

TED ANKARA COLLEGE FOUNDATION HIGH SCHOOL

ENGLISH B

EXTENDED ESSAY

“FROM CRADLE TO CRADLE”

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Research Question: Does J. M. Barrie in “Peter and Wendy” approach the concept of eternal youth the same way as Oscar Wilde in “The Picture of Dorian Gray”?

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ABSTRACT

“Peter and Wendy” and “The Picture of Dorian Gray” are stylistically distinct novels; however, they are both built on the protagonists’ desire to be forever young. This is a study on the relation that can be drawn between the ways Barrie and Wilde deal with the concept of eternal youth, leading to the research question: **Does J. M. Barrie in “Peter and Wendy” approach the concept of eternal youth the same way as Oscar Wilde in “The Picture of Dorian Gray”?**

After introducing the theme of youth and the novels’ plots, this essay will be divided into three main sections dealing with the novels’ protagonists, social dynamics and narrative styles. In the first section, Peter Pan and Dorian Gray will be compared as the subjects of eternal youth in the novels. The effects of eternal youth on these characters will be discussed. The second section will contain the evaluation of side characters and social dynamics of the novels with regards to their effects on the presentation of the concept of everlasting youth. Then, the narrative styles of the books will be compared in order to completely differentiate between the ways Barrie and Wilde have chosen to write about the same subject.

In the conclusion it is proved that while “Peter and Wendy” and “The Picture of Dorian Gray” contain similar critical ideologies against the concept of eternal youth, the writers set up very different plots and characters to show their approaches.

Word Count: 241

*“Youth is a dream, a form
of chemical madness.”*

F. Scott Fitzgerald

I. Introduction

Fleeting and much desired, youth is a concept that reminds mankind the ephemerality of time and it may evoke different connotations for everyone. When taken to extremes, as humans tend to do, this concept may manifest as the desire for being forever young. Through references to the conflicts this desire create, this study will analyse two individual approaches to the concept of eternal youth, that of J. M. Barrie in *Peter and Wendy* and of Oscar Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

One of the most influential fantasy novels of all time, “Peter and Wendy” tells the story of the *puer aeternus*¹ Peter Pan bringing a young girl called Wendy and her brothers to his dream realm of a home *Neverland* where no child ages, and having adventures together with his other stray friends, The Lost Boys. The novel plays with the contrasting themes of growing up and eternal youth, showing both the necessity and the tediousness of maturity while using Peter Pan as the personification of childhood and contrasting him with the maternal Wendy, who later chooses to grow up.

Depicting the corruption eternal youth might bring in a more drastic manner, “The Picture of Dorian Gray” by Oscar Wilde is the story of a man who seeks to keep his handsome youth by letting his portrait age and deteriorate alongside his soul, instead of his body. But while his body stays young, he starts to become more selfish, violent and vain: a fact that shows in the way his portrait gets uglier every time he acts negatively. Youth is seen as the main source of beauty in this Aesthetic novel, and while achieving it, Dorian slowly loses morality and remorse; his corruption carrying across the stand Wilde holds against the desire to hold eternal youth.

¹ The eternal boy archetype. Latin. (Yeoman, Ann, “*Now or Neverland: Peter Pan and the Myth of Eternal Youth: A Psychological Perspective on a Cultural Icon*” Toronto, 1998)

“The Picture of Dorian Gray” and “Peter and Wendy” are among the most prominent novels that deal with everlasting youth, but are rarely discussed together since they belong to different literary movements. Both works provide underhanded criticism on clinging to youth and trying to drag it on, using it as a means of escapism; albeit in dramatically different tones and styles, which leads to our research question: Does J. M. Barrie in “Peter and Wendy” approach the concept of eternal youth the same way as Oscar Wilde in “The Picture of Dorian Gray”?

Thus, this essay will be an analysis and comparison of the way the writers treat this theme, pointing out the differences between the literary styles and the similarities between the main ideas. The main points we will compare are the implications of eternal youth through main characters, social dynamics and the impact of narrative styles on the plots.

