

# “Children Are Gay and Innocent and Heartless”: Neverland and Nationalism

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## 1

Peter Pan (the title character of J. M. Barrie’s literary work, *Peter Pan*) appeared in the early twentieth century in Great Britain. *Peter Pan or the Boy Who Wouldn’t Grow Up* was performed for the first time in London in 1904. Since its first performance, *Peter Pan* has been highly popular among young people. The narrative version, entitled *Peter and Wendy*, was then released in 1911, and the Peter Pan statue was erected in Kensington Gardens in 1912. *Peter Pan* went on to become even more popular around the world as a result of Walt Disney’s animated film version, *Peter Pan* (1953).<sup>1</sup>

Martin Green establishes a new image of *Peter Pan* as an adventure story for boys. He contributes to *Peter Pan*’s inclusion in the adventure genre in English children’s literature. He succeeds in disclosing a close connection between *Peter Pan* and British imperial expansionism. Yet, he places a particular emphasis on white supremacy, or specifically, imperialism, as a non-historical category. As a result, he overlooks socio-cultural contexts in Great Britain. Indeed, in the 1900s, the British Empire was still expanding, but, during this period, Britain was facing the crisis of its fall and decline.

My proposition is that the disruption taking place in the British Isles left its traces in the text of *Peter Pan*. It is important to note that *Peter Pan* functions as an invasion story or a domestic adventure story, so I will rewrite the fantastic and adventurous images of *Peter Pan*. From the British historical point of view, the spirit of decadence prevailed in the public opinion of that time; in other words, the belief that the British Isles may be invaded by aliens. For instance, as Daniel Pick indicates, the discourse surrounding the alien invasion of the British Isles, as evident in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* and H. G. Well’s *Martians*, for example, appeared in the history of English literature.<sup>2</sup> Kelly Boyd similarly observes that “[f]iction in this period was characterized by [...] the domestic adventure,” and “in evidence were detectives [for example, Arthur Conan Doyle’s *Sherlock Holmes*]” (71). Hence, I will show how Captain Hook is depicted as the foreign invader, specifically as a Jew, and is therefore to be excluded from Neverland.

This paper will argue that *Peter Pan* reveals a conflict between the expansion of the British Empire and the maintenance of the British Isles. It is possible to suggest that Neverland represents Great Britain to some degree, while Wendy, John, Michael, and the lost boys merely act within Britain. In this paper, by considering why the children move to Neverland, I reveal that some aspects of *Peter Pan* resist the British Empire.

## 2

My previous papers, “Boys of the Empire” and “Girls of the Empire,” have discussed how the children (John, Michael, the lost boys, and Wendy) in *Peter Pan* cultivate “adventurous manliness” (in the boys’ case) and become the “angel in the house” (in the case of girls) in their positive endeavors to support the British Empire. In the fin de siècle period, the British Empire was suffering from many problems, for example, the deteriorating physicality and mentality of children and the declining imperial consciousness of citizens. Imperialists strengthened the gender differences between boys and girls in the hope that they might become imperial subjects who would successively contribute toward the expansion of the British Empire. According to imperial ideology, boys and girls were obliged to become masculine men and feminine women respectively. *Peter Pan* is said to have been an adventure story for boys and a family story for girls; to be more precise, it is effective in reproducing masculinity and femininity.

In my final opinion, however, *Peter Pan* emphasizes the importance of not only the British Empire but also Great Britain. At first sight, *Peter Pan* seems to end with the scene of grown-up children: Wendy, John, Michael, and the lost boys return from Neverland to England having defeated the pirates. The boys and the girl grow up to be men and a woman:

You may see the twins and Nibs and Curly any day going to an office, each carrying a little bag and an umbrella. Michael is an engine-driver. Slightly married a lady of title, and so he became a lord. You see that judge in a wig coming out at the iron door? That used to be Tootles. The bearded man who doesn’t know any story to tell his children was once John.

Wendy was married in white with a pink sash. [...]

Years rolled on again, and Wendy had a daughter. [...]

