

Psychological Criticism and Shakespearean Allusions in J.M. Barrie's *Dear Brutus*:

A Neverland for Adults

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Abstract

In *Peter Pan*, Sir James Barrie welcomes readers into Neverland, the realm of eternal youth. Barrie's lesser-known play, *Dear Brutus*, ushers audiences into a supernatural garden free of responsibility, reality, and permanence. Referring to Cassius' words in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, the 1917 tragedy explores the consequences of romantic escapism and the seductive power of second chances. Through the lens of Freud's and Lacan's psychological criticism, and Barrie's connection to his might-have-been daughter, Margaret, *Dear Brutus* unveils the plight of eight mysterious strangers by illustrating that all adults are lost children. *Dear Brutus* feels in many ways like an unconsciously autobiographical play in which Barrie sought to work through his own traumatic childhood and submerged desires to permit his characters to discover the importance of facing up to reality and adult responsibility.

**Psychological Criticism and Shakespearean Allusions in J.M. Barrie's *Dear Brutus*:
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Sir James Barrie is best known for the creation of *Peter Pan*, the tale of a free-spirited boy who never grows up. Barrie is a master of creating imaginative, impossible worlds outside the confines of reality, and was devoted to writing plays that transported audiences away from their circumstances. A prominent tone in Barrie's plays is one of wistful melancholy for the return of childhood. The Scottish author wholeheartedly embraced Romantic principles, reflecting a disenchanting view of adult life in many of his books. One of his plays expresses this regret in a tragedy entitled *Dear Brutus*. Performed first in 1917, *Dear Brutus* is not well known, but remains one of Barrie's best works. The play balances whimsy and gloom with a commentary on adult's deepest, unconscious desires. Barrie's allusions to Shakespeare and the nostalgic setting of a grownup Neverland allows *Dear Brutus* to offer tremendous insight into the power of second chances and the consequences of playing god. *Dear Brutus* feels in many ways like an unconsciously autobiographical play in which Barrie sought to work through his own traumatic childhood and submerged desires to permit his characters to discover the importance of facing up to reality and adult responsibility.

Background on the Author

To fully appreciate the weight of *Dear Brutus*, it is necessary to consider Barrie's experiences that inspired a play about second chances. Furthermore, Barrie's desire to seek refuge in fantasy worlds, in his writing and relationships, evoke Lacan's psychoanalytic theory that we unconsciously attempt to return to the lost comforts of the imaginary order. Thus, a background of Barrie's traumatic childhood and adult life must be noted to enrich the understanding of his 1917 play.

The famed novelist was the son of David Barrie, a modest weaver in Angus, Scotland. As one of ten children in the Victorian period, Barrie was often isolated from his parents. Barrie depicts a lonely childhood with his nanny, being forced to endure the deaths of three older siblings, in the 1896 memoir *Margaret Ogilvy*. Named after his mother, *Margaret Ogilvy* describes the traumatic death of David, the favorite son, and the overwhelming grief that consumed Barrie's childhood. Margaret's depression was substantial, to the extent that six-year-old Barrie felt compelled to stifle his own emotions and personality while pretending to be his older brother. In the memoir, Barrie recalls, "At first, I was often jealous with the cry, 'Do you mind nothing about me?' but that did not last; its place was taken by an intense desire to become so like him that even my mother should not see the difference" (1.4). Barrie equates pretending to a gleeful game as he dresses in his brother's clothes and mimics his particularly wide stance and whistle (1.4). Margaret lived another twenty-nine years after David's death, due to Barrie's diligent caretaking as his deceased brother. He writes, "There was always something of the child in her, and her laugh was its voice, as eloquent as the past" (1.5). As long as she lived, Margaret held on to the troubling, but comforting belief that her son would remain a little boy forever, never growing up and never enduring the harsh realities of adulthood.

Throughout the memoir are several echoes to Barrie's desire for eternal youth and the spark of inspiration that prompted *Peter Pan*. Barrie writes, "[T]he horror of my boyhood was that I knew a time would come when I also must give up the games" (2.1). This haunting fear of leaving childhood behind echoes Lacan's psychoanalytic theory. For Barrie, nothing could be worse than leaving the nursery behind and entering adulthood. Similarly, Lacan argues that our separation from the imaginary order, and a perfect union with our mother, constitutes a great loss that we unconsciously pursue for the rest of our lives (Tyson 28). To continue his charade of

make believe, twenty-year old Barrie “played in secret, taking this shadow to [Margaret]... when she told me her own experience, this convinced us that we were very like each other inside” (2.2). Barrie and his mother connected over a mutual desire to stay young forever while simultaneously fearing the passage of time. In fact, Chapter Two is titled “Who She Used to Be,” illuminating Barrie’s understanding that the grown-up Margaret was merely a shade of her former self as “nothing of importance happens past age twelve” (2.1). This title implies that Barrie believes the younger Margaret, without grownup worries, is someone else entirely superior to her adult counterpart. Until her death, Barrie continued pretending to be his brother, not yet realizing the shadow of Peter Pan and blissful childhood that would be forever tethered to him.

