

Deconstructing the Peter Pan/Captain Hook Binary in *Peter and Wendy*

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## Deconstructing the Peter Pan/Captain Hook Binary in *Peter and Wendy*

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### Abstract

In J.M. Barrie's novel *Peter and Wendy*, Captain Hook is the villain to Peter Pan's hero. Many scholars comment on the complexity of both characters and mention a few similarities between the two. Much of the commentary concerning Peter and Hook uses psychoanalysis or a gender theory lens; however, Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of binary oppositions also works in examining the relationship between the legendary duo. Derrida illustrated through the binary of speech/writing that one term is not superior to the other, and this analysis will prove that Peter Pan is not superior to Captain Hook. By examining the Peter Pan hero/Captain Hook villain binary, one will see that they are dependent on each other, and that, despite Hook's death, his character lives on in Peter because the characters are doubles. Both characters constantly walk the lines between good/evil and childhood/adulthood. Evidence from the novel suggests Peter flits between hero and villain, and Hook, while malicious, is not wholly villainous. By proving that Peter and Hook are both hero and villain, adult and child, and, ultimately, the completing half to the other's character, it becomes apparent that one cannot be superior to the other. Therefore, the legendary pairing of Peter as the hero and Hook as the villain is deconstructed.

Keywords: deconstruction, children's literature, binaries, archetypes

In J.M. Barrie's novel *Peter and Wendy*, Captain Hook plays the villain to Peter Pan's hero. Many scholars comment on the complexity of—and similarities between—Peter Pan and Captain Hook; Karen McGavok briefly acknowledges the “doubling or twinning between Hook and Pan” (208). The commentary concerning Peter and Hook typically uses psychoanalysis or a gender theory lens; however, Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of binary oppositions also helps illuminate the relationship between the legendary duo. In arguably his most famous deconstructed binary, speech and writing, Derrida proposes the following:

[Rousseau] valorizes and disqualifies writing as the same time. At the same time; that is to say, in one divided but coherent movement. We must try not to lose sight of its strange unity. Rousseau condemns writing as destruction of presence and as disease of speech. He rehabilitates it to the extent that it promises the reappropriation of that of which speech allowed itself to be dispossessed. But by what, if not already a writing older than speech and already installed in that place? (143-42)

Derrida's deconstruction theory is a response to scholars who claim speech's superiority over writing; his proposal that writing is not inferior, and is perhaps equal, to speech debunks their binary opposition. Jonathan Culler synthesizes Derrida's deconstruction idea between binaries: “In oppositions such as meaning/form, soul/body. . . positive/negative. . . serious/nonserious, the superior term belongs to the logos and is a higher presence; the inferior term marks a fall” (93). Since Peter Pan has traditionally been labeled a hero, a positive attribute, and Captain Hook the negative villain, the binary of positive/negative in Derrida's definition summarized by Culler would situate Pan as superior to Hook. With the guidance of Derrida's deconstruction theory, this analysis will show that Peter Pan is not superior to Captain Hook. By demonstrating that both Peter and Hook are villain, adult, child, and ultimately, the completing half to the other's character, it becomes apparent one cannot be superior. Thus, the legendary pairing of Peter as hero and Hook as villain is deconstructed.

In opposing Hook, Peter plays the hero as well as the villain. They are enemies, but both characters contain evil as well as good. Despite Hook's evil, antagonistic actions throughout the story, the narrator states he is “not wholly unheroic” and is a “misguided man” (137).

The psychoanalytic commentary agrees that Captain Hook is not wholly villainous. Lester Friedman says, “they ignore the complexity of the man by interpreting him simply as the childish embodiment of evil,” and that Hook is “not an absurd cardboard villain, but rather an obsessed man psychologically tortured by competing systems of moral and immoral behavior” (189). Hook's obsession with good and bad form displays a concern with right and wrong, although his ideas on both may be “misguided.” Hook demonstrates his partial villainy when he finds Peter asleep:

Thus defenceless Hook found him. He stood silent at the foot of the tree looking across the chamber at his enemy. Did no feeling of compassion stir his somber breast? The man was not wholly evil; he loved flowers (I have been told) and sweet music (he was himself no mean performer on the harpsichord); and, let it be frankly admitted, the idyllic nature of the scene shook him profoundly. Mastered by his better self he would have returned reluctantly up the tree, but for one thing. (115)

The text exhibits a complicated, humanizing side to Captain Hook. Although he does not leave, this paragraph alludes to Hook possessing a “better half.” He is at war with himself. He inwardly battles his better half as he fights with Peter, who struggles to determine the boundaries between right and wrong. In other encounters with Peter, Hook resorts to non-fatal childish antics, such as biting and scratching, as if his conscience is persuading him not to kill Peter. If Hook is misguided, not completely evil, and possesses a better half, this complicates the villain archetype. Even though the narrator tells the reader we do not have to sympathize with the Captain, calling Hook misguided invokes sympathy. “Misguided” infers Hook was led astray, and that if Peter had not antagonized him, he might have chosen a different path. In fact, the original play's stage directions identify Pan and Hook as the “two antagonists” (145). This description would be easily applicable to a villain character, but a hero is typically described as a protagonist.

