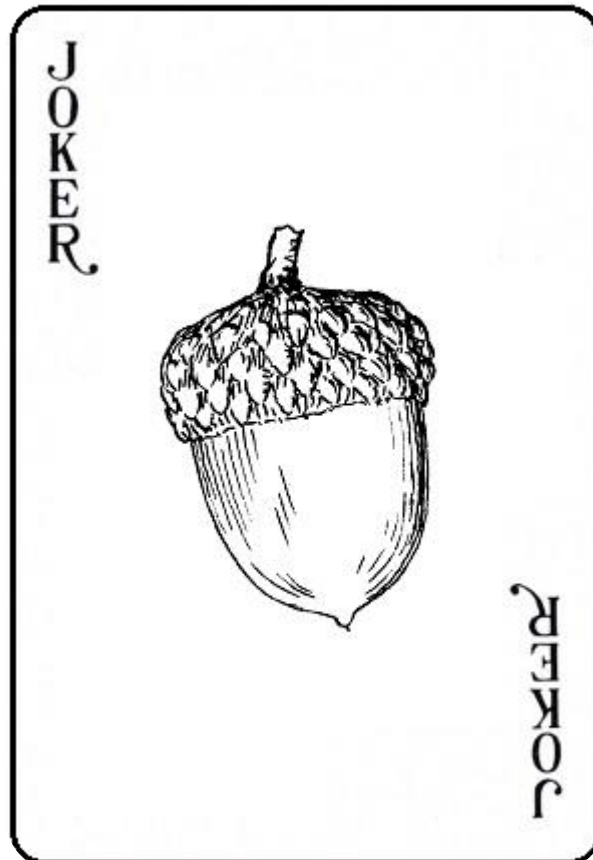


Peter Pan and Alice's Adventures in Wonderland: The Influence of Dystopian Elements on the Teaching of Morals



Lotte Roelofs, 3997103
Zijpendaalseweg 40
6814 CL Arnhem
Bachelor Thesis
Supervisor: Simon J. Cook
Second Reader: Barnita Bagchi

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“There could not have been a lovelier sight; but there was none to see it except a strange boy who was staring in at the window. He had ecstasies innumerable that other children can never know; but he was looking through the window at the one joy from which he must be for ever barred.”

- J.M. Barrie, *Peter Pan*

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Abstract

This paper analyses how dystopian elements in J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* and Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* influence the morals that the stories convey. First, dystopian elements found in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* will be examined, in which Carroll's novel will be used as primary source. Subsequently, the next chapter will prove that several dystopian elements can be found in *Peter Pan*. The morals that can be found in *Peter Pan* and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* will then be explored, together with the morality of some of the characters and whether dystopian elements influence the stories' morals. Finally, it will be concluded that the dystopian elements indeed influence the morals found in *Peter Pan* and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. The paper's findings will be summarised in the final chapter.

Introduction

In the play *Peter and Alice* (2013), playwright John Logan allows his audience to witness an encounter between “the real-life models for *Peter Pan* and [*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*]” (Clapp):

ALICE: Here’s a burden: the only reason anyone remembers me now as Alice in Wonderland is that I decided to sell my hand-written manuscript of the book [because] I needed the money. To heat my home, Mr Davies... Now, is that the Alice people want to know? Or is it possible they would rather remember that little blond girl in the dress, [...] never growing old?

PETER: But we all grow old! ... That’s the story of our lives: the one immutable; the one inescapable. The crocodile in the lagoon, [...] death just around the corner, tick tick tick. I’m grasping now but –

ALICE: (*Interrupts*) What’s your name? (Logan 16-7)

Peter Llewelyn Davies and Alice Liddell Hargreaves, portrayed by Ben Whishaw and Judi Dench, start a conversation in which they eventually start to discuss “whether flight into fantasy is helpful or damaging” (Clapp). The play combines the stories in such a way that it shows that they have several things in common. Both deal with the adventures of children who travel to faraway lands, Wonderland and Neverland, where their most frightening enemies are grown-ups: The Queen of Hearts and Captain Hook. A more significant similarity, however, is that both James Matthew Barrie’s *Peter Pan* as well as Lewis Carroll’s¹ *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*² both contain various dystopian elements.

Both stories have been studied many times before, sometimes, for example, focusing on their morals (Santor), or on gender and feminism (Bleeker, McCarthy). Allison McCarthy,

¹ Pseudonym of Charles Ludwidge Dodgson.

