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CREATOR OF PETER PAN: J.M.BARRIE

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ABSTRACT

The early twentieth century denoted the split between 'frocks and frills' drama and serious works, following in the footsteps of many other European countries. In Britain the impact of these continental innovations was delayed by a conservative theatre establishment until the late 1950s and 1960s when they converged with the counter-cultural revolution to transform the nature of English language theatre. The West End, England's Broadway, tended to produce the (Greenblatt 1844) musical comedies and well-made plays, while smaller theatres and Irish venues took a new direction. The new direction was political, satirical, and rebellious. Common themes in the new early 20th century drama were political, reflecting the unease or rebellion of the workers against the state, philosophical, delving into the who and why of human life and existence, and revolutionary, exploring the themes of colonisation and loss of territory. Many plays that are poetically realistic often have unpleasant themes running through them, such as lust between a son and his step-mother or the murder of a baby to "prove" love. These plays used myths as a surrogate for real life in order to allow the audience to live the unpleasant plot without completely connecting to it. The modern drama of ideas rooted in England by Bernard Shaw and cultivated by Galsworthy, Granville Barker, and others had practically no influence upon J. M. (Sir James) Barrie (1860-1937). Like many of his contemporaries he found little that was admirable in twentieth-century standards of life and conduct, but he did not feel called upon to enlist as a fighter in 'the liberative war of humanity'.

The present paper discusses the insignificance of the playwright J. M. (Sir James) Barrie. It throws the light on various aspects of his life. The paper also discusses Barrie's contribution in the societal and cultural field as a dramatist, novelist, journalist, story writer and experimentalist.

Keywords: Story of Peter Pan, Uncle Jim, Barrie and Peter Pan, Meredith's Pick of Men, Guardian of Davies'

I. Introduction

Born on May 9, 1860, in Scotland, J.M. Barrie was a Scottish dramatist, best known for writing 'Peter Pan' in 1904, or 'The Boy Who Would

Never Grow Up'. The son of Scottish weavers, he moved to London to pursue his interest in becoming a playwright. There he met the Llewelyn Davies boys who inspired his masterpiece. Based on Barrie's enchanting characters, Disney created the animated

classic, Peter Pan, in 1953. The fantastical tale of the flying boy who never grew up and his adventures in Neverland with the Darling children very much attracted the audience. His temperament was not of a crusading Bernard Shaw who could with enjoyment raise his ethical battle-axe and split the skulls of fools and rogues. Barrie's only weapons were a faint disarming smile and a dreamy eye. He studied the world around and saw the men and women God had made. He disagreed that they were 'very good'. On the contrary: he believed he could do much better himself. He withdrew himself indoors, put his feet on the fender, and began to create a world of his own, peopled with men and women made to his own pattern. There are no standards of literary judgement applicable to Barrie.

His world is more delightful than the real world, or that his world is unpleasantly sweet and sickly. And since it needs only very small space to write either of those things, fewer books have been written upon Barrie than upon other leading authors of his day. The plots of novels are preposterous (e.g. *Quality Street* and *Alice Sit-by-the-Fire*); his characters incredible (e.g. Valentine Brown and Phoebe Throssel, Matey and Lob, Richardson, Tweeny, Mary Rose); his dialogue sometimes as creaky as a rusty machine. Yet after all the critical tomahawks used upon him Barrie continued to smile his disarming smile. As a dramatist he did nearly all the wrong things. Blithe as Pantaloon, he hit his audiences upon their heads and rode in triumph through their hearts for many years. He is not fit anywhere among early twentieth-century writers. Uninfluenced by any, influencing none, it might be said that he was altogether without significance. But because he was not in the main stream of tendency, because he was 'not of an age', he may impress distant posterity more than he impressed the sour-faced among his own generation.

