

## Parallel Romantic Fantasies: Barrie's *Peter Pan* and Spielberg's *E.T.: The Extraterrestrial*

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At almost exactly the mid-point of Steven Spielberg's enormously successful film *E.T.: The Extraterrestrial*, Mary, the mother of Elliott, Michael, and Gertie, reads a bedtime story to her little daughter. The two are shown together on Gertie's bed, the lighting is dim, and the story is a version of Sir James M. Barrie's classic play *Peter Pan*. The reading has reached the scene in which Tinker Bell the fairy is dying, her light growing dim, and Peter makes his dramatic appeal to those who believe in fairies to save Tink by clapping their hands to attest to that belief. Later, it becomes clear that Melissa Mathison, who wrote the script of *E.T.*, did not choose this segment of Barrie's play accidentally; for *E.T.*, too, comes back to life, just after Elliott has promised him that "I'll believe in you all my life." These two crucial scenes provide only the most apparent of the many links between Barrie's play and Spielberg's movie; important parallels between the two romantic fantasies exist throughout.

Mathison has named the eldest of her three central children Michael, the name Barrie gave to the youngest of his three central children, who are, like Mathison's, two boys and a girl. For Barrie, the central child is the girl, Wendy, who is almost romantically linked with the alien Peter Pan; but for Mathison the romantic link is discarded in favor of one of loving friendship, so the central child is Elliott, the sensitive middle child who has apparently been the most hurt by the separation of his parents and the disappearance of his beloved father into Mexico with his new girlfriend. The lost boys are transmuted in *E.T.* into a foul-mouthed crew of games-playing, bicycle riding friends of Michael's, but they, like Barrie's children, have the joyful release of flight in their confrontation with the cruel and sinister world of adults.

With the exception of the mothers, the society of adults is presented in both fantasies as inept and, usually, cruel. In both works the mothers are personifications of loving maternity, but while Mrs. Darling and Mary are beautiful and emotional, they are not really in control. Society ignores almost entirely the intuitive wisdom of youth, which is, for the most part, helpless under adult authority and adult systems. Unlike Mr. Darling, Elliott's father is not shown to love his children; but like Mr. Darling's unwarranted and unreasonable exile of the

dog-nurse Nana to the backyard, Elliott's father's desertion of his family sets up the conditions under which the encounter with the alien can be most important. Barrie's Captain Hook and his pirates are paralleled in Mathison's script by Keys and his small army of police, government agents, scientists (including the biology teacher), and doctors. In both works the antagonistic force is headed by an adult male named only for the metal implement or implements he bears. Although Keys ultimately turns out to be friendly to Elliott and *E.T.*, providing a possible new romantic interest for the mother and a father-figure for Elliott, for three-fourths of the film he is made to seem hostile, not only by his actions as he stalks Elliott and *E.T.*, but also because Spielberg focuses on the jangling keys at his waist, never showing the audience his face before his conversion in the operating room; and John Williams's music turns ominous whenever he appears. But Barrie is the more merciless of the two writers. Captain Hook is never converted and is thrown to the waiting crocodile, while Mathison's

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Keys is allowed to arrive in the secret place in the forest just in time to watch the departure of *E.T.*

Elliott has much in common with Barrie's Wendy, even though he is more complex and more interesting than she is. The relationships between the children and their respective aliens, Peter and *E.T.*, are clearly parallel. Wendy has the simpler initial encounter, for Peter is a boy as well as an elfin creature; *E.T.*, though humanoid, is more bizarre in shape, more goblin than elf, so that Elliott must overcome his fear before he can deal with *E.T.* Elliott's fear, however, is minimal and is quickly overcome by curiosity and concern. Elliott's open response to *E.T.* reflects the romantic ideal of childhood which the film presents, and it contrasts with the systematic and almost total adult hostility toward the alien. Both Wendy and Elliott adopt caring attitudes toward the strangers. Wendy sews on Peter's shadow; Elliott feeds *E.T.* and wraps him in a blanket. Both Barrie and Mathison, though, assign the task of language instruction to female characters. Wendy and Peter have a rather silly dialogue about kisses and thimbles, but Gertie, with the

aid of *Sesame Street*, gives *E.T.* the essential lessons that lead to the crucial line, "*E.T.* phone home."