Barrie carried his fears of growing up into his marriage to actress Mary Ansell in 1894. As far as anyone knows, this relationship was a dull, unconsummated marriage. Ultimately, it was his friendship with Sylvia Llewellyn Davies and her five children that shaped the trajectory of his life and cemented his childlike reputation. Barrie was charmed by the imaginative games and stories the children would create in Kensington Gardens. Out of the five, none of them so captivated Barrie as Michael, whom he describes as possessing “the finest qualities of boyhood in rare abundance” (Birkin 79). Each afternoon, Barrie accompanied the Llewellyn Davies boys and their mother Sylvia for games imaginatively played in make-believe western villages, Indian encampments, and pirate lairs until they became close family friends. This connection to children allowed Barrie to unconsciously pursue the completeness of the imaginary order with a joyful regression to his youth.

In Victorian England, children rarely interacted with their parents but remained mostly under the instruction of a nanny. Barrie adored that Sylvia was not a typical housewife, but an

enchanting, nurturing mother who encouraged her children's merriment and Barrie's stories. Described as "the most beautiful creature he had ever seen" (Birkin 83), Sylvia was disinterested in dinner parties and determined to hide sweets in the pockets of her dress for her boys. Lois Tyson writes that "[W]e unconsciously behave in ways that will allow us to 'play out' our conflicted feelings about the painful experiences and emotions we repress" (13). Barrie has continued to hold on to repressed desires for the love of his mom, that unconsciously motivates his love for Sylvia. Although both Sylvia and Barrie were married, the relationship did not prevent him from dropping ill-fated love letters at her door, lamenting that they were not acquainted before her wedding. His infatuation with Sylvia seemed strange to outsiders, as Barrie was considered "the least likely man to be interested" in romance with women and was already struggling with a troubled marriage (Birkin 11). This did not stop Barrie from spending every afternoon with Sylvia and her boys, leaving Mary no alternative but to seek a divorce.

The Inspiration for *Peter Pan*

Barrie's companionship with the Llewelyn Davies family changed the trajectory of his life and theirs. In the opening of *Peter Pan*, Barrie writes, "There was never a simpler, happier family until the coming of Peter Pan" (8). Barrie took every opportunity possible to learn from the Llewelyn Davies family as they exemplified his greatest desires: Sylvia embodied motherhood, and the five boys epitomized boyhood. For the first time in his life, Barrie didn't have to pretend to be anyone but himself to experience the riches of a loving family. Although his plays throughout the late 1890s failed to achieve critical success, Barrie continued molding his masterpiece. When he presented the initial concept for *Peter Pan* to directors, it required a large cast of flying humans and animals which "only Barrie could have been mad enough to invent" (Birkin 181). Regardless, Barrie knew the Llewelyn Davies playtime was special, and in

1904, the playwright credited the five boys with inspiring the enchanting world of Neverland and the infamous lost boys. In his opening night dedication for *Peter Pan*, Barrie wrote, “I suppose I always knew that I made Peter from the five of you... that is all Peter is: the spark I got from you, and what a game we had” (Birkin 9). The boys’ fascination with childhood and innocence, blended with the memory of Margaret Ogilvy, produced a play that was strikingly different from anything else.

In many ways, *Peter Pan* was the beginning and end of everything for Barrie. When reflecting on the happiness of Kensington Gardens, Barrie said to the boys, “[A] hundred acts must be left out, and you were in them all” (qtd. in Birkin 179). From the moment the first curtain arose, *Peter Pan* was a triumph, delighting audiences young and old with the joys of the boy who never grew up. Each new revival of the play brought unprecedented success, but as the Llewelyn Davies children grew, Barrie felt more disconnected than ever. Barrie pondered, “What was it that eventually made us give to the public a play that had been woven for ourselves alone? I know I was losing my grip. I wonder if it was a last desperate attempt to retain the five of you for a little longer” (qtd. in Birkin 8). Each of the Llewelyn Davies boys were chosen as Barrie’s gateway to childhood that he longed to recapture. For Barrie to re-enter his unconscious desire for childhood, he needed the Llewelyn Davies boys, and this desperation changed their relationship forever.

Spurred by grief, Barrie wrote about a magical garden that could grant second chances, that would later inspire *Dear Brutus*. The magic shattered when Arthur Llewelyn Davies died. Before long, Sylvia received her own cancer diagnosis, which sent Barrie into an emotional writing frenzy. The *J.M. Barrie Database* pieced together scraps of Barrie’s journals that say, “If I could have a do-over, would everything be the same or are we doomed to repeat our worst

mistakes?” (Birkin 255). Following their divorce, Mary said of her former husband, “James’ tragedy was that as a man he was a failure and that love in its fullest could never be experienced; this is why he sought sentimental philandering. One could almost hear him, like Peter Pan, crowing triumphantly, but his heart was sick all the time” (Birkin 291). Sylvia may have been the woman Barrie was willing to leave behind his nonsensical, childish fashion for, if he only had the chance. Unfortunately, Sylvia passed away, leaving the boys orphans under the guardianship of Sylvia’s sister and Mr. Barrie, where he continued to ruminate over the power of a second chance.