She was called Jane [...]. (220)<sup>3</sup>

The scene suggests that the children are now good citizens who support the British Empire. Michael works as “an engine-driver,” which refers to the fact that railways are important for the imperial society.<sup>4</sup> The railway-man is treated respectably, in the same manner as a judge or a man of title. Wendy grows up to be a respectable woman and to give birth to a daughter: she is a good wife and wise mother. In this scene, they appear to have taken advantage of all their experiences in Neverland: it is implied that the ideology of British imperialism fulfills a function of training children to be good subjects that will contribute toward the British Empire’s expansion.

Yet, in *Peter Pan*, the British imperial system is not fully established, as evident in the following sentence from the last paragraph:

When Margaret [Jane’s daughter] grows up she will have a daughter, who is to be Peter’s mother in turn; and thus it will go on, so long as children are gay and innocent and heartless. (226)

Repetition is important in the sentence. This repetition of girls (Wendy, Jane, and Margaret) emphasizes the vital role women play in maintaining the British Isles, differently from expanding the British Empire.<sup>5</sup> The repetition emphasizes the importance of the girls as the chief British citizens. Wendy's daughter, Jane, is “a common grown-up, with a daughter” (226), which results from her play in Neverland, as in Wendy's case. Jane must also have gained some useful experiences with Peter Pan and new lost boys. The main imperial subjects are also to transitioning from young boys to young girls. As previously stated in my paper “Boys of the Empire,” the idea of boys as subjects lies in the fact they were expected to acquire imperial territory. Here, such boys are excluded from the literary text. The repetition in reference to girls signals a new aim: to restrain the expansion of the British Empire or, in other words, to advance the maintenance of the British Isles. In this way, maintaining the British Isles through the supportive power of girls, rather than through the expansion by boys is important in the ending of *Peter Pan*.

In addition, it is significant that, in maintaining the British Isles, children are described as “heartless” in the last sentence. Historically, the British Empire was symbolized by the old lady, as previously remarked in my paper “Girls of the Empire.” Imperialists reproduced this image of womankind for the purpose of acquiring the new imperial territory. In *Peter Pan*, the symbol of the British Empire is Mrs. Darling.<sup>6</sup> In the end, she is excluded from the text. Her exclusion appears in the same paragraph as Jane's birth: “She was called Jane, and always had an odd inquiring look, as if from the moment she arrived on the mainland she wanted to ask questions. [...] Mrs Darling was now dead and forgotten” (220-21). First, in the opening scene, she is abandoned by her own children (Wendy, John, and Michael), who can do so easily, because such children are “heartless.”

At first glance, *Peter Pan* is thus used to strengthen gender differences between boys and girls in the way that best represents the interests of the British Empire, in terms of continued expansion. Indeed, *Peter Pan* disrupts the perceived notions of gender difference through repetition of girls' role and emphasis on children's heartlessness. Instead, *Peter Pan* shows that the new image of girls functions to maintain the British Isles.

### 3

In *Peter Pan*, Neverland is set in a timeless world, which is indicative of the fact that it is not necessary for the British Empire to expand its territory. Importantly, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Great Britain was in a state of decline.<sup>7</sup> A discourse of degeneration prevailed in British society, where the increasing number of immigrants was becoming a social problem. People were fearful that immigrants may invade Britain. In reality, at that time, Germany and America had rapidly been promoting economic growth and military power. In this way, almost all of the British people (including nationalists and imperialists) feared that their country might fall into the power of enemies.

In the timeless world of Neverland, boys do not grow up, which metaphorically implies that the British Empire does not need to develop. Peter Pan in particular, the eternal boy, fulfills a vital role: he hovers between two (real and unreal) worlds, as a kind of nomad. His aim is to select a girl fit to live in Neverland and to takes to his land. He never chooses an old “lady” or a “bad” girl (for example, Mrs. Darling and Liza, respectively); he only ever chooses a “good” girl, namely Wendy.