*E.T.* it seems to me, is an amalgam of Tinker Bell and Peter Pan. Like both, he can fly and can provoke flight in others. Like Peter, he is affectionate toward the young humans although he is not really one of them; but, unlike Peter, he is not naive. Like Tinker Bell, he is associated with a complicated society of non-humans, with powers superior to those of humans, and he is also associated with the images of light. Also like Tink, *E.T.* is vulnerable to illness; Tink nearly dies when she drinks poison set out by Hook for Peter, and *E.T.* is nearly killed by separation from his people. Mathison, however, has made *E.T.* superior to either Peter or Tinker Bell, in that he is capable of mature love for Elliott and has healing power.

Both Barrie and Mathison have set up some of the basic premises of what Frank D. McConnell, in his book, *The Spoken Seen*, refers to as the romantic and post-romantic "attempt to think and argue philosophically through images." Both present a romantic ideal of childhood, in Wendy and Elliott and the other children, as well as the positive view of the alien, in Peter and *E.T.* Both present a negative image of adulthood, especially of male adulthood, Barrie in Hood and in the domestic tyranny of Mr. Darling and Mathison in Keys and the scientific establishment.

There are also parallels in the patterns of visual imagery of these two romantic fantasies. At the very beginning of *E.T.*, there is a close-up shot of a mushroom, which appears in the light of the alien spaceship before the picture of the rabbit and the pursuit of *E.T.* by Keys. As a practical matter, this close-up does give us some idea of the size of the creatures we hear making grunting noises off camera; but as an emblem it seems worth somewhat more. Similarly, apparently unnecessary mushrooms appear in *Peter Pan* as chairs for the children in the underground home and, above, "an imitation one concealing the chimney." Mushrooms are associated both with the "little people" of folklore and with magic, as in Lewis Carroll's *Alice*. In *E.T.* and *Peter Pan* they are at least emblematic of mysterious, unknown, and perhaps supernatural elements, even if nothing is made of them explicitly. They create, as it were, an aura of a world in which the strange is rather to be expected than not, a

world in which fairies and goblin-like extraterrestrials would be at home.

Far more important than the tiny, albeit significant, mushroom image are three other images which occur in both *Peter Pan* and *E.T.* and lead directly into the romantic themes that dominate both works. These are the images of flight, of the place set apart, and of light.

For the reviewer of *E.T. in Texas Monthly*, the flight imagery linked *E.T.* most clearly to *Peter Pan*. James Woolcott called the movie "a distillation of adolescent American pop, taking its love of flight from *Peter Pan* and its aching throb of homesickness from *The Wizard of Oz* . . ." But the aching throb is part of *Peter Pan* too, for Wendy tells a story about her abandoned Bloomsbury home that leaves all the boys except Peter longing for their real mothers. Nevertheless, the flight motif is an important link between play and film, for it is an outward sign of the inward grace of acceptance of the alien by human children. No adult flies in these fantasies—indeed they oppose flight—and at the end of the play, when Wendy returns to the Never-Land for spring cleaning, "She flies so badly now that she has to use a broomstick." Fairy dust and extraterrestrial power are essentially the same thing, and flight is the romantic symbol of escape from the ordinary and of the power of the alien. In this regard, both *E.T.* and *Peter Pan* are part of a tradition that also includes *Mary Poppins* and *The Wizard of Oz*.

In *The Spoken Seen*, McConnell suggests that, in romanticism, places, particularly isolated or fancied places, acquire a special power when perceived by the activated imagination of a sensitive observer. He examines the films *Mary Poppins* and *The Wizard of Oz* as depictions of transportation to magic places where child observers learn something they cannot learn at home. In the mundane existence of the Banks children on Cherry Tree Lane and of Dorothy in Kansas, there is nothing to liberate their imaginations. Only the special place, like the *hortus conclusus* of medieval literature and the magical persons connected with it, can lift the minds of the children beyond the limits of conventional upper middle class London, or equally conventional gray, rural Kansas.

In both *Peter Pan* and *E.T.* there is such a special place. In *Peter Pan* it is, of course, the Never-Land. In Barrie's stage directions, this place is clearly associated with dreams, for he says, at the beginning of Act II, "You have often half seen it before, or even three-quarters, after the night-lights were lit, and you might then have beached your coracle on it if you had not always at the great moment fallen asleep . . . . In the daytime you think the

Never-Land is only make-believe, and so it is to the likes of you, but this is the Never-Land come true." The setting is a forest with a lagoon, which disappears at the end of the play while Peter Pan plays on his pipes, "plays on and on till we wake up." The earthly paradise for the children is the imagined dream of the artist.