A Second Chance

Play and innocence were forgotten after Sylvia died. Barrie tried to convince Michael and the other children that she was simply in Neverland, but the more Barrie reached out, the more distant the boys became. Letters detail Barrie’s laments writing, “My dearest ambition is to help them and you [Michael] and I wish I did it so much better. I am so sorry about those pains in your head” (Birkin 287). Piers Dudgeon affirms in *The Real Peter Pan* that Michael suffered from constant nightmares that no one could relieve (11). George, the oldest son, was killed in combat during WWI. Peter, who referred to the play as “that terrible masterpiece,” was plagued by the identity of Peter Pan and threw himself in front of the Tube (Birkin 411). As Michael grew, depression worsened, and there was little Barrie or anyone else could do to lessen his suffering. Barrie tried writing new and exciting plays, such as *Dear Brutus*, to which Michael responded by way of review, “Not so bad” (Birkin 427). In the play, each of the eight characters invited to the Midsummer festivities share something in common: they yearn for a second chance and reflect an element of Barrie’s own personality. Despite the fanciful theme, *Dear Brutus* served as Barrie’s Neverland for adults, without harboring any illusions that a second chance in

life would be different from the first.

In 1921, Michael drowned with a close friend in Oxford, the night before Barrie's theater debut in the twenty-year old's honor. Barrie had written a new play, *Shall We Join the Ladies*, to please Michael, but as he left for college, Michael found other interests. "Barrie tried not to see it," Birkin comments, "but was wretched and miserable when he did. He needed this boy's love also, more than anything on earth, and had known for years that he had it" (448). When Barrie received the dreadful news of Michael's death, he was inconsolable. The youngest son, Nico, attempted to comfort him, but Barrie screamed, "Never you, take him away" (Birkin 449). Just as when David died, neither Nico nor Barrie could replace the loss of a beloved son. It is unclear if Michael's death was an accident or suicide, but Nico recalls his brother's fragile mental health. Nico writes, "Michael was the most remarkable person I ever met. Very sensitive and emotional, but had a profound effect on virtually everyone who came into contact with him" (qtd. in Birkin 452). Barrie was deeply affected by the loss and acknowledged that "Michael's death was the end of me" (Blazeski 4). Just like Margaret, Barrie fell into an irrevocable depression at the death of a boy who would never resurface from the water.

After the devastating loss of his adopted child and creative muse, Barrie put down his writing pen. Barrie mourned that "Michael was my entire world," and living without him would be his greatest game of pretend (Lane 1). However, it is 1917's *Dear Brutus* that illuminates Barrie's unconscious desire for a second chance with his chosen family and for Michael to be his son forever. In his journal, Barrie wrote, "[F]orever and ever I am thinking about him" displaying his anguish at the cruel loss. Michael, the purest inspiration for Peter Pan, had moved on into death, "the next big adventure" (116). To cope with the loss, Barrie found comfort in adopting his mother's philosophy that children who die escape the pains of adulthood. George

and Michael, having died in their early twenties, would never grow old. As strange as it seems, this worldview offered Barrie peace knowing that Michael would never have to suffer in old age as he had—a fate believed worse than death.

Dear Brutus: Barrie's Unconscious Autobiography

The tragic comedy of *Dear Brutus* is both cautionary and hopeful that for some brave individuals, a happier ending may come true. The play follows eight men and women, whose lives have come to grief, and their encounter with a second chance, only to wreck themselves on the reefs of their own failures (*Britannica*). Barrie's understanding that people will never truly change is brilliantly executed and remains true to the Shakespearean law in *Julius Caesar* that the "fault is not in our stars but in ourselves" (1.2.136-137). William Phelps writes that "the one hope of the world is not that human nature will change, for it never will; the hope lies in the possibility of controlling human instincts, in the coming of that time when man's energy, conscience, reason, and will power will control his passions, rather than being their obedient servants" (843). This hope for human responsibility and meaningful change is what crowns the last act of the play.

Dear Brutus never achieved the height of success of *Peter Pan* but fulfilled Barrie's goal of crafting a tragic comedy worthy of an adult Neverland. Dudgeon notes that Barrie's *Little White Bird* mentions second chances writing, "[W]e who have made the great mistake, how differently we would all act at the second chance" (qtd. in 267). Since the death of his brother David, Barrie has tried to escape his regret by clinging to childhood, which is the burden that *Dear Brutus* carries.

On opening night of *Dear Brutus* in 1917, crowds gathered to watch the unfolding of Barrie's dramatic commentary of self-revelation. The *Saturday Review* instantly praised *Dear*

Brutus as the most charming, original play since *Peter Pan* and compared Barrie's playwriting skills to that of Shakespeare (457). The fortnightly magazine wrote, "There is rarely a play really popular for all audiences in the sense that *Romeo and Juliet* was popular in its day or *Dear Brutus* is popular today" (458). The secret to Barrie's lasting popularity throughout the twentieth century lies in his remarkable imagination. *Saturday Review* believes that Barrie's plays possess two crucial traits: fancy and fun, and *Dear Brutus* shows us these gifts of Barrie at their best (459). Similarly, the Art Institute of Chicago commented, "That *Dear Brutus* is the work of Sir James Barrie is recommendation enough for even the most hardened playgoer. No one else in the modern theater has touched quite the same vein of whimsical and fantastic humor" (1). *Dear Brutus* dramatized, with brutal honesty, Barrie's obsession with childhood innocence and emotional loss by inviting audiences to peer behind the curtain at the harsh realities of grownup Neverland (Thorpe 1). Even more, *Dear Brutus* provided a crucial opportunity for Barrie to self-reflect and reconnect with Michael. Through the parent-child dynamic of Will and Margaret Dearth, Barrie unconsciously writes an autobiographical play that showcases his desire to return to the ideal imaginary order.

