

## **At the Heart of Magic**

### **Exploring Peter Pan**

**Bob Barton – October 2010**

Peter Pan is a wonderful and complex fantasy which includes many elements common to myth and folklore, particularly those with northern traditions about magical creatures and forces that battle each other to control destiny. It deals with such important themes as:

- anxiety about growing up
- choices and consequences
- dream fulfillment of intense but contradictory wishes
- the relentlessness of time

The story is told by a storyteller (the author himself) through dialogue and partly by means of stage directions. Indeed, many of the play's conceits can only be understood if the storyteller's commentary can be heard in parallel with the voices of the characters.

Teachers can use this story to discuss numerous issues, which arise in the play. For example:

- Is Mrs. Darling really a submissive, worshipping wife?
- Is the major battle Peter fights in the story confined only to defeating Captain Hook? If not, what is it?
- Characters in Peter Pan often tell each other stories. Why do you think the telling of stories is so important in the play?
- Is Neverland a kind of youthful Valhalla (where one may experience exciting adventures while remaining perfectly safe, be grown up at once and never grow up, sleep as long as you like, have freedom from adult authority) or is it darker and more dangerous than it appears?
- Peter underestimates the depth and scope of Wendy's female identity in the play. Is she merely his "maternal memsahib"? What do you think?
- In Peter Pan, Barrie parodied the adventure story conventions (the exotic island of Neverland, blood thirsty pirates, the deadly potential of nature). At the end of adventure stories, conflicts have been solved and order restored. Is this true for Peter Pan as well?

- The character, Peter Pan, is usually described as a boy who has run away from home to avoid growing up. Is that all he is or is there more?

### **Learning Aims:**

- to use drama to deepen understanding and encourage responses to themes and issues dealt with in Peter Pan
- to explore the geographical setting of the story through soundscape and improvisation
- to investigate complexities of characterization and motivation
- to interpret dramatic scenes through reading aloud and performance and to stimulate discussion of alternate interpretations

### **Key Teaching Approaches:**

- reading aloud and re-reading
- role play
- performing poetry
- soundscaping
- movement
- tableau
- storytelling

### **Resources:**

Peter Pan by J.M.Barrie  
(in a new version by John Caird & Trevor Nunn Dramatists) - Play Service Inc. 1983

Peter Pan by J.M. Barrie  
(introduced by Tony DiTerlizzi) - Puffin Classics 2008

Peter Pan In Scarlett Geraldine McCaughrean – Oxford 2006

The Lost Boys Andrew Birkin – Constable 1979

Peter Pan In And Out Of Time Donna White & C. Anita Tarr – Scarecrow Press 2006

A Life of J.M. Barrie Lisa Chaney – Hutchinson 2006

The Case of Peter Pan Jacqueline Rose – MacMillan 1984

## The Peter Pan Formula

Barrie employs the hero-quest structure in his adventure and invokes much fantasy and fairytale literature.

According to Joseph Campbell such hero-quest/adventure structures share a circular shape beginning with the call to adventure, the crossing of a threshold marking the transition into the adventure, a series of tests of skill and courage and finally a crisis at the bottom of the circle which marks the beginning of the journey upward.

- |                          |  |
|--------------------------|--|
| ▪ The Call to Adventure  | The Stolen Child .... Yeats <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Scripting Stanzas</li><li>• Soundscaping</li></ul>           |
| ▪ Crossing the Threshold | The Dangers of Fairyland/Neverland <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Physical Theatre</li><li>▪ Circle Monologue</li></ul> |
| ▪ Crisis                 | A Difficult Choice <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Role Play</li><li>▪ Forum Theatre</li></ul>                           |
| -                        |  |
| ▪ Journey's End          | Unpacking Scenes <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Interpretation</li></ul>  |
| -                        |  |

# The Stolen Child

by William Butler Yeats

Where dips the rocky highland  
Of Sleuth Wood in the lake,  
There lies a leafy island  
Where flapping herons wake  
The drowsy water rats;  
There we've hid our faery vats,  
Full of berrys  
And of reddest stolen cherries.  
*Come away, O human child!*  
*To the waters and the wild*  
*With a faery, hand in hand,*  
*For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.*

Where the wave of moonlight glosses  
The dim gray sands with light,  
Far off by furthest Rosses  
We foot it all the night,  
Weaving olden dances  
Mingling hands and mingling glances  
Till the moon has taken flight;  
To and fro we leap  
And chase the frothy bubbles,  
While the world is full of troubles  
And anxious in its sleep.  
*Come away, O human child!*  
*To the waters and the wild*  
*With a faery, hand in hand,*  
*For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.*

