spaces that are subversive in a multitude of ways, that create their own rules in such a way that they could inspire or shape a new reality. These could also so easily have demonstrated subversion of gender constructions, but neither text seems willing to do so. In *Peter Pan*, before Peter has brought them away to Never Land, Wendy asks why none of the other children there are girls. Peter explains that the lost boys are all little boys who fell out of their prams as babies, but girls 'are much too clever to fall out of their prams'.^[237] This suggests that Barrie, and by extension his characters, believe that gender is something innate, and that there are certain features unique to each gender that are present from birth and that are set and unchanging. Jacqueline Rose has explored the idea of 'preservation' in children's literature. Children's literature 'preserves' and regulates childhood just as it preserves and saves earlier forms of writing such as fairy tales and myths.^[238] Fiction becomes an essential part of the educational project for children, mirroring in form the ideal progress of the child's development: 'the implication is that one thing leads unequivocally to another – in the story and in the child who is reading it'.^[239] Patriarchal familial norms therefore seem also to be preserved as part of this educational project, as an element in a process of apparently subverting but, in fact, maintaining the 'realist' norms of society. Peter tells Tinkerbell that she cannot be his fairy 'because I am a gentleman and you are a lady'.^[240] To him, capable of flying, of remaining eternally young, of fighting pirates, of making the stars above Never Land shine brighter, this is an unbridgeable gap. There is no sense here of

gender as performative; in these ways, gender in these texts is essential and innate.

Conclusion

Peter Pan and *Danny* each offer us intriguing depictions of parent-child relationships, and the ideas about gender construction and performance that arise from these relationships are complex. Paternal figures are depicted as hapless, child-like or even threatening, so maternal figures are in turn exalted, to the extent that all female characters feel obliged to take on a maternal role to some degree. Both texts offer us spaces in which these constructions of gender could have been subverted, or at least shown to be performative. In Never Land and in Victor Hazell's forest, the boundaries between children and adults are dissolved, and there is a sense of lawlessness that is completely separated from reality in each text. So much about home and other societal structures are challenged in these spaces. However, neither text seems willing to extend this revolutionary vision to the subversion of gender roles, instead consistently linking women and girls to the domestic sphere.

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- [187] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 25.
- [188] Connell, *Masculinities*, p. 72/73.
- [189] Connell, *Masculinities*, p. 77.
- [190] Barrie, *Peter Pan or the Boy Who Would Not Grow Up*, Act V, Scene 2.
- [191] Dahl, *Danny Champion of the World*, p. 12.
- [192] See Padley, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, p. 281.
- [193] Barrie, *Peter Pan or the Boy Who Would Not Grow Up*, Act IV.
- [194] Barrie, *Peter Pan or the Boy Who Would Not Grow Up*, Act V, Scene 2.
- [195] Barrie, *Peter Pan Or the Boy Who Did Not Grow Up*, Act V, Scene 2.
- [196] Padley, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, p. 280.
- [197] Barrie, *Peter Pan Or the Boy Who Did Not Grow Up*, Act II.
- [198] Dahl, *Danny Champion of the World*, p. 2.
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- [206] Alston, *The Family in English Children's Literature*, p. 44.
- [207] Barrie, *Peter Pan Or the Boy Who Did Not Grow Up*, Act II.
- [208] Dahl, *Danny Champion of the World*, p. 126.
- [209] Dahl, *Danny Champion of the World*, p. 201.
- [210] Alston, *The Family in English Children's Literature*, p. 80.
- [211] Padely, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, p. 274.
- [212] Barrie, *Peter Pan Or the Boy Who Did Not Grow Up*, Act III.
- [213] Barrie, *Peter Pan Or the Boy Who Did Not Grow Up*, Act V, Scene 1.
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- [225] Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan*, p. 9.
- [226] Alston, *The Family in English Children's Literature*, p. 78.
- [227] Alston, *The Family in English Children's Literature*, p. 82.
- [228] Barrie, *Peter Pan Or the Boy Who Did Not Grow Up*, Act IV.
- [229] See Shipley, *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, p. 145.
- [230] Shipley, *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, p. 157.
- [231] Barrie, *Peter Pan Or the Boy Who Did Not Grow Up*, Act I.
- [232] Pennell, *Roald Dahl*, p. 104.
- [233] Dahl, *Danny Champion of the World*, p. 126.
- [234] Dahl, *Danny Champion of the World*, p. 52.
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- [237] Barrie, *Peter Pan Or the Boy Who Did Not Grow Up*, Act I.
- [238] Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan*, p. 60.
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