The Midsummer's Eve Woods

Dear Brutus opens with eight strangers invited to partake in Lob's Midsummer's Eve festivities. Lob is a peculiar, eccentric old man who takes great pleasure in the mysterious assembly. His butler Matey confesses, "He always likes them to be here on Midsummer night ... them who have that in common" (21). This question of commonality lingers throughout the party as the eight strangers discern why they were summoned. Lob says that "in the wood you get what nearly everybody here is longing for— a second chance" (56). Upon this reveal, each character is ecstatic about the possibility of better circumstances, echoing, "I would give the world to be able

to start again” (23). Each guest is so unsatisfied with their lives that they feel obligated to try and fix what went wrong. The magic of the wood, according to Lob, is only accessible on Midsummer’s Eve; the strangers had one night to experience a second chance. As they chant in unison, “[T]o the wood, to the wood!” (57), Barrie introduces the wood’s unsettling nature. Following the call, the narration illustrates, “[T]here comes a sudden indrawing of breath from all, for no garden is there now and in its place is an endless wood of great trees; It is a somber wood with splashes of moonshine and of blackness standing very still” (58). The chosen eight cannot help but enter the enchanting forest where they hope to wrestle with fate for the future of their lives.

Although the woods are daunting, the guests, like Barrie, are desperate for a second chance. The first set of characters that audiences encounter is the love triangle comprising Mr. Purdie, Mabel Purdie, and Joanna Trout. After years of marriage, Purdie has grown tired of marriage to Mabel and is pursuing an affair with Joanna. Before entering the woods, Mabel catches Purdie and Joanna in an intimate embrace and candidly remarks, “I’m looking for something I’ve lost; my husband’s love. Have you picked it up, Joanna?” (41). Without sensitivity to Mabel, Purdie and Joanna grieve that fate did not bring them together sooner (42). No matter the consequences, each of them are willing to do anything for the lure of romance in the woods.

Will and Alice Dearth are perhaps the most important individuals in *Dear Brutus*. Although once very much in love, the couple has experienced failing careers, wrestled with alcoholism, and endured a turbulent divorce, turning them into shades of their former selves. Both are disillusioned with life and entirely disappointed with themselves. As they prepare to enter the woods, Alice explains her need for a second chance and a new husband. Alice replies,

“I got to know you really, Will; I knew from the first moment I saw you that you would love me or knife me, and I despise you for it” (51). She continues, admitting, “If I hadn’t married you what a different woman I should be. What a fool I was” (52). Will Dearth does not deny his wife’s accusations, but achingly mourns, “perhaps if we had had children. Such a pity that three things come not back to men nor women- the spoken word, the past life, and the neglected opportunity” (52). Dearth voices that if things were only different, and they could have raised a true family, they might have been happy together. Echoes of Barrie’s voice to his wife Mary can be heard in the couple’s dialogue as a regretful husband who gave up on his childless marriage in pursuit of a second chance with Sylvia. Barrie and the Dearth’s confront these “if onlys” with hopes of a fortunate outcome in the Midsummer woods.

As the eight guests enter the woods in Act 2, their personalities remain the same, but they have no memory of the real world they left behind. The moonlight magic of Midsummer’s Eve grants the guests a glimpse into an alternative path. Mr. Coade, an elderly man who has dealt with chronic illnesses for years, dances merrily with the energy of a child in the woods. Matey, the butler, and Lady Caroline, a snobbish society woman, have turned from grave enemies to vulgar lovers. Joanna is alarmed to find her role as mistress reversed with Mabel. Immortalized as the “other woman,” Joanna searches for her husband, Purdie, who is captivated with Mabel in the woods. Lob’s second chance did not change the guests or give them what they wanted. Instead, audiences realize that the woods become a taunting mirror, pointing out the same insecurities, disappointments, and hang ups as before.

The “Might-Have-Been” Daughter

Will Dearth is the only character who benefits from his second chance in the woods. The magic grants him his greatest wish: a dream child, Margaret. In real life, Dearth is a poor, drunk

nobody, but in this fantasy he is a successful artist made happier by the company of his daughter. Margaret is a dear child whose closest companion in the world is Will Dearth. The scenes between Will and Margaret Dearth are the most compelling in the play; however, the audience experiences pangs of remorse knowing Margaret is the only character that does not actually exist in reality. The first hint that Margaret is no ordinary daughter comes when she voices her concerns about the fragility of happiness. Margaret worries, "It's too lovely Daddy, I won't be able to keep hold of it... the world, everything, and you most of all. Things that are too beautiful can't last" (76). Barrie's obsession with childhood rings clearly in Margaret's words. He implies that childhood is too good to last and will eventually fade to gray with age. A similar passage in *Peter Pan* says, "Children know they must grow up after two; two is the beginning of the end" (13). Barrie argues that there is an innate sense in every child that can feel the loveliness of youth slipping away with each passing day. Just as writing *Peter Pan* was, at some level, a desperate attempt to keep the Llewelyn Davies boys young at heart, Barrie communicates in *Dear Brutus* the depth of loss he feels about growing up.

