

The story of Peter Pan has long been one to capture the spirit of adventure in little boys and girls alike. However, the original play—*Peter Pan, or the Boy who Would Not Grow Up* by J. M. Barrie—may not have attempted to appeal to both genders in an equal way. In fact, in his representation of ‘perfect’ motherhood, Barrie unwittingly demonstrates the shackles of expectation that society places on girls from the very day of their birth, not only depriving women of their agency but keeping men locked in a perpetual state of childhood.

Gender plays a significant role in *Peter Pan* from the story’s very beginning, with John expressing great dissatisfaction at the idea of having a daughter instead of a son. This underlines the basis of gender inequality at the time of the play’s creation, 1904, which is that girls were widely considered to be worth less than boys, regardless of their individual demeanors.

Later, when Peter arrives and tells Wendy, “One girl is more use than twenty boys” (200), it’s no wonder she takes it as a compliment. Upon further analysis, however, it’s clear that rather than praising women’s worth, Peter is only quantifying their usefulness, almost assigning them a monetary value. What he sees useful in Wendy is not any individual qualities of hers but her ability to act as a maternal figure for the Lost Boys, as well as the tasks she’d be able to perform for them, such as reading stories, darning clothes, and tucking them in at night. In all that they expect of her, it’s almost as if they’re not looking for a mother so much as a servant.

When Peter is trying to convince Wendy to come to Neverland he tells her, “I’ll make you come” (204), in an immediate attempt to take the choice away from her, and thus strip her of her agency. When that doesn’t work, he changes tactics, attempting to entice her there by saying, “How we should all *respect* you” (204), but in truth that respect serves only as a bait. Wendy, however, longing to feel worth after John makes her aware—for perhaps the first time—that girls are beneath boys, wants nothing more than validation, and thus agrees to come to Neverland.

Once there, the ‘adventure’ Wendy is allowed to take part in is not exploring or pirate fighting like her brothers, but acting the part of the adult women. Like the other two female characters in Neverland—Tinker Bell and Tiger Lily—she yearns for Peter’s romantic affections, yet he cannot fathom that she wants to be any more than his mother. In desiring his love, the three girls in Neverland struggle for any sort of recognition of their own needs and emotional value, but in Peter’s everlasting immaturity he cannot give them that. In a way, this mocks the common practice in the Edwardian Era of men marrying ‘domesticated’ women for the sole purpose of being cared for and slaved over by them, blurring the line between a man’s romantic partner and his mother. In always having a maternal figure in their lives, men are kept in a perpetual state of childlike helplessness, as demonstrated by Mr. Darling not being able to tie his own tie. Additionally, the fit Mr. Darling throws over Nana showcases how, without independence, men never reach full emotional maturity, yet—ironically—are still given full control over the household and all its inhabitants, often with destructive consequences.

But despite how men are limited by their gender roles, women are undoubtedly dealt the blunt of the damage. In some ways—especially during the battle scene on Captain Hook’s ship—Wendy appears to play-act all three stages of a women’s life: childhood, sexual maturity, and motherhood. Through her cries for Peter’s help, she plays the role of the ‘damsel in distress,’ typically the romantic interest of the hero who saves her. However, her competence and compassion—such as when she convinces the pirates to repent—places her in the role of mother again, destined only to support the men in her life. The eagerness in which Wendy performs these roles demonstrates her true childish nature, and it is through this performance that the wildly divergent expectations of women all come to a head. Like a child, Wendy is expected to be naïve and innocent, and like a mother, docile, domesticated, and self-sacrificing. Yet, this is

paradoxical, as to get to this stage of motherhood, women *must* shed their innocence and become sexualized, though society often considers their sexualities dirty and shameful. Therefore, women must have desires but never show them, and be simultaneously too childlike to handle power and too mature not to answer to their husband's every beck and call. The pressure placed on women to be what society wants them to be is not only unbearable, but entirely unrealistic.

During the scene where Peter is trying to find the Lost Boys their new mothers, it's clear that Wendy isn't the only one who suffers from these strict expectations. Though the boys all want mothers, they refuse to accept anybody less than perfect, allowing only the prettiest women to be candidates—demonstrative of how a woman's value depends on her appearance— and declaring them “not true mothers” (266) for even the slightest mistakes or shows of individuality. Even Wendy assists in this, showcasing how girls are often taught to believe in and support their own oppression. She is so self-sacrificing that she very nearly sacrifices her own childhood in order to allow Peter to forever live in his, and even when she promises to visit him it's to do ‘spring cleaning,’ not because of any emotional connection they have with each other.

Looking at the play from this lens, it's clear that there isn't quite so much difference between the real world and Neverland after all. In both, men are allowed to exist in an emotional state of childhood forever, and women are expected to live their lives in sacrifice to these men no matter what their age. In the end, Wendy's return to her mother represents her own inability to escape the grips of womanhood, and Peter's refusal to leave Neverland represents his inability to ever grow up. Both situations are closer to a nightmare than a fantasy, and all because the strict gender expectations of Edwardian society strip children of their agency, depriving them of any control over their own futures. A domestic life is expected of all of them, and their only chance at happiness is to convince themselves that it's the life they want.