Mathison's special place is far less ephemeral than the Never-Land; it has existence in the ordinary world of the film, as a clearing in the forest. Yet it, too, is a place set apart, known primarily to the children of the area, especially Elliott, Michael, and Michael's friends Steve, Greg, and Tyler. It is wild, a natural island in the midst of suburbia. It is the place the spaceship lands, a place associated with mushrooms, rabbits, and deer, and the place from which *E.T.* phones home and from which he finally leaves. It is mysterious only in that it is hard to get to, that we see it almost always at night, and that it is here that extraterrestrial and terrestrial worlds make contact. Mathison's magic is the superior and benevolent science of the extraterrestrials, and she replaces the elves, leprechauns, and goblins of dream with a new form of real life. It is Keys's connection with the special place that allows him to become part of the closing scene: his lines to Elliott, "I've

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been to the forest" and "I've been wishing for this since I was ten years old," make him one of the believers.

The final connecting image between *Peter Pan* and *E.T.* is the image of light. In *Peter Pan* the two lights of significance are the night-lights and Tinker Bell. The night-lights, though addressed by Mrs. Darling in Act I as if they are guardian angels, are helpless in the face of the supernatural, represented by the ball of light that is Tink. Life and light are equated only in Tinker Bell, whose light fades as she is dying and revives with the expression of faith of the clapping hands. In *Peter Pan*, the light image is relatively simple and unimportant; in *E.T.* it is much more important, both visually and symbolically. Visually, light is more prominent in *E.T.* because the original text was conceived as a screenplay, while Barrie's work was for theatrical production. Mathison's spaceship and extraterrestrial provide great opportunities for Spielberg to exploit the associations of warm light and color, especially, of course, in the radiant red

thorax and glowing fingertip of *E.T.* Similarly, Spielberg uses cold white light to represent the scientific searchers with their flashlights and the doctors who, with all their technology, cannot deal with the complex organism of the extraterrestrial. Radiant, warm light reflects the life-force—healing, communicating, benevolent—that is the essence of the advanced science of the extraterrestrials, while cold light symbolizes the apparently destructive and clearly inhuman aspects of earthly, adult, male-dominated science and technology.

In addition to the parallels in characterization and imagery, Barrie's play and Spielberg's film contain thematic parallels that reflect their common source in the assumptions of romanticism. One of these, according to Meyer Abrams in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, is that for the romantic poet, "as a vehicle of an emotional state of mind, poetry is opposed not to prose, but to unemotional assertions of fact, or science." Put another way, the romantic imagination brings into question the assumptions behind the everyday world of fact, of business, of technology. Both play and film do just this. Presenting alternative worlds to our own on stage or on the screen, they draw us into a consideration of which is superior, reality or the imaginative dream. Given Mr. Darling's postage-stamp like existence in the reality of the urban business world, who would not choose instead the Never-Land, fear maturity, and wish "to be a little boy and to have fun"? Given the world of adult science, as symbolized in *E.T.* by the flashlights and pickups of the hunters, the ether and frogs in jars of the school biology lab, and the dark mirror like face-plates of the NASA scientists who invade Elliott's home, who would not choose the apparently loving world of the extraterrestrials? Both my husband and son say that, given Elliott's choice, they'd go.

I'd stay. In both *Peter Pan* and *E.T.* the central humans, Wendy and Elliott, choose to return to their homes, drawn back primarily by the power of maternal love. Thus the romantic concept of the power of emotion is central in both play and film. Moreover, *Peter Pan*, because he is simply a personification of eternal boyhood, cannot love; but *E.T.* can, and this makes Elliott's choice more emotionally painful than Wendy's.

The second romantic axiom that lies at the base of Barrie's play, as well as of Mathison's screenplay, is the celebration of the creative consciousness, which is particularly alive in childhood but is preserved in the mind of the visionary adult who, alone, can be the seer for the rest of mankind. In "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early

Childhood," Wordsworth calls it the "visionary gleam," as well as "the glory and the dream," and natural phenomena like the pansy remind him of it. The romantic view of childhood conceives of the child, because he is close to nature, as capable of clearer vision than the socialized adult. The child's mind accepts and integrates, rather than excludes, the strange and the wonderful. In *Peter Pan*, Mrs. Darling fears the face at the window and the ball of light; Wendy is "pleasantly interested to see a stranger" in her bedroom at night. All three Darling children are ready to try flight and to desert their home in search of adventure in the forest and lagoon of the Never-Land. In *E.T.*, Elliott is only the most accepting of the children in the film; he welcomes the alien with love. Quickly overcoming his fear of E.T.'s bizarre appearance, Elliott adopts what his brother Michael calls "the goblin" and ultimately plays the father role much more creditably than does the boy's own father, to whom Elliott cannot talk about his problems because "he's in Mexico with Sally." Elliott, Gertie, Michael, and the three friends on bicycles, who are the parallels to the lost boys in *Peter Pan*, conspire to save E.T. from the crude and destructive response made to him by adult society in the film. In both works, then, the vision of childhood is

seen as superior to that of rational adulthood, and the warmth of emotion is shown to be needed to humanize the world of scientific, technological fact. Both are clearly in the romantic mode.