Additionally, Margaret represents a vital key that unlocks Barrie's authorial intention for the play and his understanding of the profound connection joining loss and innocence. When she is afraid, Margaret asks her father what a "might-have-been" is. Will Dearth explains that they are merely ghosts or kinks inside of us that could have set us off along the wrong path. Dearth says, "The poor soul I might-have-been may not have had Margaret, and how I feel sorry for him" (78). Paul Taylor argues that "*Dear Brutus* allowed Barrie to be remarkably self-revelatory about his obsession with grief over what might-have-been" (1), which is exactly why Margaret is so essential. Barrie purposefully gave Margaret, the lost child, the name of his beloved mother. Likewise, similarities in Barrie's memoir and *Dear Brutus* are used to parallel Margaret Dearth

to Margaret Ogilvy. After his brother David's death, Barrie had described his mother as a "weary shade" (2). Dearth tells Margaret that might-have-beens are "lovely but intangible shades made of sad folk's thoughts" (78) echoing Barrie's own personal trauma. Margaret's most agonizing line is when she cheers, "I am so glad I'm not a shade! How awful it would be to wake up and find one wasn't alive" (78). If Peter Pan is the "boy who wouldn't grow up," Margaret is the girl who couldn't grow up because her existence is only fantasy (Taylor 2). As with most of Barrie's best plays, *Dear Brutus* entwines youthful pleasures with disillusioned heartache, and it is excruciating to watch Margaret and Mr. Dearth in the middle of make-believe and reality.

In many ways, Barrie grew up without a true mother. Pretending to be his brother David depleted any of his own individuality and taught him that who he was alone could never be enough to earn his mother's love. Wendy Darling, the nurturing "child mother" of Peter Pan and the lost boys, heals this void for Barrie in a peculiar manner whereby youth fixes the brokenness of adults. Likewise, Margaret could not imagine her father surviving alone, commenting, "Poor old daddy, wandering the world without me" (78). Even so, Barrie's final letter to Michael Llewelyn Davies writes "more and more wishing you were a girl of 21 instead of a boy so I could say the things to you that are now always in my heart" (Birkin 419) which echoes Dearth's comment to Margaret saying, "[T]he awful thing about a son is that never can you tell him that you rather like him. No, daughters are the thing" (80). After adopting the five Llewelyn Davies boys, Barrie may have yearned for a daughter of his own to fill the void left by his mother and Sylvia after their deaths. For Barrie, Margaret is the manifestation of both his second chance desire and distress over the end of childhood.

To illustrate his fear of adulthood, Barrie highlights the harsh environment of the woods. In the enchanted woods, Alice Dearth is penniless, searching for scraps to eat. The narrator

comments, “A vagrant woman has wandered in their direction ... but she, once a dear fierce rebel, with eyes of a storm is now a whimperer. She and they meet as strangers,” (89-90). When their eyes meet, Will wonders if the woman has lost anything. On seeing the pair’s good fortune, Alice comments, “You drew something out of the lucky bag when you got Margaret, Mister. Take care of her, they are easily lost” (93-94). Again, Barrie focuses his attention on Margaret as a child with inevitable consequences in the real world. Tragedy strikes when Mr. Dearth feels a pull toward Alice. Despite Margaret’s attempts to restrain him, Will leaves behind the magical forest and his only daughter. The narrator says that “Margaret runs from tree to tree calling to her Daddy, but we begin to lose her among the shadows. Out of the impalpable that is carrying her away, we hear cries ‘Daddy, come back; I don’t want to be a might-have-been’” (97). The spell breaks, and Margaret fades into the shadows of a Midsummer’s Eve dream.

A Return to Reality

Barrie reveals that fate has no power over the direction of one’s life, and there is no one to blame but ourselves for the consequences of our own actions. Some may wish on stars and seek mysterious second chances, but until there is significant self-reflection and “fight” within their soul, Barrie argues that they will never change. As the characters return, they are horrified as they begin to recognize themselves and remember their places in reality. Purdie laments that he used to think of himself as a fine fellow before the revelation in the woods saying, “It isn’t an accident that shapes our lives. What really plays the dickens with us is something in ourselves that makes us go on doing the same sort of foolish things” (106). Even with limitless chances, Purdie despairs that he will never be satisfied with any one woman.

What Barrie describes as the “pampered something we are born with” (106) is humanity’s sin nature or tendency to repeat past mistakes. The guests resolve that this nature can

only be controlled by strong will and resilience. Purdie admits, “I have an abominably clear perception that the likes of me never really tries. Forgive me Joanna, Mabel . . . my whole being is corroded” (107). Thus, Purdie reveals himself to be a stand-in for Brutus saying, “Shakespeare knew what he was talking about. ‘The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings’” (107). Even with limitless second chances, unless one is able to recognize fault in themselves, their circumstances will stay the same.

Dear Brutus ends with lingering questions over the strange Midsummer’s Eve experiment. Can anyone truly change, and does the magic of the woods leave a permanent effect? The narrator promises that, once in a while, “there is hope for the brave ones” (138). Reality is much harder for Will Dearth than it is for the rest of the guests. Each of them returns the same, unchanged, but Dearth has lost something irreplaceable. Barrie describes the sound of his realization like the “clash of a hammer” as Dearth cries, “Oh no, my Margaret! I wish. . . I wish” (135). In his review of *Dear Brutus* A.B. Walkley writes, “When Mr. Dearth ‘comes to’ and suddenly realizing the loss of his dream-child, breaks into a sob, you catch your breath. What Barrie can do with children and the love of them we all know; but surely, he has never touched the theme with such tender and delicate felicity as he gives it here” (Birkin 410). The loss of Margaret is potent, particularly for Barrie as he expresses the unconscious desire to have children. Alice tries to recall why she entered the woods, murmuring about a second chance, as Mr. Coade mourns, “Yes, you poor dear thought you could make so much of it” (134). The guests prepare to fight their host, Lob, for trickery, but Dearth, having learned something critical from his time in the woods, stops them: “No, I’m rather fond of him. Lob, I thank thee for that hour” (136). Alice and Will Dearth choose to be brave outside of the woods. Recognizing the chance for self-reflection, re-commitment, and purposeful change, they step into the light of the

woods, refusing to waste Lob's opportunity.

