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Peter Pan and Trainspotting:

Escaping adulthood

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The two Scottish novels *Trainspotting* (1993) by Irvine Welsh and *Peter Pan* (1911) by James Matthew Barrie are respectively works of punk-postmodern fiction and a children's fairytale. Immediately the novels therefore distinguish themselves from each other in terms of both genre and content. However, a thematic and sociological survey of these two very different works proves itself pertinent since the novels' protagonists, Mark Renton and Peter Pan, share one feature in particular: a mutual reluctance to enter adulthood and instead remain without attachment to society. A comparative investigation of *Trainspotting* and *Peter Pan* in relation to escaped adulthood is then both relevant and important since the novels depict how the main characters' individual desires showcase a lack of societal flexibility when the need of the few take precedence over the need of the many.

Literary exploration of an area such as individualism, which leads to a sub-cultural individualism, is possible and highly interesting when considering the texts

Peter Pan and *Trainspotting*, works of fantasy and postmodern realism. In this way, literature can essentially function as a tool which authors such as Welsh and Barrie use as a plat-form to unfold the verisimilitude and diversity of life, making the reader consider this reality in terms of individualism and sub-cultural lifestyles.

Peter Pan

Turning our attention to the novels' two main characters it becomes clear, however different the novels are, that Peter and Mark share one feature in particular: they both want to remain a boy and escape the world of ordinary adulthood. This presents the thematic oppositional

pair: boyhood/adulthood. The desire to literally remain a boy is most obvious in Peter: "I don't want ever to be a man" (...). "I want always to be a little boy and to have fun".¹ Peter is the incarnation of the boy who did not want to grow up, and due to the novel's fantastic elements, he never does. He is the myth of the eternal boy – never aging – the *puer aeternus*.² Incidentally overhearing his parents discussing his future and eventually being forgotten by them, Peter decides to fly away to become the eternal boy.³ Together with the Lost Boys (children forgotten by either their nurses or parents) Peter creates a new life for himself in the marvellous yet equally dangerous world of Neverland – in this way escaping the pressures from the adult Edwardian society. Initially, the 'Never' states itself as a point of no return towards an ordinary life, growing naturally into maturity.⁴ Adulthood is for Peter the ultimate trap, depriving him of his favourite occupation – being able to play all the time. In line with this, boyhood equals innocence, gaiety, heartlessness, and ultimate fun. Adulthood, on the other hand, equals process, maturity, sexual awareness, and last but not least responsibility, which all in all equates for Peter to a repulsive boredom.

Despite indications of Peter's sadness (not to forget bitterness towards his mother)⁵ when the Darlings (Wendy, Michael, and John) and the Lost Boys are leaving Neverland – in this way abandoning the 'Never' in favour of a mature life, as one only stays physically stagnated while being in Neverland – Peter is essentially too fond of his individualistic lifestyle and more importantly himself to consider changing his way of life. This lifestyle contains an egocentric attitude, using the Lost Boys and the Darlings for his purpose of eternal fun – essentially luring them away from their homes, as remarked by Barrie in various comments throughout the novel: 'Of course it was to this that Peter had been luring them'.⁶

At a literary level Peter has to remain the eternal child, so that he for ever can be the hero of the story about the brave little boy who comes to children's nurseries at night to show them a world beyond their imagination. He represents the ultimate great adventure for children and the ticket to a world without limitations. When considering events from a psychological point of view, Peter is possibly in the end a boy who turns to such drastic measures due to the trauma that the closed nursery window and its related rejection must have been, resulting in his choice to remain

the eternal child. He withdraws completely from society into his own radical individualism and that of the world of Neverland – in this manner refusing to subordinate himself to the pressures of adult society.

Mark Renton

Turning our attention to Mark it becomes clear in terms of his withdrawal from society into a heroin addiction that he, like Peter, wants to be free of the rules and responsibilities of his surrounding society. Neither does he possess a job since this would only emphasize societal pressures. Though not at quite as obvious a level as Peter, Mark also demonstrates with his lifestyle his wish to escape adulthood and remain a boy, rather than facing up to the pressures from society. Drugs (along with their own attendant forms of fantasy-inducing escapism) are his primary focus, since he perceives this as the ultimate challenge in life:

Ma problem is, whenever ah sense the possibility, or realise the actuality ay attaining something that ah thought ah wanted, be it girlfriend, job, education, money and so on, it jist seems so dull n sterile, that ah cannae value it any mair. Junk's different though. Ye cannae turn yir back oan it sae easy. It willnae let ye. Trying tae manage a junk problem is the ultimate challenge. It's also a fuckin good kick.⁷

As the quote illustrates, Mark is utterly bored with the adult life provided by contemporary Scottish society. He does not expect anything from life or himself. He proclaims: "ah choose no tae choose life", succumbing to an existence free from all attachments to society because it has nothing to offer him.⁸ It is worthwhile to draw a parallel to Peter here, with his statement: "To die will be an awfully big adventure".⁹ At the surface this connects the characters immensely. But if we look a little deeper into the psychological motivations of the respective characters, we see that where Mark's statement concerns a pessimistic worldview, by contrast, Peter is merely showcasing his dominant feature of gaiety.