² Which will now be referred to as *Alice’s Adventures*.

for example, has written an article on the “sexist and racist history” of *Peter Pan*, and argues that “[a]ll of the women share unrequited attractions to Peter, their emotions trapped in a limited range between jealousy of one another and mute longing for Peter” (McCarthy). Furthermore, Maaïke Bleeker argues that “*Peter Pan* [...] confirms conventional gender patterns in such an extreme manner that it is almost painful” (Bleeker 165), and “ultimately produces a negative effect when it concerns the sort of image of women which is confirmed by it” (169). Lauren Millikan chooses a feminist approach to *Alice’s Adventures*, stating that “[e]ither critics have seen her as a feminist hero, a rebel breaking out of the traditional female gender role, or they are more hesitant to give Carroll the credit of really breaking any stereotypes” (Millikan). Scholars have identified utopian and dystopian structures in *Alice’s Adventures* as well (Elbaz, Conkan), and it has even been claimed that “Barrie’s Neverland in *Peter Pan* was actually a utopian world, immersed in one of the most elaborate fantasies of children’s imagination”³ (Magalhães 40). Michael Franklin, however, argues that “after establishing Neverland as a utopian space that is separate from adulthood, the text problematizes the assumptions of child innocence and its projected decline in adulthood” (1).

Children’s literature is a useful way to teach children lessons and morals. Also, “[a]n acquaintance with and an understanding of literary characters is one of the first ways a young child has of making sense of what it is to be human” (Rutgers). The way children’s literature has developed through the ages has been researched many times. Frederick Darton, for example, set children’s stories “in their historical context”, which reveals much about the general history of England (Darton i). Children’s books are famous for their morals and lessons, and often combine “social and moral instruction with entertainment” (Grenby). This “‘instruction with delight’ [approach] became enshrined in children’s literature from around the middle of the 18th century” (Grenby). Also, Sheila Egoff argues that during the late

³ However, counterarguments for this statement can be given as well. These will be treated in the Neverland chapter.

Victorian age, “[the] idea that children’s books could be more than vehicles for instruction, information, and moral persuasion” started to develop (5). Indeed, Carroll and Barrie made their stories approachable to children; Wendy and her brothers, for example, are ordinary children who are given the ability to fly, and Alice has conversations with talking animals and various other creatures. Egoff also states that the Victorians were interested in matters such as “death, resurrection, faith and disbelief, moral courage and moral cowardice, [and] trust and suspicion”, but also in “poverty, cruelty, the fruits of friendship, and doing one’s duty” (5). Lastly, Egoff remarks that “protagonists of Victorian children’s books did mature and come to terms with life” (5), which is indeed the case in both *Peter Pan* and *Alice’s Adventures*; Wendy, her brothers and the Lost Boys decide to leave Neverland to grow up, and Alice, even though she remains young throughout the story, imagines herself being “a grown woman; and how she would keep [...] the simple and loving heart of her childhood” (Carroll 144). Striking, however, is the fact that Peter refuses to leave Neverland, saying that “no one will catch [him] and make [him] a man” (Barrie 174). He literally seems to fight the Victorian idea of a maturing protagonist.

Many articles either examined morals or dystopian elements in *Peter Pan* and *Alice’s Adventures*, but the connection between the two in Barrie’s and Carroll’s work, however, is yet to be made. Therefore, this thesis aims to prove that a number of dystopian elements can be found in *Peter Pan* and *Alice’s Adventures*, and will explore how these elements influence the morals of the stories. Wonderland and Neverland will be examined, together with their main characters. In the case of *Alice’s Adventures*, the focus will primarily be on Alice and the way she experiences Wonderland and its inhabitants. Because there are so many children to be found in Neverland, the analysis of *Peter Pan* will primarily focus on the Darling children and their experiences, but also on Hook, and occasionally on Peter as well. The

dystopian elements found in both works indeed prove to have influence on the stories' morals, and demonstrate how children can learn from and relate to the characters' experiences.

Wonderland

Wonderland seems to contain, at least for Alice, various utopian elements. She “[burns] with curiosity” when she spots the White Rabbit and follows him down the rabbit hole (Carroll 38). In line with the descriptions of Alice’s personality, to her, a utopian place would be somewhere where she can have adventures and gain knowledge by letting her inquisitiveness flourish. In the mocking world of Wonderland, the adults are unreasonable and ignorant, whereas Alice is the opposite. In Lewis Carroll’s time, children were seen as “a problem [;] [o]ften treated as miniature adults, [and] were often required to perform, were severely chastised, or were ignored” (Millikan). Therefore, a place where she is able to speak her mind and even appears to be more intelligent than the adults around her could be considered utopian to Alice. This idea, however, is soon spoiled, because even though Alice now speaks up and protests, the adults in Wonderland refuse to acknowledge her and remain unreasonable⁴. The “adults [in Wonderland], especially those who resemble governesses or professors, are foolish, arbitrary, cruel, or mad” (Lurie 5). Carroll then, intentionally or not, mocked the way Victorian children were treated and how adults regarded themselves as their superiors; *Alice’s Adventures* could be “read as a satirical attack on children’s treatment and education” (Millikan). In Carroll’s time, children were not supposed to negotiate with or disagree with adults, but Alice disregards this completely; she protests, objects and asks questions throughout the entire novel. During her stay in Wonderland, Alice indeed remains her curious self, but comes to the conclusion that Wonderland is not as utopian as she had hoped for. Events become “[c]uriously and curiously” (Carroll 44) and turn more and more dystopian.

⁴ Except for the Duchess, in a way. This will be discussed in the Morals chapter.