Labeling Peter as an antagonist, specifically Hook's antagonist, complicates his hero title and alludes to Peter's maliciousness. Hook may be willing to hunt and kill children, but Peter rather enjoys killing too: “He did this because there is a saying in the Neverland that, every time you breathe, a grown-up dies; and Peter was killing them off vindictively as fast as possible” (101). While

he believes it is real, Peter's pseudo-killing reveals his violent intentions. Although Peter is not actually killing adults, he *believes* he is killing them. This belief is an example of Peter's confusion between play-acting and reality, a confusion connected to his villainous tendencies. For instance, at the mere mention of pirates in the novel, Peter is excited: "'Pirates!' He cried. The others came closer to him. A strange smile was playing about his face, and Wendy saw it and shuddered. While that smile was on his face no one dared address him; all they could do was to stand ready to obey" (78). This quote reveals both Peter's sinister edge and his absolute power over the Lost Boys. Just as Hook captains his crew, Peter Pan captains the Lost Boys. Both characters enjoy being murderous, feared, and loved. Karen Coats addresses additional similarities between the two:

Both are quite willing to accept death at the hands of the other, simply because they are not tethered to life by the bands of love for other people. Yet Barrie has portrayed their hatred in devilishly clever ways to create surprising affective states for the reader; we may find ourselves cheering the boy's hatred of the man even while we identify in some ways with the man's hatred of the boy. (21)

Coats acknowledges the reader's ability to align with Peter or Hook in their contempt for the other. She implies that a reader could root for Hook like one would for a hero. Coats suggests that they can accept death because they are not tethered to love; however, Hook and Pan, as captains, both desire love, and they can accept death dealt by the other because they are equals.

At the encounter on the rock, the mirroring implies they are equal opponents and reflects Derrida's deconstruction of binaries. They are literally on equal ground, without an advantage over the other:

Hook rose to the rock to breathe, and at the same moment Peter scaled it on the opposite side. The rock was slippery as a ball, and they had to crawl rather than climb. Neither knew that the other was coming. Each feeling for a grip met the other's arm: in surprise they raised their heads; their faces were almost touching; so they met. Some of the greatest heroes have confessed that just before they fell to they had a sinking. . . . But Peter had no sinking, he had one feeling only, gladness; and he gnashed his pretty teeth with joy. (84)

The quote emphasizes the rivals' connection and mirroring. It also displays Peter's malevolence, which

hints Peter is not one of the "greatest heroes" due to the lack of a sinking feeling. While one could read this passage as Peter being fearless (like other great heroes), the word choice, combined with additional evidence of Peter's unheroic manners, alludes to the possibility of Peter not being a great hero at all.

After the encounter on the rock, Peter demonstrates his duality by exhibiting "good form" in offering Hook his hand to stand. Hook displays his villainous side by biting Peter. This specific example works dually on behalf of the hero/villain and child/adult binaries. Pan acts like an adult, playing fair, and Hook acts like a child by biting in retaliation. Friedman comments on Hook behaving like a child: "The captain surely is a grownup, but he is a pirate, hardly an appropriate embodiment of typical adulthood. . . . Pirates are boy-men who spend their lives playing games, dressing up in costumes, and living by their own rules. In this sense, they most closely resemble older Peter Pans" (195). Hook is the grown-up version of Peter Pan, but "acts like an adolescent most of the time. He is reckless and headstrong. Furthermore, he longs to have a mother who will take care of him" (May 73). This idea comes from Hook telling his crew "we will seize the children and carry them to a boat: the boys we will make walk the plank, and Wendy shall be our mother" (81). The pirates and the Lost Boys fight over Wendy as if she were a toy. By calling Wendy "our mother," Hook amplifies his inner child.