Where the wandering water gushes  
From the hills above Glen-Car,  
In pools among the rushes  
That scarce could bathe a star,  
We seek for slumbering trout  
And whispering in their ears  
Give them unquiet dreams;  
Leaning softly out  
From ferns that drop their tears  
Over the young streams.  
*Come away, O human child!*  
*To the waters and the wild*  
*With a faery, hand in hand,*  
*For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.*

Away with us he's going,  
The solemn-eyed -  
He'll hear no more the lowing  
Of the calves on the warm hillside  
Or the kettle on the hob  
Sing peace into his breast,  
Or see the brown mice bob  
Round and round the oatmeal chest  
*For he comes the human child  
To the waters and the wild  
With a faery, hand in hand  
From a world more full of weeping than he can understand*

*He sits on the floor with the shadow, confident that he and it will join like drops of water. Then he tries to stick it on with soap from the bathroom, and this failing also, he subsides dejectedly on the floor. This wakens Wendy, who sits up, and is pleasantly interested to see a stranger.)*

WENDY. *(Courteously.)* Boy, why are you crying? *(He jumps up, and crossing to the foot of the bed bows to her in the fairy way. Wendy, impressed, bows to him from the bed.)*

PETER. What is your name?

WENDY. *(Well satisfied.)* Wendy Moira Angela Darling. What is yours?

PETER. *(Finding it lamentably brief.)* Peter Pan.

WENDY. Is that all?

PETER. *(Biting his lip.)* Yes.

WENDY. *(Politely.)* I am so sorry.

PETER. It doesn't matter.

WENDY. Where do you live?

PETER. Second on the right and then straight on till morning.

WENDY. What a funny address!

PETER. No, it isn't.

WENDY. I mean, is that what they put on the letters?

PETER. Don't get any letters.

WENDY. But your mother gets letters?

PETER. Don't have a mother.

WENDY. Peter! *(She leaps out of bed to put her arms round him, but he draws back.)* No wonder you were crying.

PETER. I wasn't crying about my mother. I was crying because I can't get my shadow to stick on. Anyway I wasn't crying.

WENDY. It has come off! How awful. *(Looking at the spot where he had lain.)* Peter, you have been trying to stick it on with soap!

PETER. *(Snappily.)* Well, then?

WENDY. It must be sewn on.

PETER. What is "sewn?"

WENDY. You are dreadfully ignorant.

PETER. No, I'm not.

WENDY. I will sew it on for you my little man. Stand still. I dare say it will hurt a little.

PETER. *(A recent remark of hers rankling.)* I never cry. *(She seems to sew the shadow to his heels. He bears the pain, and then tests the combination, but the flimsy thing drags uselessly behind him.)* It isn't quite itself yet.

WENDY. Perhaps I should have ironed it.

PETER. Perhaps it's dead.

WENDY. I think we need a little more light. *(She touches something and to his astonishment the room is illuminated. The shadow awakes and is glad to be back with him as he is to have it. He and his shadow dance together. He is showing off now. He crows like a cock. He would fly in order to impress Wendy further if he knew that there is anything unusual in that.)*

PETER. Wendy, look, look; oh the cleverness of me!

WENDY. You conceit; of course I did nothing!

PETER. You did a little.

WENDY. *(Wounded.)* A little! If I am no use I can at least withdraw. *(With one haughty leap she is again in bed with the sheet over her face. Popping onto the end of the bed the artful one appeals.)*

PETER. Wendy, don't withdraw. I can't help crowing, Wendy, when I'm pleased with myself. Wendy, one girl is worth more than twenty boys.

WENDY. *(Peeping over the sheet.)* You really think so, Peter?

PETER. Yes, I do.

WENDY. Dear Peter, with such a large family I have passed my best, but you don't want to change me, do you?

PETER. No. *(She is too loving not to know that he is not loving enough, and she hesitates as one who knows the answer to her question.)*

WENDY. What is wrong, Peter?

PETER. *(Scared.)* It is only pretend, isn't it, that I am their father?

WENDY. *(Drooping.)* Oh yes. *(His sigh of relief is without consideration for her feelings.)* But they are ours, Peter, yours and mine.

PETER. *(Determined to get at facts, the only things that puzzle him.)* But not really?

WENDY. Not if you don't wish it.

PETER. I don't.

WENDY. *(Knowing she ought not to probe but driven to it by something within.)* What are your exact feelings for me, Peter?

PETER. *(In the classroom.)* Those of a devoted son, Wendy.

WENDY. *(Turning away.)* I thought so.

PETER. You are so puzzling. Tiger Lily is just the same; there is something or other she wants to be to me, but she says it is not my mother.

WENDY. *(With spirit.)* No, indeed it isn't.

PETER. Then what is it?

WENDY. It isn't for a lady to tell.

PETER. Perhaps Tink will tell me.