II. Peter and Dorian; or, the Boys Who Wouldn't Grow Up

Peter Pan and Dorian Gray do not have much in common other than being the namesakes of their respective novels and the epitome of how refusing to age will bring about corruption; or being such prominent figures related to youth that both have psychological syndromes named after them. (Peter Pan Syndrome denotes being “socially immature”² while Dorian Gray Syndrome is found in a man so obsessed with his own beauty that he exhibits arrested development and an intense fear of aging.³)

“Gay and innocent and heartless” (Barrie 100), Peter Pan is boyhood personified. Throughout the novel, he takes on many roles: chronically; an escort to heaven for dead children, charismatic leader, tyrant, son, husband, petulant boy, saviour, trickster, and stubborn puer aeternus. He glides through life as if everything is play-pretend; and for him, it is. Peter is brave in the way he is willing to sacrifice his own life to save Wendy, and he “shows good form” (Barrie 85) against his enemy Hook. These actions could be taken as manifestations of his youthful innocence.

What makes Peter’s ethereal childhood a negative aspect and gives the story darker undertones is his immaturity and his capability of committing possibly harmful acts simply for his own entertainment. This could be seen in the way “when [the Lost Boys] seem to be growing up, which is against the rules, Peter thins them out (...)” (Barrie 29) or the war games he plays in which he actually kills “tons” (Barrie 26) of people. The term “he does not know better” could apply to him throughout life, since he cannot possibly grasp the concepts of life and death when his very being is not bound to aging and going through these times. In his ignorance, Peter is a boy through and through; and this situation drags out as he continues to stay a child. Just like any other child, the morals imposed upon the society do not always

² Kiley, Dr. Dan, “*The Peter Pan Syndrome: Men Who Have Never Grown Up*”, Avon Books, 1983

³ Gieler, Uwe et al. eds., “*Clinical Management in Psychodermatology*”, 2008, p. 46-47

affect Peter. Due to his ambiguous morals, he would do almost anything to achieve what he wants; and doesn't hesitate in being manipulative, hurtful and cocky. In fact, "It was his cockiness" (Barrie 69) that made Hook hate Peter. This could be tied to the way people subject to growing up are required to have proper manners and be humble; and Peter's eternal youth gives him an excuse to be above all of these.

Another drawback to his character is that he does not take life seriously and he forgets everything shortly after it happens, and so his life becomes an endless cycle of taking children to Neverland and bringing them back when they want to grow up. Peter Pan, though idolised greatly, does not conform to the natural order; and is a reminder that "All children, except one, grow up." (Barrie 1)

Dorian Gray, on the other hand, is "a young man of extraordinary personal beauty" (Wilde 5). The way his beauty reflects "the purity and candour" of youth is constantly referenced throughout the first half of the book, where his boyhood is not yet completely lost. "Purity", being unstained by the negative emotions and actions of humans, is a part of Dorian's youth as much as his fear of growing old; so much so that he "would give his soul" (Wilde 24) to stay young and escape from the weight of time. His somewhat naïve vanity, brought on by the inexperience of youth, is one of the chief factors contributing to his corruption through this mysterious "deal with the Devil" trope. As invoked by his youth, Dorian is very impressionable as well; an aspect which the aesthetically obsessed Lord Henry delights in exploiting. In this sense, while youth is mostly explored as an enabler for beauty, it is also a source of innocence and naivety in "The Picture of Dorian Gray". As Dorian grows more and more hedonistic, his portrait which is a reflection of his soul becomes uglier, which shows Wilde's point that eternal youth is only superficial and nothing could keep one's mind and soul from aging. Dorian however, finds the portrait fascinating to a degree, even feels "a

sense of infinite pity” (Wilde 74) as it would show the alterations of time while Dorian would stay forever young.

After years have passed in a time skip between chapters ten and eleven, Dorian’s appearance is still the same. However, his once innocent vanity becomes a self-obsession, and his morals deteriorate. He kills his friend Basil and spends his time in an opium den to escape reality. Dorian’s delicate and ideological personality regresses into that of an impenitent hedonist of monstrous greed because of his narcissistic desire for eternal youth. In the end, when he realises how far he has fallen and swears to become a better man, his portrait reveals to him “his own wasted resolutions and wild regrets” (Wilde 148). Dorian’s death, brought on by his stabbing of the portrait, signifies the ultimate failure that is the desire for eternal youth.