The Burden of *Dear Brutus*

As much as Barrie's writing is whimsical and full of childish merriment, there is a potent warning laced throughout *Dear Brutus* that implies a mature audience. Alexia Kirk, director of Oxford University's revival performance of *Dear Brutus* comments, "If there was ever an English classic you've never heard of but you'd want to know, this is it. But it's challenging... tragic, comedy, and melancholy" (2). Regardless of his insistence on the power of fate and the existence of numerous second chances, Barrie will always choose boyhood over love and pretend over reality. Not even the most tragic of circumstances could convince the playwright to be anything other than who he is. Barrie will always be charmed by Sylvia and the five Llewelyn Davies boys. He will forever cherish the spark of inspiration for Peter Pan's flight. Yet Barrie's boyish features will always sink and age. The children will grow up and leave him behind. No matter how much Barrie loves Michael, he will always be the "might-have-been" child: a dream that sinks beneath the waves as a twinkling shadow. *Dear Brutus* is a tragedy because Barrie will never change.

The idea of never growing up is both beautiful and tragic. Nevertheless, the truth Barrie seeks to divulge is that all adults are lost children who feel alone and want to be loved. Each guest is lost in the woods trying to find their way back to who they once were or to gain a second chance to make things better. In Barrie's case, this is an unconscious desire to return to the comforts of the imaginary stage. Yet, Barrie's "might-have-beens" are cruel dreams of a Neverland that will never come. He realizes with the deaths of his mother, Sylvia, and Michael that nothing can alter the inevitable; only those brave enough to truly change themselves can direct a new path but they can never return to a before. Will and Alice are the exception to the

rule because they dare to examine the flaws in themselves and accept responsibility for their actions. When Barrie wrote *Dear Brutus* in 1917, he was grappling with the loss of Sylvia and Arthur and his guilt over the boys' declining mental health. Three out of the five Llewelyn Davies boys died before Barrie, and two of them were suspected suicides. Birkin documents that Barrie sent two letters a day to Michael at college, no matter how unrequited, because he was terrified to lose the love of his beloved child (400). Despite this, Barrie was "morbidly distant" from Michael and the other children out of fear that his darkness would spread to them (Birkin 411). *Dear Brutus* embodies this tension well: a desperate desire to change and hold on to family forever, and a painful acknowledgement that consequences are often permanent. Thus, *Dear Brutus* becomes Barrie's unconscious autobiography, expressing his contradictory desire to be free from adult responsibility and find belonging in a family.

Shakespearean Understandings of Fate and Choice

Dear Brutus contains several allusions to the English literary canon, most notably to the acclaimed Bard of Avon. Two key Shakespearean plays, *Julius Caesar* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* provide inspiration for Barrie's *Dear Brutus*. The most obvious connection lies in the play's name. *Dear Brutus* is a direct reference to Marcus Brutus, a conspirator in Julius Caesar's murder. Shakespeare's character Brutus is often seen in a sympathetic light, caught between his loyalty to his friend Caesar and his love for Rome. His decision to ultimately kill Caesar is complex, illustrating Brutus as a tragic, anti-hero persona. In the aftermath of mutiny, Brutus and Cassius discuss the consequences of their actions. Shakespeare wrestles with the tension between preordained fate and individual action (Schanzer 1). Cassius states, "Men at some times are masters of their fate. The fault, Dear Brutus, is not in our stars but in ourselves that we are underlings" (1.2.135-139). Caesar was warned about the "ides of March" and the

Midsummer company was warned not to enter Lob's woods, but what role does fate play in the inevitable? Barrie was undoubtedly inspired by the tension between fate and destiny, and used *Dear Brutus* to explore the possibility of mastering fate.

Essentially, fate implies a supernatural force beyond our control that determines humanity's actions. Both Shakespeare and Barrie hold firm beliefs that there is no one to blame but ourselves for our failure to change our circumstances. This idea differs from the beliefs of Thomas Hardy and Edmund Gosse, Victorian poets, whose life philosophies are marked by fatalism and the understanding that humans are puppets in the hands of destiny (Maity 1). Gosse writes that "[a]bandoned by God, treated with scorn by nature, man lies helplessly at the mercy of accident, chance, and time from which he has to endure injury and insult from the cradle to the grave" (267). Barrie disagrees that humanity is at fate's disposal. When Purdie realizes the fault within himself, the narrator comments, "The truth ran through him, seeking for a permanent home and willing still to give him another chance, loath to desert him" (106). Barrie argues that fate is something outside of us, hoping that we may realize permanent change and growth is only possible within ourselves.