WENDY. *(With spirit.)* Oh yes, Tink will tell you. She has no scruples. She hugs you openly — Tink's an abandoned little creature. *(The curtain of the fairy chamber opens slightly and Tink who has been eavesdropping tinkles a laugh of scorn.)*

TINK. I know I am, and like a true woman, I glory in it.

PETER. She says she knows she's an abandoned little creature and that like a true woman, she glories in it. *(Badgered.)* I suppose that she wants to be my mother.

TINK. You silly ass!

WENDY. *(Who has picked up some of the fairy words.)* I almost agree with her! *(The boys all run in wearing their nightgowns and*

## Act Five: Scene Two

*(Wendy and Peter are huddled together on the floor of the nursery. Michael is sitting on the end of his bed.)*

WENDY. Remember not to bite your nails.

PETER. All right!

WENDY. When you come for me next year, Peter — you will come, won't you?

PETER. Yes. *(Gloating.)* To hear stories about me!

WENDY. It is so queer that the stories you like best should be the ones about yourself.

PETER. *(Touchy.)* Well then?

WENDY. Peter, I want to tell you something.

PETER. *(Enthralled.)* Is it a secret?

WENDY. Oh, Peter! When Captain Hook carried us away ...

PETER. Who's Captain Hook? Is it a story? Tell it me!

WENDY. Do you mean to say you've forgotten Captain Hook? And how you killed him and saved all our lives?

PETER. I forget them after I kill them.

WENDY. *(Wondering about her rival.)* I didn't see Tink this time.

PETER. Who?

WENDY. Tinker Bell! Your fairy!

PETER. *(Carelessly.)* There are such a lot of them.

I expect she is no more.

WENDY. *(Pained.)* Oh, Peter, you forget everything.

PETER. Everything except mother Wendy. *(The nursery darkens once more and the Storyteller comes back into view.)*

STORYTELLER. But next year he did forget. She waited in a new frock because the old one simply would not meet; but he never came. *(We see Wendy huddled at the end of her bed, her eiderdown wrapped tightly around her.)*

# Act Five:

## Scene Two

WENDY. Peter! *(The window blows open, as of old, and Peter drops to the floor. Wendy, helpless and guilty, squeezes herself as small as possible.)*

PETER. Hallo, Wendy.

WENDY. *(Faintly.)* Hallo, Peter.

PETER. Hallo! Where is John?

WENDY. John — doesn't sleep here now.

PETER. Is Michael asleep?

WENDY. *(Hesitating.)* Yes. *(Horried at herself.)* That isn't Michael.

PETER. Hallo, is it a new one?

WENDY. Yes.

PETER. Boy or girl?

WENDY. Girl.

PETER. Do you like her?

WENDY. Yes! *(Something inside of Wendy is crying, "woman, woman, let go of me." Faltering.)* Peter — are you expecting me to fly away with you?

PETER. Of course, that is why I've come. *(A little sternly.)* Have you forgotten that this is spring-cleaning time? Come on. I'm Captain!

WENDY. I can't come. I've forgotten how to fly.

PETER. I'll soon teach you again.

WENDY. Oh, Peter, don't waste the fairy dust on me.

PETER. *(A fear at last assailing him.)* What is it?

WENDY. I will turn on the light and then you can see for yourself.

PETER. *(Frightened — husky.)* Wendy, don't turn on the light. *(Wendy switches on the light and faces him. A bewildered understanding comes to him. She puts out her arms but he shrinks back.)* What is it? What is it?

WENDY. I am old Peter. I am ever so much more than twenty. I grew up long ago.

PETER. You promised not to!

WENDY. I couldn't help it. I am a married woman, Peter.

PETER. No, you're not.

WENDY. Yes, and the little girl in the bed is my baby.

PETER. No she's not. *(After a pause — fiercely.)* What does she call you.

WENDY. Mother.

PETER. Mother?

WENDY. Oh Peter, Peter! *(She knows not what to do, and rushes from the room in agony. Peter takes a step towards the sleeping child, with a little dagger in his hand upraised, then is about to fly away, then flings himself on the floor and sobs. Jane wakes up.)*

JANE. Boy, why are you crying? *(Peter jumps up, and crossing to the foot of the bed, bows to her in the fairy way. Jane impressed, bows to him from the bed.)*

PETER. Hallo.

JANE. Hallo.

PETER. My name is Peter Pan.

JANE. Yes, I know.

PETER. I came for my mother to take her to the Never Land to do my spring cleaning.

JANE. Yes, I know. I've been waiting for you.

PETER. Will you be my mother?

JANE. Oh yes. *(Jane descends from the bed and stands by Peter's side, with the look on her face that he likes to see on ladies when they gaze at him. Wendy has returned to the room and is looking at them rather forlornly.)*