Losing Herself

After shrinking and growing several times, Alice is not only frightened by her changing appearance, but also starts to wonder “[w]ho in the world [she is]” (Carroll 46). She is curious and hungry for knowledge, which is emphasised again when she fears she has turned into a girl called Mabel, who “knows such a very little”, while Alice herself “[knows] all sorts of things” (47). She expects to expand her knowledge in Wonderland, but instead, Wonderland makes her question her identity and everything she knows. She has a fear of not knowing, and, even more importantly, of not knowing who she is. This, as Marius Conkan argues, makes Wonderland a “metaphorical dystopia”, because it “damages and degenerates the self-consciousness and the identity of Alice” (Conkan). Her fear of losing her identity is reinforced when Alice meets the Caterpillar. He asks her who she is, but she is unable to answer this question, saying that “[she] hardly [knows]” (Carroll 69). She follows the White Rabbit into the rabbit hole as her curious self, but the longer she stays in Wonderland, the more she realises that her identity is fading.

Wonderland’s Darker Side

Another striking dystopian aspect is Wonderland itself. Alice wishes to enter Wonderland’s “loveliest garden”, claiming it is the most beautiful garden she has ever seen (Carroll 41). She expects to reach some kind of utopian place and she “[longs] to get out of that dark hall, and wander about among those beds of bright flowers and those cool fountains” (41). This description bears resemblance to the Garden of Eden, which is often considered the “precursor to modern [u]topian thought” (Origins of Utopia). However, the name “Wonderland” was given by Alice herself, and is only mentioned at the end of the story when she “half [believes] herself in Wonderland” (Carroll 143). Moreover, the location of Wonderland is, however uncertain, said to be “down, down, down” (39). According to James

R. Lewis, Alice falls through “a portal to an underworld” (26). In Greek mythology, the underworld is “related to the concept of [hell]”, also described as “a mysterious and shadowy place beyond ordinary human experience” (mythsencyclopedia). If Wonderland indeed bears resemblance to some kind of hell, then it contrasts with this idea of the Garden of Eden.

However, the beautiful garden Alice wishes to enter so badly would then appear be some kind of “metaphorical utopia” (Conkan), which turns out to be the Queen of Hearts’ property. The Queen wants to behead everyone who gets in her way (Carroll 86-7) and this makes her the dystopian figurehead; her behaviour and the beheadings could then be seen as “relentless regulations” (NCTE). In other words, Wonderland seems like a paradise at first, but proves to be considerably dystopian due to its symbolic location and, more importantly, the Queen’s merciless reign.

Mad Society

Even though Alice does not know what to expect when she follows the White Rabbit down the rabbit hole, the creatures she encounters disappoint her. As previously mentioned, Alice wants to learn and have interesting conversations, but she soon finds out that the inhabitants of Wonderland are “easily offended” (Carroll 57), and sometimes even “perfectly idiotic” (81). She states that “the way all [those] creatures argue [is] enough to drive one crazy” (81). The Cheshire Cat tells Alice that everyone in Wonderland are mad, even Alice herself (87), which suggests that Alice is situated in some kind of asylum⁵. Alice is also offended by the way she is treated at the Mad Tea-Party; the Mad-Hatter offers her wine, but, apart from the fact that offering wine to a child is peculiar, there was no wine on the table (91). The Hatter then tells Alice “[her] hair wants cutting”, to which she replies that it is rude to make such comments (91). Then, Alice is let down again; she looks forward to meeting the Queen and playing croquet with her, but discovers the Queen’s severe habits (Carroll 105-6). The Queen

⁵ This idea has been turned into an EA video game, *Alice: Madness Returns*.

oppresses her people by frightening them; if they refuse to obey her, she wants “their heads off” (103). Dennis Knepp argues that the Queen of Hearts is used to satirise dictators, because many “ruthless tyrants terrorize the people, supposedly for their own good” (54). In Carroll’s time, England was ruled by Queen Victoria, and it is often suggested that the Queen of Hearts corresponds to her and her “authoritative and aggressive” reign (Historical Context).

According to Lauren Millikan, “the British justice system at the time was in shambles” (Millikan). This argument, combined with the Queen of Heart’s opinion that “[s]entence [comes] first – verdict [comes] afterwards” (Carroll 141), would then lead to the conclusion that *Alice’s Adventures* “belongs perhaps more to the genre of Political Satire than even Carroll realized” (Millikan). The Duchess could be an example of a dystopian “incompetent government [official]” (NCTE); she appears to be the first person Alice has a normal conversation with, but then insults Alice by saying that “[Alice does not] know much, and that’s a fact” (Carroll 83). Subsequently, she tells Alice that “[i]f everybody minded their own business [...] the world would go round a deal faster than it does” and, after Alice disagrees with the before mentioned remark, she wants Alice’s head to be chopped off as a punishment (83). To Alice’s disappointment, the Duchess appears to be just as cruel as the Queen. She further affirms this in a lullaby for her baby:

Speak roughly to your little boy,
And beat him when he sneezes:
He only does it to annoy,
Because he knows it teases (84).