He expects her not to be a mother but a mother-like woman: “What we need is just a nice motherly person” (132). He does not want her to become a real mother, for he discards the old image of the mother (for instance, Queen Victoria), which is associated with the British Empire. Instead, he adopts the notion of a “motherly person” as a new symbol of Great Britain. Peter is already an eternal boy, and the boys never grow up in Neverland. This eternality of Neverland represents the fact that the British Empire no longer needs to be expanded; in other words, Great Britain will last forever.

Moreover, the notion of eternal girlhood is important in *Peter Pan*. The eternality of girlhood is related to the centrality and recurrence girls in the novel. Both the transposition from Mrs. Darling to Wendy in the opening scene and the Wendy-Jane-Margaret repetition at the end imply that the existing imperial system must fundamentally reform. Clearly, the girls of *Peter Pan*, as well as the boys, play the key role from the Great British perspective, which is also suggested in the title of this literary text, *Peter and Wendy* (the narrative version of *Peter Pan*).

Wendy, who behaves herself in such a way, hesitates to become the mother of redskins in Neverland. Her hesitation also has a close relation to anti-imperialism: “Secretly Wendy sympathized with them [redskins] [...]. [...] Her private opinion was that the redskins should not call her a squaw” (157-58). The boys’ behavior in Neverland exhibits a lack of concern for redskins, which results in their suppression: “They called Peter the Great White Father [...]” (157). The redskins, consequently, call Wendy Peter’s wife, namely the mother, whereas she wavers about the name they give her. Her moral scruples are contradictory to the imperial expansion of territory. She is expected to become not an imperial mother but an English motherly person.

#### 4

There is a clear reason for Neverland to represent Great Britain. The reason is that Captain James Hook has a look of racial otherness. Hook is depicted as a Jewish person in particular. The remaining pirates are also described as alien people. All the pirates probably represent illegal immigrants to Britain. Hook is the extremely undesirable alien. Deliberation on the detailed physical description of Hook is necessary in order to understand how the perception of Neverland differs from the British imperial colony.<sup>8</sup>

London, in the period from the 1880s to the 1910s, was a highly overpopulated city. The overpopulation-induced degeneration of the city, for example, with environmental pollution and housing shortages, was caused by not only the movement of hopeful young people from the country but also the arrival unlawful immigrants from foreign countries.<sup>9</sup> Importantly, at this time in Britain, the horror of Jewish immigration was gradually increasing. *The Jews State* by Theodor Herzl, for instance, was published in London in 1896 (a book considered to be the origin of the Zionist movement.) In this book, Herzl states, “[t]he Jewish Company is partly modeled on the lines of a great trading association company,” and “[i]ts principal center will be London” (31). There was a growing movement in support of the expulsion of Jews in London. The Aliens Act was thus enforced immediately in 1905 in order that Britain might restrict its intake of Jewish immigrants.<sup>10</sup>

Interestingly, Wendy labels the group of pirates as unclean pigs, which is reminiscent of a

London ghetto: “No words of mine can tell you how Wendy despised those pirates. [...] [A]ll that she saw was that the ship had not been scrubbed for years. There was not a port-hole on the grimy glass of which you might not have written with your finger, ‘Dirty pig’; and she had already written it on several” (192).<sup>11</sup> Moreover, she is to purchase Mr. Darling’s house cum keen coupon: “It was Jane’s nursery now, for her father had bought it at the three per cents from Wendy’s father [...]” (221). Her purchase of the house with low interest is concerned with both the rise of house rent and the negative reputation of Jewish landlords.<sup>12</sup>

In light of this, how does *Peter Pan* depict Hook? His appearance is described as follows:

In the midst of them [pirates], the blackest and largest jewel in that dark setting, reclined James Hook, or, as he wrote himself, Jas. Hook [...]. [...] In person he was cadaverous and blackavised, [...] which at a little distance looked like black candles [...]. (114-15)

Characteristically, he has a black, dead, and diseased complexion. He seems to be depressive and manic, in a word, hysteric:

His eyes were [...] of a profound melancholy, save when he was plunging his hook into you, at which time two red spots appeared in them and lit them up horribly. (115)

According to Sander Gilman’s *The Jew’s Body*, “[t]he pathognomonic sign of the Jew is written on the skin” and “all of the forms of disease are linked in a common symptom.” Gilman goes on to say, “[i]t should come as no surprise in this long chain of cultural-medical associations that the blackening of the skin was also reported, in the fin de siècle, as a sign of hysteria” (101). Gilman also describes how “at the end of the nineteenth century the idea of seeing the hysteric was closely bound to the idea of seeing the Jew.” Gilman concludes as follows: “[I]f the visual representation of the hysteric [...] was the image of the female, its subtext was that feminized males, such as Jews, were also hysterics, and they too could be ‘seen.’ The face of the Jew was as much a sign of the pathological as was the face of the hysteric” (63).<sup>13</sup> These traits would be closely related with Hook’s feminine manner and voice: “[I]f I [Hook] was a mother I would pray to have my children born with this [hook] instead of that [normal hand]” (119); “‘So, my beauty,’ said Hook, as if he spoke in syrup” (192).

With regard to Jewish persons, William M. Thackeray describes their features as “[r]inglets glossy, and curly, and jetty” and “haughty noses bending like beaks of eagles” (18). Robert Burton, also, writes that the “goggle eyes amongst the Jews” are inherited “with all the rest of their conditions and infirmities” (88). Hook, in *Peter Pan*, has his hair “dressed in long curls” (115) and “instead of a right hand he had the iron hook” (114) and “undoubtedly the grimmest part of him was his iron claw” (115). Moreover, it seems as if he has a hooked nose and protruding eyes (Fig. 1).<sup>14</sup>



Fig. 1. Francis Donkin Bedford, “This Man is Mine” from J. M. Barrie, *Peter and Wendy* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1911) [Between pages 224-225].

Hook is therefore characteristic of a Jewish person in that has a neurotic temperament and uses an artificial hand—namely, a mentally and physically handicapped person—and has curly hair, a hooked nose, and protruding eyes.

Hook is also suggestive of “Jack the Ripper.” The reason for this comparison is that Tinker Bell, a sexual woman, is almost killed by Hook. As for Jack the Ripper, Gilman explains, “[t]he image of the Jews as sexually different, the Other even in the killing of the Other, led to the arrest of John Pizer, ‘Leather Apron,’ a Polish-Jewish shoemaker” (113). From the normative perspective of the British middle class, it was quite natural to place Jews and prostitutes in the same category, as both were considered to be great dangers to their economy and sexuality (Gilman 120). The aforementioned facts would thus imply that the Neverland is in some ways imagined as the blighted

slum or the Jewish community in London: “The Neverland is [...] an island [...] with [...] savages and lonely lairs, and gnomes who are mostly tailors, and caves through which a river runs [...] and a hut fast going to decay, and one very small old lady with a hooked nose” (73). As from Hook, he has different blood from the others. The blood, in general, is the proper identification of the body: “A man of indomitable courage, it was said of him that the only thing he shied at was the sight of his own blood, which was thick and of an unusual colour” (115). He also gives a false name, with his real name kept secret from others: “Hook was not his true name. To reveal who he really was would even at this date set the country in a blaze [...]” (188).

There is something in Hook’s appearance that recalls Jack the Ripper. Hook, as remarked above, has a hook instead of his right hand. He has a cadaverous face, has almost killed the sexualized female figure, and has black skin. Gilman explores this idea further: “[T]he color of the Jew’s skin, the blackness, of the Jew, was spoken of as if it was a sign of syphilis. Like the leper, Jews bear their diseased sexuality on their skin. Jews=lepers=syphilitics=prostitutes=blacks. This chain of association presents the ultimate rationale for the Jewish Jack the Ripper” (127). Hook’s face and form thus evoke the fresh and visual image of the Jewish body, which can also be compared to Jack the Ripper. Hook is a socially marginalized figure. He, together with the pirates, is just about to invade Neverland, in which his comrades seek to be based, because they are wanderers who do not have their own country or nation. Hook and his comrades come to assemble in Neverland from the four corners of the world.