To return to Mark, he is living in a punk drug-using subculture together with his mates. Because of his ability to adapt easily to new situations (a job interview or a court hearing), all aspects are being weighed equally against each other in his life. In this way everything loses its significance. At the end of *Trainspotting* Mark steals a pile of money from his friends and flees to Amsterdam, demonstrating how not even his mates hold an

importance to him.¹⁰ There is, as proclaimed by the character Johnny Swan: "Nae friends in this game. Jist associates".¹¹

Ultimately, Mark is living a punk-reality to its extremes by choice. He is demonstrating the hypocrisy of society and its futile attempt to establish meaningful systems, which he views as keeping individuals in the false belief that it is worthwhile living. Throughout the novel Mark is not the eternal physical young boy that Peter is, but the eternal reminder to society that nothing makes a difference. According to Mark, one might as well withdraw into his pessimistic belief in as much individual nullification as possible.

The identities of Mark and Peter

Moving on to a closing comparative analysis concerning Peter and Mark's identities both of them can then be seen to share the same feature in being portrayed as escapists. Neither of them intends to live by the terms which they are given by society – instead they withdraw into their own subcultural lifestyle. They are both living out the belief in their radical individualism – depicting the lack of responsibilities one would find in a child. In extension of such a lifestyle they share a pronounced selfishness, as everlasting play and drugs always will overrule any meaningful relationship, and because of this the two protagonists are essentially singles and outsiders. Mark shares merely a superficial community with his mates, and Peter obtains the company rather than an actual friendship with the Lost Boys in being their leader. Because they are being portrayed as such radical individualistic escapists, they likewise depict a deeply pessimistic worldview. In line with Matt McGuire's argument, the characters thus illustrate a worldview dominated by Charles Darwin's conception of the survival of the fittest, and in both novels the weak are left for exploitation.¹²

Ultimately, this reflects Mark and Peter's identities or character traits in a negative manner due to their unsympathetic behaviour. Mark is the exploiter of friends and family for drugs and money, and Peter of children who can be of use to him in Neverland. Whereas drugs represent the temptation in *Trainspotting*, Peter performs the function of the drugs in *Peter Pan* in terms of representing the ultimate temptation for the Darling children. At a universal level Peter is therefore the incarnation of the universal trickster, drawing a reference to for example Loki in Nordic mythology. The characters are living in worlds without

limitations – the world of unlimited drugs and the world of unlimited play. In both worlds one thus feels capable of anything.

However, a fixed determination of the protagonists' traits as purely negative and unsympathetic is not possible. Despite the pessimistic analysis they nonetheless also reflect a distinct dynamic. Mark illustrates such an overwhelming energy through his complete withdrawal from society that it is impossible not to view it as refreshing. Free from all demands he shows the courage to live his life as he pleases without any concerns for societal norms and expectations from his surroundings. Likewise Peter radiates such energy through the intensity of his eternal youth that it can only be perceived as exhilarating.¹³

The two protagonists predominately reflect what I perceive to be negative characteristics, yet it is important not to forget the constructive, positive elements that co-exist with them. At a universal level Mark and Peter depict such different life choices from those ordinarily available, that they are a constant reminder of something as romantic as to follow one's individual convictions. The two characters thus serve as tools of knowledge. They are bringing to awareness the importance of not losing oneself in the face of a society which stresses the need for perfection, broadcasting desires and standards which easily can become one's own through unconscious media manipulation. By means of their drastic escapism, attention is brought to the negative aspects of society, such as 'anti-individualistic pressures',¹⁴ but also to society's attempts to fix gender roles, as in the case of Wendy already incarnating the role as mother when she is still a young girl. *Trainspotting* and *Peter Pan* directly and indirectly stress the importance to always regard the actions of a society critically. Therefore, in viewing the identities of both Mark and Peter, a fixed negative assessment proves insufficient, since they essentially depict constructive usefulness with their respective statements of lifestyle in terms of following your individualistic belief no matter the cost.

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Notes

- 1 J. M. Barrie, *Peter Pan*, (1911; Wordsworth Edition Limited, 2007) p. 35.
- 2 Peter Hollindale, 'A Hundred Years of Peter Pan' in *Children's Literature in Education* Vol. 36 No. 3 September 2005, p. 199
- 3 Barrie, *Peter Pan*, p. 115.
- 4 Hollindale, 'A Hundred Years of Peter Pan' pp.199–200. (Wood quoted by Hollindale)
- 5 Barrie, *Peter Pan*, p. 115 (pp. 115–20).
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 43
- 7 Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting*, (1993; Vintage, 2004) p. 90.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 188
- 9 Barrie, *Peter Pan*, p. 98
- 10 Welsh, *Trainspotting*, pp. 342–44
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 6
- 12 Matt McGuire, 'Welsh's Novels' in *The Edinburgh Companion to Irvine Welsh* (Edinburgh University Press, 2010) p. 20.
- 13 Hollindale, 'A Hundred Years of Peter Pan', p. 199.
- 14 Berthold Schoene, 'Welsh, drugs and subculture' in *The Edinburgh Companion to Irvine Welsh* (Edinburgh University Press, 2010) p. 67 (McMillan quoted by Schoene)



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