The Duchess is just as unreasonable as the Queen; they both bear no contradiction. They also use fear as a tool to control the people, which is typical for a dystopian leader (De Souza 5). Once again, the adults in Wonderland are “foolish [and] arbitrary” (Lurie 5), whereas Alice is not. The inhabitants of Wonderland do not extend Alice the warm welcome she hoped for,

which makes her feel out of place, “lonely [,] and low-spirited” (Carroll 58). In other words, “it is society that is actively working against the protagonist’s aims and desires”, which is, as John Joseph Adams claims, characteristic for a dystopian story (Adams).

Violence Hurts

The use of violence is another recurring dystopian element in *Alice’s Adventures*. Within a dystopian society, violence is often used “to instill fear in the characters” (De Souza 5). George Kruglov, however, comments that “[t]he violent acts committed by characters throughout lack the aspect of damage and injury, making the violence watered down and ineffective” (Kruglov). Even though the violence in the story does not physically harm any of the characters, Alice is scared nevertheless. The encounter between Alice and the Duchess, for example, exhibits various kinds of violence. As previously mentioned, the Duchess wants to behead Alice because the two disagreed. Furthermore, the Duchess acts aggressively towards her son by “tossing the baby violently up and down, [while] the poor little thing howled” (Carroll 84). Also, “the actions of the cook towards the Duchess at first glance appear to be very violent” (Kruglov); Alice sees how “the cook [takes] the cauldron of soup off the fire, and at once set to work throwing everything within her reach at the Duchess and the baby” (Carroll 83). Alice witnesses this scene “in an agony of terror”, and is even more startled when the cook throws a saucepan which nearly hits the baby’s nose (83). After this scene, the Duchess “[flings] the baby at [Alice] and takes off to play croquet with the Queen (84). The cook then throws another pan, “but it just missed her” (84). Alice takes the baby outside, and concludes that if she were to leave the baby at the Duchess’ house, “they’re sure to kill it in a day or two” (85). Kruglov thus concludes that this “would be considered a scene with real violence”, even though no characters appear to be in pain (Kruglov). Kruglov also argues that by removing pain as a consequence of violence, Carroll turns “Wonderland into a

children's Utopia [:] A place where their playfully violent actions would not have a painful reaction" (Kruglov). However, even if the characters remain unharmed, Alice is nevertheless horrified by the scene and might therefore even be emotionally hurt, which makes her a dystopian protagonist (NCTE). She is also afraid of getting hurt; when she is at the White Rabbit's house, she drinks a potion which makes her grow so tall she "had to stoop to save her neck from being broken" (Carroll 60).

Not-So-Wonderful Wonderland

Wonderland contains a number of dystopian elements. Alice's first wish is to enter the "loveliest garden" (Carroll 41), but then discovers that this garden contains fake red-painted roses and, more importantly, is part of the Queen's court. The utopian image she had of the garden is spoiled, and perhaps even turned dystopian, when she is confronted with reality; the Queen of Hearts turns out to be cruel, unreasonable and impulsive. She frightens her people by beheading everyone who opposes her. By using violence, which is something Alice discovers to be common in Wonderland, she remains in control. Furthermore, the other creatures Alice meets are not as exciting and interesting as she wished them to be; she wanted to learn new things from them, have adventures and expand her knowledge, but instead she considers most of them mad and is frustrated because they are "easily offended" and sometimes even impolite (Carroll 57, 91). She begins to feel lonely, confused and misunderstood and even starts to question herself and who she is (Conkan). Some of the inhabitants of Wonderland, for example the Queen, the Duchess and the Duchess' cook, are also violent by nature, which has a harmful effect on Alice. She "feels that something is terribly wrong with the society [she is in]" (NCTE). Thus, Wonderland could be seen as a dystopian place.

Neverland

Ana Teresa Magalhães and Vera Patricia Leal, as previously mentioned in the introduction, are of the opinion that “Barrie’s Neverland in *Peter Pan* was actually a utopian world, immersed in one of the most elaborate fantasies of children’s imagination” (Magalhães 40). Indeed, Neverland is appealing to children, because this fictional world incorporates “endless fights with pirates, sea waters inhabited by mermaids, woods and clears filled up with the magic of fairies, and above all the non-existence of rules and parents” (40). Children are also given the ability to fly and can remain young forever. However, some of these seemingly utopian aspects lose their positive appeal and dystopian elements can be detected as well.

Victorian Utopia?