In *Julius Caesar*, Brutus ends up purposefully falling on his sword, unable to live with the consequences of Caesar's death and the guilt of his own dishonor. Although Roman audiences would have viewed his suicide as an honorable death in battle, vanquished by his own hand, the characters in *Dear Brutus* would have understood this sacrifice as a cowardly one. Matey reveals that the Midsummer's experiment rarely works on Lob's guests, leaving them even more discouraged and unsatisfied. When Purdie admits an endless number of chances couldn't change his nature, Joanna exclaims, "It is so lovely not to be married to a rotter" (107). Alice and Will Dearth are the brave ones who stand a chance at a good life because they face

each day as a second chance to do better. Despite Barrie understanding death in *Peter Pan* as “the next great adventure” (147) *Dear Brutus* suggests his longing for satisfaction in the present. If only his mother would have loved him, or Michael would have never died, Barrie might have wanted to live—not as a boyish adult, but a compassionate father as Dearth is to Margaret. *Dear Brutus* fleshes out Barrie’s internal “might-have-beens,” only to discover that unless one is truly courageous and full of humility, the circumstances will always be the same.

Additionally, Shakespeare’s 1605 play *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* bears striking resemblance to *Dear Brutus*. Both plays are set in a fantasy garden or woodland realm where magic is actively manipulating reality for the human guests. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is a comedy about love and its many difficulties. The woods itself is a crucial character in the story, often encouraging inhabitants to act on their impulses or greatest desires without regard to the consequences outside of the protective woods. This freedom is similar to Barrie’s construction of Lob’s woods that magically appear during the Midsummer’s Eve and offer a seductive chance at life on a different path. In fact, Lob’s character is inspired by Shakespeare’s Puck, a mischievous sprite or fairy that influences the play’s events. In *Dear Brutus* the characters draw a direct connection between the two figures commenting, “Wasn’t there a Lob in Shakespeare? No, the names are so alike; Lob is another name for Puck” (20). The characters in *Dear Brutus* experience a collective amnesia in Act 2 in the woods, alluding to the closing line in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (Morris 1). Puck suggests that the events in the garden are nothing more than a dream imitating a forgetful fog: “If we shadows have offended, think but this, and all is mended. That you have but slumbered here while these visions did appear” (Shakespeare 5.1). Lastly, the setting of Midsummer, itself, is a connection between Shakespeare and Barrie’s texts. Traditionally, Midsummer, or the summer solstice, is intended to celebrate nature’s gifts to

the world. Shakespeare and Barrie drew on superstitions about Midsummer, attributing a mystical atmosphere to the woods that is only possible on the longest day of the year.

Applying Psychoanalysis to *Dear Brutus*

Children's literature, like any genre, deserves to be analyzed from an adult's point of view. To further divulge the relationship between Barrie and the expressions of his unconscious, one must examine such texts as Sigmund Freud's *The Ego and the Id* and Jacques Lacan's *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. The desires of the unconscious are sometimes inexpressible to an outside observer but surface in moments of heightened emotion and manifest themselves in dreams. The language of *Dear Brutus* is artful and poignant, almost as if the characters are existing within a dream world. It is only when the guests cross the border of reality and make-believe that the desires emerging out of the id are clear. Freud's psychoanalytic theory rests on a tripartite understanding of human personality consisting of the ego, superego, and id. These components represent a person's unconscious, or id, that is managed through the efforts of the ego and repressed by the moral conscience of the superego (Cherry 2). Lacan, on the other hand, considers the human personality occurring successfully as part of three orders: imaginary, symbolic, and real. Lacan's psychoanalysis supports how Barrie's central themes feature a longing for the past and a haunting experience of loss that is only deepened with age. John Griffith of "Making Wishes Innocent" remarks that Barrie's writing is a cheerful celebration of childhood on the surface, but when examining his intention for *Peter Pan* and *Dear Brutus* a "deliberately insubstantial fantasy springs" (2). At first, Neverland is an ambiguous place, something the psyche both desires and retreats from, insisting it is only make-believe if it becomes too real. Griffith argues that this conflict of desire and fear that Barrie's characters feel reveals the classic dilemma of children's literature: the tension between staying home and

running away (28). Barrie's involvement in both *Peter Pan* and *Dear Brutus* illuminates compelling instances of unconscious expression.

To apply psychoanalysis to *Dear Brutus*, it is necessary to begin with Barrie's foundation in *Peter Pan*. Literary critic Michael Egan examines *Peter Pan* from a Freudian perspective, focusing on the metaphors and archetypes of Neverland and the figures who inhabit it. First, Egan emphasizes the cyclical venture of the Darling children from the unconscious world of Neverland and back to reality, writing, "[E]ach new generation of children must undertake the pilgrimage afresh, an essential condition for maturity" (41). Likewise, the novel ends with a promise that the cycle will last forever so long as children are "gay, innocent, and heartless" (323), which resembles Freud's concept of the selfishly amoral child. For a child to be heartless, he or she must be incredibly selfish, lacking the maturity of the superego and the strength of an adult conscience. Barrie presents a paradox between children suffering from selfishness and residence in Neverland requiring it of them. Egan explains, "[T]he world of *Peter Pan* is open to us only so long as we are free from the restraints of conscience" (41). It is a child's ability to selfishly reward the desires of the unconscious that grants them access to Neverland and the consideration of adults that forever bars them from it.

When looking at *Dear Brutus* from this perspective, one must remember Barrie's escapist tendencies. Within Neverland, anything good and evil is possible, with no consequences in reality. Griffith writes, "That is the great magic of neverland: it is a place for people who are 'gay, innocent, and heartless' or that is, free of guilt" (31). Essentially, there are no penalties because make-believe actions do not count. Similarly, Margaret tells her father that "[T]o be very gay is so near to being very sad" (77). As a child "might-have-been," Margaret understands that she will never exist, and whatever childhood joys she experiences in the woods are fleeting.