Like Captain Hook, Peter switches between childish antics and adult behavior. Even before he brought Wendy to Neverland, Peter played the authoritarian in the Lost Boys' lives, which contributed to his egotism. He is their "captain." When labeled the Great White Father, the narrator says, "[Peter] liked this tremendously, so that it was not really good for him" (91). Peter continues to play a father role when Wendy is present, but resorts back to being a child (95). For Peter, playing "adult" is a game, and when he grows tired, he maintains his refusal to grow up. If Captain Hook is supposedly one of the grown-ups, then Peter's imitation of Hook is yet another example of his adult role-playing. Peter Pan disguises his voice as Hook's to confuse the pirates, and even adds the signature "'I'll plunge my hook in you'" (79). His portrayal is so menacing and convincing that even Hook himself is startled: "'Who are you, stranger, speak?' Hook demanded. 'I am James Hook,' replied the voice, 'captain of the Jolly Roger.' 'You are not; you are not,' Hook cried hoarsely" (82). Hook's cry is desperate,

and the repetition of “you are not; you are not,” mimics a child’s whine. Hook is reduced to playing the child because Peter is borrowing his persona. However, similar to how Peter struggles to draw the line between play-acting and reality, Peter does not stop at borrowing Hook’s voice.

Near the end of the book, Peter constantly thinks “Hook or me this time” as he travels to his final battle with the Captain (127). Peter is the only one who can kill Hook and vice versa. He earns the hero title by saving his crew and defeating Hook. Upon Hook’s defeat, it would be easy to assume Peter’s superiority in their binary, but his actions after Hook’s death suggest otherwise. Since Neverland cannot contain two captains, they must be condensed into one, and Peter is the one left standing. He takes over Hook’s ship and persona: “Peter had already lashed himself to the wheel; but he piped all hands and delivered a short address to them... Captain Pan calculated. . . and if they snapped at him he would tear them” (139). Peter not only takes over Hook’s wheel, but also threatens to tear into the Lost Boys, if they disobey him. Like Peter’s belief in killing adults by breathing, by getting rid of Hook physically, Peter has taken his adult role-playing of his enemy into the realm of reality. Peter Pan becomes Captain Hook in appearance, status, and action. His new guise makes Wendy question her supposed hero:

The general feeling was that Peter was honest just now to lull Wendy’s suspicions, but that there might be a change when the new suit was ready, which, against her will, she was making for him out of some of Hook’s wickedest garments. It was afterwards whispered among them that on the first night he wore this suit he sat long in the cabin with Hook’s cigar-holder in his mouth and one hand clenched, all but the forefinger, which he bent and held threateningly aloft like a hook. (140)

Peter goes beyond imitating Hook’s voice, all the way to trying on the Captain’s wickedest clothing. Pretending he possesses his nemesis’s hook reveals Peter’s obsession with the pirate. Another counterargument would be that he does not stay obsessed with Captain Hook for long because he forgets him. The original play contains the contradictory evidence to Peter’s lack of connection to Hook after his death. In the play, Peter tells Wendy, “So come on. . . I’m captain” (162). Peter may have forgotten his old enemy in his perpetual refusal to grow up, but he has absorbed the sole captain role. Beyond

the shared traits, through Peter’s imitation and dress-up, Hook subconsciously becomes part of Peter.

Peter lives on without his memory of Hook, but other characters and readers cannot imagine a Peter without a Captain Hook. Paul Fox comments on the need for both characters and their multiplicity:

It is not so much the pirates themselves who are more aesthetically developed than the Indians, for just as the Lost Boys without Peter shamle through their everyday existence, without Hook, the pirates are simply another motley bunch of misfits on the island. But Hook. . . displays the capacity to act out roles unwritten for him. It is impossible to define Peter’s character because it is multiple; it is only in the manner of his becoming that he can be described from moment to moment in the narrative. (41)

Both characters share multiple roles with one another because they are connected through a binary. The characters complete one another in a hero/villain archetype, but it is a messy relationship that cannot be untangled. Friedman summarizes our need for the characters’ interdependence:

After all, what would Luke Skywalker be without Darth Vader, Robin Hood without the Sheriff of Nottingham, or, in a contemporary literary version of boy-hero versus man-villain, Harry Potter without Lord Voldemort? These deadly combatants are forever yoked together in our minds. . . As long as we crave both heroes and villains, as long as we thrill to the glory of flight and shudder at the expression of wickedness, Peter Pan and Captain Hook will breathe within us. (216)

The idea of being “forever yoked together in our minds” coincides with Derrida’s deconstructed binaries. One cannot separate speech from writing because they complement and depend on one another. Once Hook is killed, Wendy and the Lost Boys leave Neverland, which forces the reader to leave as well. Peter must carry the binary by himself, and this draws the story to a close. Peter Pan may be labeled as a boy-hero, and Hook the villain-man, but as demonstrated, those terms are interchangeable in this particular pairing. Therefore, Peter is not superior to Hook but equal because their stories cannot be told separately. As Friedman suggests, we as readers crave both characters, not just Peter.

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