The first dystopian element is connected with the time in which *Peter Pan* was first published. The Darling children live in London, and British children at the beginning of the 20th century “were legally viewed as little adults” (Renaissance London). Neverland would therefore be a utopian place for children from that time, because it allowed them to leave their obligations behind and be children, perhaps even forever. However, Jason Marc Harris argues that Neverland is actually dystopian, because “rather than offering childish escapes from the duties and griefs of English civilization, [the narrative employs] the folkloric tradition [to] cast a thin veil of glamour over the darker shadows beneath” (86). Peter entices the Darling children to fly to Neverland, although Wendy hesitates at first. When she tells Peter she could not leave her parents behind, he tries to convince her by cunningly telling her how useful and respected she will be (Barrie 33-4). He gives her a romanticised image of a housewife which she cannot resist (34). However, Wendy soon discovers that being a mother in Neverland does not differ much from being an actual mother, and concludes that sometimes “children are more trouble than they are worth” (108). Wendy’s character contradicts the idea of not growing up, because

Neverland stops her from aging, but she is turned into a mother at the same time (Nusbaum 8). By going to Neverland, children, and Peter in particular, try to escape the responsibilities they will have to face as adults, but instead of being free from worries, Wendy has to face them nevertheless. Neverland can be seen “an escape [of Victorian society] which [...] takes shape along the lines of exactly the same laws and in doing so confirms those laws instead of denying them” (Bleeker 172). In other words, Neverland “embodies the promise of an escape from [laws]”, but fails to live up to expectations (172).

Dictator in Disguise

Peter Pan could be seen as a dystopian element as well. He appears to be a “lovely boy” who still has “all his first teeth” (Barrie 11), which emphasises the idea of him being an innocent child. However, further character analysis shows that Peter is not as innocent as he seems. Wendy and her brothers soon discover his cockiness, carelessness and his love for epicaricacy. During their flight to Neverland, for example, Wendy and her brothers sometimes fall asleep because the nocturnal journey tires them, and when they do, they lose the ability to fly and instantly fall down (40). Peter finds this funny, and even though he saves them just before they actually hit the earth, “it was his cleverness that interested him and not the saving of human life” (40). The Darling children expected to enter a world without rules, but they have no choice but to obey Peter; he hates mothers so much that he forbids the children to talk of them (57), and when the children accidentally do grow up, “Peter thins them out” (52). Also, “if they [break] down in their make-believe he [raps] them on the knuckles (71)”, and if he feels that they are not enjoying their adventures in Neverland, he “[treats] them severely” (81). These rules could be connected to the dystopian idea of “[restricted] independent thought [and] freedom” (NCTE). The Darling children and the Lost Boys obey Peter’s “relentless regulations” (NCTE) out of fear of being punished. When Tootles accidentally

shoots Wendy, for example, he admits to be “so afraid of Peter” (Barrie 66). Peter indeed wants to strike Tootles with his arrow as a punishment, and if it were not for Wendy, Peter would have actually killed Tootles⁶ (67). Peter shows “sudden sinister moments” throughout the story which “slowly push [him] away from the pure child trope” (Franklin 11). In other words, the positive image Wendy and her brother had of Peter does not correspond with his behaviour, and his controlling and violent habits turn him into a dystopian leader.

Behind the Magic

The name *Neverland* has a strong connection with the word *utopia*, which does not only mean “good place”, but also “no place”⁷ (Bagchi). Ostensibly, the Darling Children indeed experience Neverland as a utopian place with a lagoon full of mermaids (Barrie 34), fairies, pirate ships (43), and “splashes of colour here and there” (6). However, both Neverland’s setting as well as its inhabitants have a darker side as well. The island itself, for example, turns “dark and threatening by bedtime” (44). This gloomy atmosphere scares the Darling children, which results in a feeling of loneliness (42). Furthermore, the fairies and the mermaids are an example of inhabitants who fail to live up to, especially Wendy’s, expectations. Wendy is very excited to meet Tinker Bell, because “fairies struck her as quite delightful” (29). However, Tinker Bell turns out to be impolite, jealous and merciless; she even tries to kill Wendy because she “[hates her] with the fierce hatred of a very woman” (50). The mermaids disappoint Wendy as well; she “never [has] a civil word from one of them” (85), and they even “[splash] her with their tails, not by accident, but intentionally” (86). Because the inhabitants of Neverland are actually mean, unfriendly and, in Tinker Bell’s case, even jealous, Neverland proves to be a dystopian place where Wendy is wished dead by

⁶ Gerald Brom wrote a retelling of Peter Pan called *The Child Thief* (2009), in which Peter is turned into a horrible murderer.

⁷ The word *utopia* can therefore be seen as a pun: eu-topia means “good place” and “ou-topia” means “no place” (Bagchi).

a fairy and bullied by mermaids. The Darling children “[help the readers recognise] the negative aspects” of Neverland, which characterises dystopian protagonists (NCTE). The only inhabitants the Darling children do not dislike are the Lost Boys. Although the Lost Boys themselves are not seen as a dystopian element, they appear to be “rather lonely” (Barrie 31), and when they get the chance to leave, “they [jump] with joy” and join the Darling children without hesitation (120). This strongly suggests that they do not consider Neverland a utopia either.

Deadly Violence

Another recurring dystopian element in *Peter Pan* is violence in combination with death.

Peter is quite violent himself, admitting to have killed “tons” (Barrie 45) who he “[forgets] after [he kills] them” (177). Also, during the fight with the pirates, the Lost Boys, John and Peter “draw blood” and kill many (95). The pirates wound them in return; Tootles, for example, is stabbed by Smee “in the fourth rib” (96), and Peter is bitten by Hook⁸ (96).