## 5

I have tried to show that Neverland in *Peter Pan* represents the British Isles. *Peter Pan* reveals resistance to British imperial expansionism. Hence, it is questionable whether or not *Peter Pan* functions to support the expansion of the British Empire. This doubt can be detected through intensively reading into the full significance of both the continued repetition of Wendy’s offspring and the total exclusion of Hook. Traces of anti-imperialism, or more specifically, nationalism, can be detected in spite of the apparent imperialism shown in the ending.

## Notes

- 1 For further information about Barrie and his *Peter Pan* works, see Birkin.
- 2 With regard to the invasion story in this period, see Pick, especially chapter 10, and also Hynes.
- 3 In this paper, the narrative version of *Peter Pan*, *Peter and Wendy* (1911), is mainly used in J. M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan* works. The standard text is *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens and Peter and Wendy* (Oxford UP).
- 4 With regard to railway-imperialism relations, see Richards and Mackenzie, and also Freeman.
- 5 Sheila A. Egoff argues that *Peter Pan* “extols the joy of imagining at any age” (91-92). She considers this repetition of girls to be the revivification of childhood dream: “This revivification of such dreams in succeeding generations-signals Wendy’s embrace of them not only as a child, but also as an adult” (91).
- 6 Interestingly, Mrs. Darling likes parties and jewelry (for instance, necklace and bracelet), and is thus a female consumer. For more information on female consumption culture in the Edwardian era, see Rappaport, especially chapter 6.

- 7 With regard to the discourse of national degeneration within Britain at that time, see Greenslade, and also Rose. Similarly, for the British decline in national strength, see Arrighi.
- 8 Hook would stand for an Eastern Jew in particular. The Western Jews, for example Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud, clearly differentiated themselves from the Eastern Jews. The Jews were divided into two groups (Gilman *The Jew's Body* 62-63, 100-1). As to the Western Jews, see also Gilman's *Smart Jews*. For detailed information on Jews in England during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see, for example, Feldman. Incidentally, with regard to Hook's character, see also Stewart, who suggests his identity could have a close connection with the Stuarts.
- 9 Walter Besant, in *East London* (1901), observes that one cause of the overpopulated city lies in the movement of young people from the country to cities. Arnold White, in *The Problems of a Great City* (1886), states that the arrival of Jewish immigrants causes city congestion.
- 10 For further information about both immigration into Britain and the Aliens Act 1905, see Winder, and also Kelves.
- 11 On the close relation between Jews and the pig, see, for example, Fabre-Vassas.
- 12 As for the housing problem in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries London, see Feldman and Jones, and also Englander.
- 13 The notion of male Jews in hysteria probably has its root in the city life: "It is the struggle for life in the city which causes the madness of the male Jew [...]." As Gilman states, "[t]he reason for this inability to cope with the stresses of modern life lies in 'hereditary influences,' i.e., in their being Jews" (63-4).
- 14 In addition, Hook is represented as the following figure in the film *Peter Pan* by Walt Disney (Fig. 2). On this note, in Steven Spielberg's film, *Hook* (1991), Dustin Hoffman, a Jewish-American actor, plays Hook.



Fig. 2. Captain Hook from *Peter Pan* (Walt Disney, 1953).

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In this paper, the children’s (Wendy, John, and Michael) journey to Neverland in *Peter Pan* is revealed to be closely linked to the maintenance of the British Isles, in the sense that they contribute toward maintaining Great Britain and constructing the new British subjects or subjectivity. Although they ultimately affirm imperialism, together with the lost boys, the representation of the children questions the imperialist notion of expansionism. This literary text also leaves the reader with the possibility of dismantling the British Empire, particularly in letting Wendy’s offspring repeatedly experience Neverland’s way of life and in empowering the children to exclude the immigrant group, the pirates, from its land.