Lob's woods operate much differently than Neverland; although it is an escape from reality, it only shows the possibilities of a different path. Apart from Will Dearth, everyone's circumstances in the woods are worse than before. Likewise, the overarching theme of *Dear Brutus* is that our decisions matter tremendously; regardless of a second chance, we are always left with the dark realization that humans rarely change. Barrie and the guests of *Dear Brutus* are seduced by their unconscious id to attempt a second chance at life, not as innocent children, but as lost adults with tragically competing egos and superegos.

Where Neverland is the manifestation of id in *Peter Pan*, the character Lob represents a driving force for the eight guests to express their unconscious desires for a better life. Lob is very childlike and immature in his pleas to convince the guests to enter the woods. Hiding under the table, Lob cries, "I had my heart set on your going. It is the thing I want, and it isn't good for me to not get the thing I want" (32). When the women in the party are not showing him enough attention, Lob wails, "[N]obody cares for me- nobody loves me, and I need to be loved" (33). Freud describes that the id is driven by pleasure and desires immediate gratification. Lob encourages the guests to lay aside their moral superego and realistic ego to consider the beauty of a new life and shows his immaturity by a need for motherly affection. By expressing this latent impulse, Barrie sets up the Midsummer's Eve guests as pawns in the woods for the id's pleasure.

Lacan's theory of psychoanalysis details the unattainable object of desire through four stages of human life. A major period of disruption is a human's transition from the imaginary stage, where the child is in a satisfying relationship with the mother, to the symbolic stage, which is a separation from that intimacy. The older we get, the farther we are from this perfect, intimate relationship with the mother in childhood which constitutes a haunting loss (Lacan 86). Barrie would have resonated deeply with Lacan's theories, as Lacan argues that humanity longs most to

return to the imaginary order where there are no restricting societal constraints. For Barrie, the idea of separating himself from his home and his mother would have been horrific. Griffith writes that “Barrie was plagued all his life, and quite consciously, by an obsessive concern for his mother’s affection” (30). As he grew, the only way Barrie could cope was to pretend every change was only make-believe. When David died, the trauma intensified Barrie’s games of pretend and desire for his mother to love him. From that moment on, regardless of his age, Barrie was determined to replace his dead brother to encourage his mother’s affections and cultivate the intimate bond they shared in the imaginary stage. Peter Pan could have existed in Neverland with only the pirates and lost boys for company, but Pan made it a necessity to foster a relationship with Wendy as his make-believe mother. A world without a mother, for Pan and Barrie, would be miserably incomplete (Griffith 3). This melancholic longing for the past connects Lacan’s theories to Barrie’s playwriting.

Likewise, Lacan’s unattainable object of desire, or *objet petit a*, represents a constant sense of loss or nostalgia for something missing in our lives. Lacan writes, “We are always searching for fulfillment, for knowledge, for possessions, for love, and whenever we achieve these goals there is always something more we desire; we cannot quite pinpoint it but we know that it is there” (88). Furthermore, the *objet petit a* does not have to be a particular object, but can represent the void, gap, or whatever substance momentarily heals the loss in our symbolic reality (Lacan 87). Each of the characters in *Dear Brutus* experiences this sense of melancholy when they accept Lob’s invitation. It doesn’t take them long to realize that what they all have in common is a dissatisfaction with reality and a longing to change. Will and Alice Dearth have a perpetual longing for a child that they believe will fix their marriage. Will mourns, “Perhaps is such a pity and a blessing seeing what sort of father they would have had” (Barrie 52). This

sense of overwhelming regret leads the Dearth and the Midsummer's guests into the woods with hopes that they can return to the life of perfection they once enjoyed. Margaret is also an example of Dearth's unattainable object of desire. Margaret, though merely a fantasy, represents his desire to be a father and a return to the childlike innocence of his imaginary stage. The tragedy of *Dear Brutus* is that this unconscious desire is impossible; all we can do is hopelessly chase a false promise of wholeness by gaining what we lack.

Peter Pan chronicles the boy who wouldn't grow up, but *Dear Brutus* showcases eight adults who cannot grow up or mature from the same foolish decisions. The Midsummer's guests shake their fists toward the sky, furious with the universe for ordaining such disastrous occurrences, until the host reminds them where the fault truly lies. *Dear Brutus* is a melancholic reflection on the inner workings of one's soul, affirming that humans have no one to blame but themselves. The loss of Michael Llewelyn Davies devastated Barrie's world and fundamentally shaped his writing, allowing him to process the anguish of outliving his children and what "might-have-been." *Dear Brutus* is the result of a traumatic childhood wrought with grief and an adulthood that is perpetually looking for family. The play communicates through Margaret's tearful wails that Lob's woods is a Neverland for adults, filled with harmful experiences that matter in reality. In his play, Barrie strives for theater and literary audiences to identify with the text's chosen eight in that all adults are lost children in need of divine guidance. Agreeing with Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Barrie argues that people are not governed by fate but undone by themselves. *Dear Brutus*, Barrie's unconscious autobiography, permits Alice and Will Dearth to exemplify Barrie's submerged desire to face the realities of the symbolic order with bravery.

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