Captain Hook is the most evil of all the pirates, with eyes that light up “when he [plunges] his hook into [someone]” (55). He treats his men like dogs, “and as dogs they [obey] him” (54).

Another example is the previously mentioned scene in which Tinker Bell wants the Lost Boys to shoot Wendy, and Peter, as a result, wants to stab Tootles (65-7). Thus, in the case of Neverland, it is as if “violence has taken the place of rational thinking and moral choice.” (De Souza 5), which is a recurring characteristic in dystopian stories. Captain Hook and Peter do not talk things out⁹, neither do Wendy and Tinker Bell, which results in violent, and sometimes even deadly¹⁰, situations. Sometimes it is even called “a massacre rather than a fight” (Barrie 126).

⁸ Although “not the pain of this but the unfairness was what dazed Peter.” (Barrie 96-7).

⁹ Hook is annoyed by Peter’s cockiness and “impertinent appearance” (Barrie 133).

¹⁰ Hook dies in his last fight with Peter.

A Villain's Dystopia

Neverland is not only dystopian to the Darling children and the Lost Boys, but to Hook as well. He feels tormented by Peter and as long as Peter lives, “the tortured man [feels] that he [is] a lion in a cage into which a sparrow had come” (Barrie 127). Peter, however, is not the only one to disturb Hook; there is “a gigantic crocodile” that wants to eat him, which is Peter’s doing because he fed it Hook’s hand (56). Because of these fears, Neverland is a dystopian place to Hook as long as Peter inhabits it. Hook is “unhappy” (144), and “terribly alone” (141). At one point, it even troubles him that “no children love [him]” but fear him instead (143), although he is “not wholly evil” (133). His “[struggle] to escape” Peter’s wickedness and his feeling of being “trapped” are examples of a dystopian protagonist (NCTE). Kent Lasnoski argues that “because almost nothing is impossible for [the young,] [m]en are ceaselessly jealous of [them], a jealousy which can lead them to a desire to destroy it as Hook desires to destroy Peter” (Lasnoski). This suggests that as long as Peter is around to torment him while he remains unloved by all other children, Neverland can be considered Hook’s dystopia.

“The Awful Thing”

In conclusion, Neverland is often described as a utopia for children, but contains strong dystopian elements nevertheless. The recurring theme of death and violence disturbs the Darling children and the Lost Boys, since the beasts, pirates and Indians “want blood” (Barrie 52), Tinker Bell wants to murder Wendy, and Peter is there to punish them when they disobey or grow up (52). Because of his dominant behaviour, Peter could be seen as the dystopian controlling factor (NCTE). To 20th century children, a world without parental supervision, rules, and obligations seems utopian, but because they are faced with all the above-mentioned threats, this image is soon spoiled. During their flight to Neverland, Michael and John already

propose to fly back home, to which Wendy replies: “That’s the awful thing. [...] We should have to go on, for we don’t know how to stop” (Barrie 41). This suggests that they already had a foreboding that Neverland would not be as wonderful as they imagined.

Morals and Morality

Claire Hintz and Elaine Ostry state that utopias and dystopias teach children “about governance, the possibility of improving society, the role of the individual and the limits of freedom” (1). They also argue that to an extent, “childhood itself [is seen] as utopian” (5), especially by adults, which would mean certain aspects of the adult world, such as following rules and taking responsibility, could be seen as dystopian elements. However, whether childhood can be considered utopian depends on the time in which the children live. The Darling children were created only a few years after the Victorian era, when children were often treated as adults (Renaissance London), and five decades earlier, Alice’s social situation was more or less similar. During the industrial revolution, there was “a huge demand for female and child [labour]” (Lambert). Children did not really have a childhood, so describing it as utopian seems inappropriate. A fictional world such as Neverland or Wonderland could therefore be considered a fictional place of refuge. During the second half of the 19th century, this started to change; children “were going to school instead of work”, and were now able to “avoid the exploitation of their childhood and gain an education” (National Archives). In a way, Alice represents this change by constantly emphasising that she “[knows] all sorts of things” (Carroll 47). She uses her education to solve problems and is eager to expand her knowledge.

From Misunderstood to Motherly

The mental stage of the characters in both *Peter Pan* and *Alice’s Adventures* have influence on the morals each story conveys, and also on the way children from different eras can relate to and learn from them. There are different stages of “moral growth” (Sears). Alice, for

example, is said to be about seven years old¹¹, which means she is in transition from stage three, age three to seven, to stage four, age seven to ten (Sears). At this point, Alice is aware of the views, norms and values of others, she “[expects] wiser people to take charge, [and understands] the roles of ‘child’ and ‘adult’” (Sears). However, as a result of the development of stage four, she also starts “to question whether parents and teachers are infallible” (Sears). She is not intimidated by authorities, but she is aware that they are needed to keep the system going, and starts to develop a “strong sense of ‘should do’ and ‘should not do’” (Sears). The problem with Wonderland, however, is that almost all inhabitants who Alice expects to be wiser than herself are in fact “mad” (Carroll 87). Even those in charge fail to live up to these standards. The Duchess, for example, actually argues that “[e]verything’s got a moral, if only you can find it” (109), but the morals she comes up with make no sense¹². For instance, she tells Alice that “flamingoes and mustard both bite. And the moral of that is[:] ‘Birds of feather flock together’” (110). Alice is aware of the absurdity of this statement, and replies by telling the Duchess that “mustard [is not] a bird” (111). The Duchess without protestation agrees with Alice, and by doing this completely subverts her own arguments. This not only shows how nonsensical the Duchess is, but it also blurs the generalised boundaries between adult’s wisdom and children’s ignorance. However, even though the Duchess admits that Alice is right, Alice soon discovers that the Duchess is an exception to the rule.