II. Tragic Childhood

James Matthew Barrie was born in Kirriemuir, Angus, to a conservative Calvinist family. His father David Barrie was a modestly successful weaver. His mother Margaret Ogilvy assumed her deceased mother's household responsibilities at the age of eight. He was a small child and drew

attention to himself with storytelling. When he was 6 years old, Barrie's next-older brother David (his mother's favourite) died the day before his 14th birthday in an ice-skating accident. This left his mother devastated, and Barrie tried to fill David's place in his mother's attentions, even wearing David's clothes and whistling in the manner that he did. One time, Barrie entered her room and heard her say, "Is that you?" "I thought it was the dead boy she was speaking to", wrote Barrie in his biographical account of his mother "*Margaret Ogilvy (1896)*" and I said in a little lonely voice, 'No, it's not him, it's just me.' Barrie's mother found comfort in the fact that her dead son would remain a boy forever, never to grow up and leave her¹. Eventually, Barrie and his mother entertained each other with stories of her brief childhood and books such as '*Robinson Crusoe*', works by fellow Scotsman Walter Scott, and '*The Pilgrim's Progress*'².

Barrie never recovered from the shock he received from a brother's death and its grievous effect on his mother, who dominated his childhood and retained that dominance thereafter. Throughout his life Barrie wished to recapture the happy years before his mother was ill, and he retained a strong childlike quality in his adult personality.

III. Journalist to Story Writer

Following a job advertisement found by his sister in The Scotsman, he worked for a year and a half as a staff journalist on the Nottingham Journal. Back in Kirriemuir, he submitted a piece to the St. James's Gazette, a London newspaper, using his mother's stories about the town where she grew up renamed "Thrums". The editor "liked that Scotch thing" so well that Barrie ended up writing a series of these stories. These stories became the basis for his first novels: *Auld Licht Idylls (1888)*, *A Window in Thrums (1890)*³, and *The Little Minister (1891)*. The stories depicted the "Auld Lichts", a strict religious sect to which his grandfather had once belonged. Modern literary criticism of these early works has been unfavourable, tending to disparage them as sentimental and nostalgic depictions of a parochial Scotland, far from the realities of the industrialised nineteenth century, seen as characteristic of what

became known as the Kailyard School. Despite, or perhaps because of, this, they were popular enough at the time to establish Barrie as a successful writer. Following that success, he published "*Better Dead (1888)*" privately and at his own expense, but it failed to sell.⁴ His two "Tommy" novels, "*Sentimental Tommy (1896)*" and *Tommy and Grizel (1900)*", were about a boy and young man who clings to childish fantasy, with an unhappy ending. The late nineteenth century English novelist George Gissing read the former in November 1896 and wrote that he "thoroughly disliked it"⁵

The account of his early days as a journalist is found under a thin veil of fiction in *When a Man's Single (1888)*, a book which has many touches of Barrie's individual humour. When Barrie met and told stories to the young daughters of the Duke of York in 1930, the future Queen Elizabeth II and Princess Margaret. After meeting him, the 3-year old Princess Margaret announced, "He is my greatest friend and I am his greatest friend".⁶

IV. Barrie as a Novelist and Experimentalist

At the end of the nineteenth century Barrie had a large following as a novelist. He had made a few experiments in play-writing, but with no marked success. His experimental plays "*The Professor's Love Story (1895)*", "*The Little Minister (1897)*" and "*The Wedding Guest (1900)*" show Barrie endeavouring to fit himself to accepted stage conventions, before he began to write in a more personal manner. *Quality Street (1901)* has the atmosphere of Mrs. Gaskell's '*Cranford*' set in the Napoleonic period, its maiden ladies are 'old' (according to the judgement of the time) almost before they are past girlhood, and the pathos of the piece comes from the barbarity of a generation which put its women 'on the shelf' if they did not marry in the earliest twenties or before. The 'lavendered' atmosphere of *Quality Street* holds up of a good deal of pleasantness by that suggestion of yellowing and slow decay which hangs about its dimity souls.

Social reformers in need of a tract might turn *The Admirable Crichton (1903)* to their own uses. It is rarely possible to apply the usual vocabulary of criticism to Barrie. Though this play

has several well-rounded and finished characters, it would be rash to say that any one of them is 'probable'. The illusion of life-likeness given by Barrie to his characters comes, not from their conformity to the human model, but from the fact that they are consistent with Barrie's own imaginative world. In a world of fantasy normal human beings are 'out of the picture'. It is said to swallow the camel which is Barrie's universe, it is absurd to strain at the gnats which are his characters. All that can be seen is that the people within the author's created universe shall look as though they belong there.