Peter Pan is a child who does not want to grow up, while Dorian is a young adult who wants to keep his youth to stay beautiful. They do not meet the same ends, but “Peter and Wendy” and “The Picture of Dorian Gray” show both the positive and the negative effects eternal youth has on the main characters. The concept of eternal youth is thereby shown to be unnatural and an element of corruption in both works through the actions of the protagonists.

III. Interacting and Counteracting

Written in the same city, London, and only twenty years apart (1891 and 1911, respectively), “The Picture of Dorian Gray” and “Peter and Wendy” both rely heavily on social interactions to develop the main characters and to reveal the authors’ opinions on certain topics.

In “Peter and Wendy”, the main conflict is between childhood and growing up; thus, adult characters and children are constantly polarised. The negative aspects of adulthood are showcased throughout the plot to justify the desire for eternal youth. Besides Peter’s unwillingness to become one, adults are said to have lost their imagination and innocence, and are no longer able to fly like children do. Another way through which the reader is prompted to question adulthood is the way children imitate their society’s teachings without knowing why they are acting that way: “‘All look your best,’ Peter warned them; ‘first impressions are awfully important.’ He was glad no one asked him what first impressions are; they were all too busy looking their best.” (Barrie 41). Wendy’s father, Mr. Darling who has “a passion for being exactly like his neighbours” (Barrie 2) repeatedly acts pretentious and has a need to feel validated, drawing attention to the deceit of the adults’ world along with the scene of Captain Hook poisoning Peter while he is unguarded. In this case, the desire for eternal youth is justified, since the adult world is depicted in a way that only few people would want to be a part of. However, Barrie also shows the repercussions of eternal youth through Peter’s errors and immaturity, as discussed in the previous chapter. The opposing sides of adults and children and the attitudes of side characters against the protagonists help shed some light on the reasons and results of the concept of eternal youth.

“The Picture of Dorian Gray” depicts London’s high society in which beauty is one of the chief factors of being important. Even after Dorian’s reputation sours, members of the society still revere him because of his youthful beauty; which adds to his immaturely capricious

nature. Through parties, Dorian keeps staying popular and so finds his way of living validated by the society; his unwavering youth revered and marvelled at by all. “Very young men” (Wilde 103) are taken by Dorian and try to imitate him, mirroring the way he once blindly followed everything Lord Henry taught him; perhaps depicting a vicious cycle that every young member of the society goes through: to be impressed and to impress.

Using characters’ relationship dynamics more liberally than Barrie, Wilde shows Dorian’s relationship with Lord Henry to be one of the main reasons for Dorian’s downward spiral. Lord Henry only cares about beauty and satisfaction in life, romanticising life and human suffering: “There is something to me quite beautiful about her death.” (Wilde 83). His saying “The secret of remaining young is never to have an emotion that is unbecoming.” (Wilde 76) registers with Dorian as abandoning all negative emotions like shame, regret, worry – even though it could be argued that these emotions are what keeps us human. He criticises old people, especially women repeatedly, and gives Dorian a book that teaches him of the hedonist ideals. Dorian takes his corrupting influence to heart, representing the naivety of youth. The effect of Lord Henry’s teachings can be seen clearly as Dorian becomes so corrupt that he kills; but Lord Henry does not take the blame on himself, insisting that “Art has no influence upon action.” (Wilde 171). The overall dynamics of these two characters can be seen as Lord Henry influencing Dorian but remaining the way he is throughout the novel, while Dorian changes gradually because of his influence. Both of their views on eternal youth are tied to unchanging beauty, but they disregard the corruptibility and impressionability that youth brings, which causes Dorian’s demise.

Overall, side characters and social dynamics are used mostly to show the differences between the children and adults in “Peter and Wendy”; while in “The Picture of Dorian Gray”, they are used to develop the main character.

IV. The Narrations

The difference between the narrative styles of Barrie and Wilde is what creates the distinctions between “Peter and Wendy” and “The Picture of Dorian Gray”, with the first being regarded mainly as a children’s novel while the latter is famously Gothic.