Even though *Peter Pan* primarily concerns Peter, Hook and the Darling children, Wendy is the main focaliser. Her age is not mentioned, but she is probably around thirteen years old (Neverpedia). Despite the fact that she is still a child, she becomes a “girl who is no longer herself childlike” (Roth 59). She mentally matures as soon as she enters Neverland and regards it her duty to care for the Lost Boys. Compared to her brothers, she is far “more capable of abstract reasoning about moral values and becomes interested in what’s good for

¹¹ Not in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, but in the sequel that takes place half a year later, *Through the Looking-Glass*, Alice says: “I am seven and a half exactly” (Carroll 210).

¹² Rahman has thought of this as well (3).

society” (Sears). The Darling children are aware of Peter’s constant act of make-believe, but even though they probably know Peter is not their biological father, they start to forget who their real parents are. Wendy finds this quite disturbing, “and nobly anxious to do her duty, she [tries] to fix the old life in their minds” (Barrie 80). She feels that forgetting about their family is morally wrong, which shows that she is the only one who is not able to fully lose herself in the world of imagination. Wendy did not go to Neverland to forget about reality; “she chose to go simply because she wished so much to be a mother, as a consequence of education given to Victorian girls” (Magalhães 41). She feels responsible and takes care of Peter, her brothers and the Lost Boys as a “nice motherly person” (71); she bathes them (82), gives them medicine (121), tells them stories (71), and “[holds] them tight” when they need to be comforted (160), even though she always remembers that she is not their real mother. At one point, Peter wants to know for sure whether their parental roles are make-believe, because “it would make [him] seem so old to be [the boys’] real father” (110). Wendy then tells him it is only true if he wants it to be (111). Peter accepts her as a mother because she is “also a child” (Magalhães 41). Wendy, at the stage of “abstract moral reasoning”, starts to feel things are “right because [they feel] right” (Sears); she cares for the Neverland children because she feels that doing so is the right thing. She also starts to become aware of “what’s good for society” (Sears): social constraint and parental authority.

Alice: Mind over Madness

Most of the inhabitants of Wonderland are irrational and unreasonable, like for example the Queen with her impulsive punishments. Alice is aware of Wonderland’s fallacies and realises its authorities’ incompetence, which suggests that she is a dystopian protagonist (NCTE). Moreover, these authorities often try to cover up this incompetence by using violence, which frightens Alice in a dystopian fashion. Furthermore, Alice thinks things through and tries to

come to a solution. Following the White Rabbit down the rabbit hole seemed like an interesting investigation, but Alice soon discovers Wonderland is full of nonsense, which tests her patience and, more importantly, her logic. David S. Brown argues that “there are [indeed] lessons in logic for us to discover in Wonderland” (79). Brown also explains that “logic is about [...] having clear ideas, [...] putting them into an orderly arrangement, and [...] identifying and dismantling fallacies” (80), and subsequently argues how the illogical aspects of Wonderland are a useful way of teaching the reader “lessons in logic” (79). One lesson is that assumptions cannot prove anything, which Brown illustrates with an example of the King (83). During the trial, he “*assumes* the Knave wrote the letter” and uses a made-up motive to “prove the Knave’s guilt as a tart thief” (83). The Queen is convinced by this “bad piece of reasoning”, and the Knave is beheaded (83). The reader is also made aware of the different categories of “quantity, quality, time [and] place”, and should be careful not to mix them up (85). The Mad Hatter makes this mistake “when Alice speaks of the category of *time*, while [he] thinks she is talking about a person whose name is ‘Time’” (86); Alice tells him he is wasting her time, to which he replies that “[if Alice] knew Time as well as [he did], [...] [she] wouldn’t talk about wasting *it*. It’s *him*”¹³ (Carroll 93).

It is striking that in most cases, the adults make these mistakes rather than seven-year-old Alice. This suggests that to both children as well as grownups, the moral of the story is that adults should not think of themselves as superior to children, and, as Arifa Ghani Rahman states, that “[the adult’s] world [is] hypocritical in teaching children one thing and themselves behaving contrarily. It is a message that is significant even today” (6). The dystopian elements contribute to this message, because they illustrate how hard it is for Alice to be in a world that contains adults who are unreasonable and so stubborn that, except for the Duchess, they do not value her opinions. The fear and frustration she experiences make her a dystopian protagonist, and even though the story is set in the second half of the 19th century, children of

¹³ Brown uses the same quote on page 86.

all ages are able to relate to this feeling of being a misunderstood child in a world full of unreasonable adults. The moral behind Alice being misunderstood would be that superiority, whether in age, size or social class, does not automatically geminate with being (morally) right. Wonderland contributes to this idea, because it contains (adult) authorities who are actually mad, but still refuse to admit their incompetence. Instead, they use violence to scare their people, which suggests dystopian leadership (De Souza 5). By following her instincts, Alice shows that authorities are not always right. She trusts her own mind when everyone around her is crazy.