Between that time and 1900 he wrote several novels and collections of sketches, as well as a charming biography of his mother *Margaret Ogilvie*. He had practically no 'public life', yet high official distinctions fell upon him: a baronetcy in 1913; the Order of Merit in 1922⁷; the Rectorship of St Andrew's University also in 1922. His address as a rector was a typical piece of Barrieism.⁸

V. Barrie as a Dramatist

At Dumfries, he and his friends spent time in the garden of Moat Brae house, playing pirates "in a sort of Odyssey that was long afterwards to become the play of 'Peter Pan' "⁹. All these dramatists formed a drama club, producing his first play "*Bandelero the Bandit*", which provoked a minor controversy following a scathing moral denunciation from a clergyman on the school's governing board. A quarter of a century later, however, when his novels were out of fashion, he had become probably the most popular dramatist then living.

In two of his later plays, "*Dear Brutus (1917)*" and "*Marc Rose (1920)*", Barrie went further from the world of reality; away to Lob's enchanted Wood of the Second Chance, and Mary's Island. There was always something of the emotional trapeze artiste about Barrie. He often was self-assured above a large bath of warm tears, and unemotional spectators caught their breath for fear he should tumble in. He reacted against this discomfort most skilfully, but the strain of fearful anticipation was trying for the audience. Both *Dear Brutus* and *Mary Rose* impose some such strain, but,

there again, the laws of the Barrie universe apply, not the laws of earth. It revisits the idea of the ageless child and parallel worlds. Other plays include *"The Admirable Crichton (1902)"* and *"What Every Woman Knows (1908)"*. Barrie's last play, *"The Boy David (1936)"*, was a comparative failure in the theatre. This may have been because it departed from the customary Barrie manner, but more probably it was a sign that the author had outlived his own audience.

VI. Cricketer Barrie

After the First World War, Barrie sometimes stayed at Stanway House near the village of Stanway in Gloucestershire. He paid for the pavilion at Stanway cricket ground.¹⁰ In 1887, he founded an amateur cricket team for friends of similarly limited playing ability, and named it the Allahakbarries under the mistaken belief that "Allah akbar" meant "Heaven help us" in Arabic (rather than "God is great").¹¹ Some of the best known British authors from the era played on the team at various times, including H. G. Wells, Rudyard Kipling, Arthur Conan Doyle, P. G. Wodehouse, Jerome K. Jerome, G. K. Chesterton, A. A. Milne, E. W. Hornung, A. E. W. Mason, Walter Raleigh, E. V. Lucas, Maurice Hewlett, Owen Seaman (editor of Punch), Bernard Partridge, George Cecil Ives, George Llewelyn Davies (see below) and the son of Alfred Tennyson. In 1891, Barrie joined the newly-formed Authors Cricket Club and also played for its cricket team, the Authors XI, alongside Doyle, Wodehouse and Milne. The Allahakbarries and the Authors XI continued to exist side-by-side until 1912.¹²

VII. Jim Uncle and the Invention of Peter Pan

The Llewelyn Davies family played an important part in Barrie's literary and personal life, consisting of Arthur, Sylvia and their five sons: George, John (Jack), Peter, Michael and Nicholas (Nico). Barrie became acquainted with the family in 1897, meeting George and Jack (and baby Peter) with their nurse (nanny) Mary Hodgson in London's Kensington Gardens. He entertained the boys regularly with his ability to wiggle his ears and eyebrows, and with his stories. The character of *'Peter Pan'* was invented to entertain George and Jack. Barrie would say, to amuse them, that their