This examination of the parallels between *Peter Pan* and *E.T.: The Extraterrestrial* does not intend to show that *E.T.* is merely an update of the older play. I have already discussed some clear differences, such as the relative importance of the images of the special place and of light in each work. There are many others. Perhaps most significant is the difference in what happens to the "visionary gleam" in each work. At the end of Barrie's play, Wendy is growing up; she is unable to see Peter clearly any more, and she can fly only with a broomstick. Barrie holds out little hope that Wendy, John, Michael, or the lost boys can keep their faith and belief in Peter; they will forget him as quickly as John and Michael begin to forget home when they are in the Never-Land. Only the artist retains his memory of the dream and gives it permanence for the audience by creating the true Never-Land on stage. In contrast, Spielberg's movie holds out hope that Elliott's vision of a creative relationship with the alien, the extraterrestrial society represented by the spaceship, and E.T. can be preserved and shared, not only with other children,

but with insightful adults as well. In the film, though not in the book based on it, Keys stands beside Mary as Elliott makes his choice, representing, I think, the man who has preserved the dream he had as a ten-year-old. In a way, then, Barrie has created a tragedy of romanticism; Mathison and Spielberg have made it into comedy.

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## Perceiving Prairie Landscapes: The Young Person's View of a Western Frontier

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Prairie is "a large treeless tract of level or undulating grassland," a kind of topography characterizing a great part of the Canadian and American west. Physically the prairie regions of the two countries are indistinguishable from each other. Wallace Stegner, whose childhood homestead occupied both Saskatchewan and Montana, recalls, "For all my eyes could tell me, no Line existed . . . only more plains, more burnouts, more gopher holes, more cactus, more stinkweed and primroses, more hawk shadows slipping over the scabby flats, more shallow coulees . . ." (*Wolf Willow*, p. 83). As his imagery shows, Stegner's childhood coincided with a cycle of drought.

Among the first to perceive the literary possibilities of the prairie were Victorian authors of adventure stories, who turned it into a *royaume aventureux* where young heroes imbued with the virtues and ideals of the British middle class might demonstrate their prowess as convincingly as had medieval knights in the perilous

forest. Charles Kennedy, the fifteen-year-old hero of R.M. Ballantyne's *The Young Fur Traders*, is determined to pursue the voyageur's "desperately wild, unsettled, roving sort of life . . . full of dangers both from wild beasts and wild men," rather than taking on the safe job of a clerk, as his father intends. In W.H.G. Kingston's *The Frontier Fort*, Reginald Lorraine, a young Englishman whose "intelligence, high spirits, and good humor made him an agreeable companion," insists on rescuing a frontier fort threatened by Blackfeet rather than riding safely to Edmonton.

No one made more enthusiastic use of this romanticized setting than the contributors to *The Boys' Own*, *Union Jack*, *Chatterbox*, and other serial publications. Jessie M. Saxby, whose "Prairie Life and Adventure" appeared in *Chatterbox* in 1898, introduced into a single story blizzards, frostbite, temperatures of 56° below, frozen water holes, ravenous wolves, thieving Indians, villainous white men dressed as Indians, thunderstorms, mosquitoes, and fever. There was no shortage of perils in this wilderness. The

prairie experience often constituted a *rite de passage*, marking the transition from adolescence to manhood and bringing the fairy tale rewards of recognition, wealth, and beautiful wives.

American authors also have used the "child against the wilderness" motif. In particular, the blizzard, that extreme embodiment of wind, snow, and cold, provides the challenge that reveals the heroic qualities of young protagonists. In Bonnie Bess Worline's *The Children Who Stayed Alone*, it is Phoebe and Hartley who care for the five younger children, cook cabbage soup and corn bread, milk the cows, feed and water the stock, get in water and fuel, and shelter a sick Indian woman and her baby in their little sod house, all during a raging blizzard. No wonder Mother's eyes grow bigger and bigger when she hears about it all!

Genuinely exciting and moving is Laura Ingalls Wilder's account in *The Long Winter* of the journey made by two boys, fifteen-year-old Cap Garland and Almanzo Wilder, across the storm-drifted prairie to buy wheat. As Wilder suggests, in winter