Darlings

Neverland shows that “although children find in this utopian world the possibility to live without rules, to live great adventures, to live as children” (Magalhães 42), they do realise soon enough that it is not as utopian as it seems. Peter’s attitude and punishments, the constant threat of violent beasts, evil pirates, and, above all, the lack of parental comfort and safety are clear examples of dystopian elements within this world. By experiencing the fears these elements generate, the Darling children and the Lost Boys learn that even if Neverland is an adventurous place, in the end, they all want a mother to come back to. This indirectly teaches young readers to embrace the safety of their homes and, perhaps even more importantly, to accept that growing up is part of life. These morals are not picked up by Peter as he refuses to leave Neverland, which contributes to the mystery of his character. His age remains unknown, and even though Wendy says that he is “just [her] size” (Barrie 8), it is striking that “he [has] all his first teeth” (11). However, it is difficult to put Peter in one of the five moral stages. Normally, children start to change their teeth around the age of six, which, in combination with his pre-teenage appearance, means that mentally, Peter is a combination of stage three, four and five (Sears). “The children find hints of Peter’s consummate

childishness and its moral ambivalence” (Lasnoski). This illustrated when he, for example, catches the falling Darling children: “It was his cleverness that interested him and not the saving of a human life” (Barrie 40). The Darling children realise he is primarily concerned with himself and his obsession with keeping up make-believe appearances, which sometimes puts them in mortal danger. This indirectly teaches children that being selfish and careless can be immoral and dangerous. In other words, Peter as a dystopian element clearly has an influence on the moral of the story.

Another moral lesson hidden in *Peter Pan*, is that people are not simply good or bad. Michael Rowland states that “[t]he extraordinary complexity of Hook [...] belies the myth of him being merely a savage stock monster of fairytale” (1). He has clear motives to resent Peter. Apart from the fact that because of Peter, he is now constantly haunted by a crocodile, he is so jealous of Peter’s carefree attitude that the desire to eliminate him becomes an obsession (Lasnoski)¹⁴. To get this done, he “[maps everything] out with almost diabolical cunning” (Barrie 124). However, it bothers him that people think he is all evil and “no children love [him]” (143). It has even been proven that Barrie first wanted to cast Peter as a force for evil and that “Captain Hook did not exist” in the early stages of the story (Muñoz Corcuera 74); Barrie has even written “entries which show a demonic Peter Pan who kidnaps and murders children” (74). Peter was changed into a more likeable character after Hook was introduced, because it “would not have worked with two villains and no hero” (75). Peter kept his “most sinister features” nevertheless (75), and Hook was given “some positive ones” (76). He has a “handsome countenance” with eyes as blue as a “forget-me-not” (Barrie 54-5), “he loved flowers [...] and sweet music” (133) and is very elegant and well-mannered (55). The fact that a child cut off his hand and fed it to a crocodile has offended his pride, but he is not only looking for revenge, but indirectly for love as well. He is a tragic and complex character,

¹⁴ Which contributes to the idea that childhood and its carefreeness is utopian.

trapped as a dystopian protagonist, who is bullied by Peter, the boy who seems innocent at first, but ends up being one of the most dystopian elements of the story.

Dystopian Elements and Morals

The dystopian elements found in *Alice's Adventures* and *Peter Pan* influence the morals of the stories. In Wonderland, the dystopian idea of being a misunderstood child teaches readers that adults are not always right, and that instincts are often there to be followed; sticking to personal moral values is better than blindly believing others. The characters of Alice and the inhabitants of Wonderland combined illustrate how there is no clear distinction between the wise adult and the ignorant child. In Neverland, Peter indirectly teaches children the importance of caring for others, and readers learn to accept or even embrace that growing up is inevitable. Furthermore, the characters of Captain Hook and Peter Pan illustrate how there is no clear distinction between good and evil, thus children become more aware of the complexity of human character.

Dystopian elements in children's literature not only allow children to reflect on the society they live in, but can also teach them about morals and morality. Fictional worlds in children's literature are created to entertain the readers and the dystopian elements within this world prove that in the end, no world is perfect. Due to the imperfection of this world and its characters, the reader becomes more aware of the complexity of life and human character itself. Apart from the morals in dystopian elements, characters can also teach the reader about morality and immorality. Thus, development of children's moral values is stimulated by the lessons learned from the novels and their dystopian elements, which can help the reader become an understanding adult, because in the end, growing up is indeed "the story of our lives" (Logan 17).

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“To die would be an awfully big
adventure.”

- J.M. Barrie, *Peter Pan*