little brother Peter could fly. He claimed that babies were birds before they were born; parents put bars on nursery windows to keep the little ones from flying away. This grew into a tale of a baby boy who did fly away. Arthur Llewelyn Davies died in 1907 followed by Sylvia's death in 1910; "Uncle Jim" became even more involved with the Davies family, providing financial support to them. His income from Peter Pan and other works was easily adequate to provide for their living expenses and education. Sylvia specified her wish for "J. M. B." to be trustee and guardian to the boys, along with her mother Emma, her brother Guy du Maurier and Arthur's brother Compton. It expressed her confidence in Barrie as the boys' caretaker and her wish for "the boys to treat him and their uncles" with absolute confidence and straightforwardness and to talk to him about everything. Barrie unofficially adopted the Davies boys following the deaths of their parents. He suffered bereavements with the boys, losing the two to whom he was closest in their early twenties. George was killed in action in 1915, in the First World War.¹³ Michael, with whom Barrie corresponded daily while at boarding school and university, drowned in 1921, with his friend, Rupert Buxton, at a known danger spot at Sandford Lock near Oxford, one month short of his 21st birthday¹⁴. Some years after Barrie's death, Peter compiled his Morgue from family letters and papers, interpolated with his own informed comments on his family and their relationship with Barrie. Peter died by throwing himself in front of a train shortly after completing the work.

VIII. Magnanimous Barrie

Barrie's third play Walker, London (1892) resulted in him being introduced to a young actress named Mary Ansell. He proposed to her and they were married on 9 July 1894. Barrie bought her a Saint Bernard puppy, who played a part in the novel *"The Little White Bird"*. He used Ansell's given name for many characters in his novels.¹⁵

Beginning in mid-1908, Mary had an affair with Gilbert Cannan, who was twenty years younger than she¹⁶ and an associate of Barrie's in his anti-censorship activities, including a visit together to Black Lake Cottage, known only to the house staff.

When Barrie learned of the affair in July 1909, he demanded that she end it, but she refused. To avoid the scandal of divorce, he offered a legal separation if she would agree not to see Cannan anymore, but she still refused. Barrie sued for divorce on the grounds of infidelity; the divorce was granted in October 1909.¹⁷ Knowing how painful the divorce was for him, some of Barrie's friends wrote to a number of newspaper editors asking them not to publish the story. In the event, only three newspapers did. Barrie continued to support Mary financially even after she married Cannan, by giving her an annual allowance, which was handed over at a private dinner held on her and Barrie's wedding anniversary.

Barrie died of pneumonia at a nursing home in Manchester Street, Marylebone on 19 June 1937.¹⁸ He left the bulk of his estate to his secretary Cynthia Asquith. Before his death, he had given the Copy rights of all 'Peter Pan' works, which included 'The Little White Bird', 'Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens', the play 'Peter Pan', or 'The Boy Who Would Not Grow Up' and the novel 'Peter and Wendy', to the Great Ormond Street Hospital in London which continues to benefit from them. The surviving Llewelyn Davies boys received legacies, and he made provisions for his former wife Mary Ansell to receive an annuity during her lifetime. His will also left £500 to the Bower Free Church in Caithness to mark the memory of Rev James Winter who was to have married his sister in June 1892 but was killed in a fall from his horse in May 1892.

IX. Barrie in Meredithian Sense

The cleavage between the actual world and the Barrie world of fantasy does not, however, disable his plays from providing some critical commentary upon life. To Barrie, one of the most interesting spectacles in the two worlds, his own and this, was the familiar tragi-comic contest between man and woman. 'You meet, now and then, men who have the woman in them without being womanized; they are the pick of men.' In the Meredithian sense Barrie was one of 'the pick of men'.¹⁹ He had womanly insight, and a wish to see life and mankind from the woman's point of view. He was the male egoist's least flattering friend, and

would not pretend to believe that the world is kept on its way by strong, self-reliant males. He drew at least two portraits of such strong, self-reliant men: John Shand "What Every Woman Knows, (1908)" and Harry Sims "The Twelve Pound Look(1913)" and their actual strength is no more than that of over-blown air-balls.