J. M. Barrie adopts a relatively simple language in “Peter and Wendy”, heavily focusing on the plot events rather than the scenery and characters’ mindsets, which would make it easier for children to read. His narrative oversees every character and their thoughts, and is not focused solely on the protagonist; thus enabling the reader to see into the conflicts and contrast between adults and children. In one of the many paragraphs written from the narrator’s point of view, he refers to Peter taking Wendy then subsequently her descendants to Neverland and bringing them back only to repeat it for decades, saying “and thus it will go on, so long as children are gay and innocent and heartless” (Barrie 100). In these lines, he draws attention to the cyclical ways of time. In my opinion, this shows the most serious drawback of the eternal youth that Barrie depicts: it would not change anything. History repeats itself, and those who achieve eternal youth would have nothing to do but to dabble in the repeated waves of time. The easily-read way the novel is written in and the clear lines between moral and amoral carry across Barrie’s point: Everybody must give up on youth at one point or another even if it sounds dreadful; since not doing so would have repercussions.

Oscar Wilde in “The Picture of Dorian Gray” adopts an Aesthetic tone, leaning heavily on meticulously written descriptions of surroundings and reflecting the protagonist’s inner conflicts. The preface contains the lines “There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.” (Wilde 3), dissociating Wilde’s art from any higher judgement. This could be seen throughout the book in the way that Wilde aestheticizes concepts such as violence, cruelty and death in order to draw attention to the

descriptions such as “red dew that gleamed, wet and glistening, on one of the hands, as though the canvas had sweated blood” (Wilde 157) rather than acts of murder and cruelty. The way Dorian is willing to any distance for beauty and eternal youth could be taken as an allegory for the author’s belief that beautiful language justifies the contents of any book. However, just like the way a novel’s beauty would not stop criticism, Dorian’s eternal youth does not stop his soul from corrupting and growing old; his boyish caprice mixed with a lust and greed for everything beautiful in the world. Another point that should be considered is the abrupt time skip that contains Dorian getting accustomed to Hedonism after he has discovered the portrait, between the chapters ten and eleven. The time skip contrasts with the slow pace that the novel had set beforehand, showing the meaninglessness of time against infinite youth. The concept of eternal youth is thereby only an act of vanity in “The Picture of Dorian Gray”, and is never completely achievable.

Both authors had chosen to let the readers draw their own conclusions rather than being didactic, showing reasons and all sorts of results of the concept of eternal youth. Eternal youth is first idolised and then shown to have negative aspects in both, even though “Peter and Wendy” is more dream-like and light where “The Picture of Dorian Gray” depicts a grittier and more drastic view of the world.

V. Conclusion

In this essay, it is pointed out that while “Peter and Wendy” and “The Picture of Dorian Gray” both deal with the concept of eternal youth, the authors have chosen very different ways of reflecting on this theme. However, J. M. Barrie and Oscar Wilde both show a critical take on the ever-dreamy desire of dragging out youth forever, which unifies these novels thematically. This leads to the conclusion that the authors have similar views on the concept of eternal youth.

“Peter and Wendy” has a protagonist that is depicted both as an ideal hero and a petulant child, showing the long-term repercussions of eternal youth on Peter Pan’s mind and actions. The side characters’ take on Peter varies from awed to hateful, which could be tied to every person’s inner conflict between growing up and the secret desire of being eternally young. The conflict between adults and children is never solved since it is only in the imagination of children, and time is the only winner. “The Picture of Dorian Gray” views eternal youth as eternal outer beauty, but the corruption the self-obsession and vanity of eternal beauty brings is also a factor. The protagonist starts out as an innocent young person, evolving – because of the influence of another man – into an immoral and regretful man whose beauty is no longer a condolence for his sins. Dorian’s downfall is the effect of eternal youth, as shown by Wilde.

All in all, both novels show that eternal youth is merely a means of escapism – it enables one to avoid the society’s expectations and the effects of time on the body. However, like any other type of escapism, clinging on to it is futile at best and harmful at worst. Not growing up or not growing ugly; they do not change the fact that time always carries on and takes something (maybe memories, maybe beauty) away with it. Drawing on these conclusions, J. M. Barrie in “Peter and Wendy” approaches the concept of eternal youth ideologically same as, but stylistically different than Oscar Wilde in “The Picture of Dorian Gray.”

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