"The Twelve Pound Look" is possibly the best one-act comedy yet written. Barrie was a friend and admirer of George Meredith and in this play he observed several of the principles laid down in Meredith's famous "Essay on Comedy". Except that it has not the rapier-thrusts of wit that Meredith desiderated for ideal comedy, "The Twelve Pound Look" might usefully be appended to the "Essay" as an illustration of the working of the Comic Spirit. Harry Sims, though pompous and ridiculous, is presented without contempt, as Meredith insisted that a truly comic figure should be. Shand and Sims give glimpses of the universal egoist, even as Meredith's Willoughby Pattern gives a glimpse from a different angle. Sir Willoughby is more rarefied and intellectualized than Barrie's two men, and the latter were consequently closer to average humanity, and more useful as corrective agents of male egoism. Barrie, though himself a 'glorious, dazzling success', pleaded through Kate in "The Twelve Pound Look" for the 'poor souls' who had not 'got on' and who therefore retained those humane feelings often endangered by the worship of success and efficiency.

X. Man of Insignificance

Most of Barrie's stage triumphs have been dismissed by critics as marred by ephemeral whimsicalities, but at least six of his plays "Quality Street (1901)", "The Admirable Crichton (1902)", "What Every Woman Knows (1908)", "The Twelve-Pound Look (1910)", "The Will (1913)", and "Dear Brutus (1917)" are of indisputably high quality. Barrie idealized childhood and desexualized femininity but took a disenchanting view of adult life, as reflected in the gentle melancholy of those works. Sometimes he expressed his disenchantment humorously, as in "The Admirable Crichton", in which a butler becomes the king of a desert island, with his former employers as serfs; sometimes

satirically, as in *"The Twelve-Pound Look"*; and sometimes tragically, as in *"Dear Brutus"*, in which nine men and women whose lives have come to grief are given a magical second chance, only to wreck themselves again on the reefs of their own temperaments. The elaborate stage directions in Barrie's plays are sometimes more rewarding than their dialogue itself. Barrie proved himself a master of stage effects and of the delineation of character, but the sentimental and whimsical elements in his work have discouraged frequent revivals.

Prurient speculation over the nature of Barrie's relationship with the Davies children persisted into the 21st century. The suggestion of impropriety was sometimes supported by admittedly odd excerpts from *"The Little White Bird"*, including one that featured a man plotting to turn a young boy against his mother in order to gain exclusive access to his affections. However, Barrie's personal associates and most scholars concluded that, although unconventional and perhaps somewhat unhealthy, his attachment to the boys was devoid of any sexual component. Nicholas, the youngest Davies, explicitly addressed the rumours, contending that Barrie was "an innocent" and likely asexual.

After *"Peter Pan"*, Barrie continued writing, mostly plays aimed at adults. Several of his later works had a dark element to them. *'The Twelve-Pound Look (1910)'* offers a glimpse inside an unhappy marriage and *'Half an Hour (1913)'* follows a woman who plans on leaving her husband for another man, but she decides she must stay when her husband severely injured in a bus accident. His last major play, *"Mary Rose (1920)"*, centred on a son visited by his mother's ghost.

The plays *'Peter Pan'* or, *'The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up'* added a new character to the mythology of the English-speaking world in the figure of *"Peter Pan"*, the eternal boy.²⁰ Though the popular conception of the character is that of a charmingly impish figure, bent more on adventure and escaping the tedium of adulthood than anything truly sinister, the Peter of the play and books is anarchical, selfish, and murderous. For example, he kills his compatriots *"the Lost Boys"* when they show

signs of maturing. Notes by Barrie indicate that Peter was in fact intended to be the true villain of the story.

XI. Conclusion

Most of the early works of J.M. Barrie are marked by quaint Scottish dialect, whimsical humour and comic clowning, pathos, and sentimentality. Though as a novelist in the nineteenth century he led the Kailyard School 'a group of writers who dealt with Scottish peasant life', he did not exercise particular 'influence' upon dramatists, except possibly upon A. A. Milne, who protested, however, against the tendency to regard him as steeped in the Barriesque. Though his greatest success *"Peter Pan (1904)"* is still a financially valuable property, its hearty juvenilism is wearing thin, and fairies are due for cold storage. Barrie was stigmatized as an escapist and as a propagator of infantilism. Neither charge was wholly unjustified, but both were counterbalanced by the good that was in him, by the joy he had given to countless children and adults, by his contribution to human understanding, and by his skill in a chosen craft.

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