The Lost Boys and Girls
Stereotypical Gender Roles in J.M. Barrie’s and Disney’s *Peter Pan*.

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Abstract

This essay discusses how female and male characters are represented in the novel *Peter & Wendy* by J.M Barrie from 1911 and the Disney version *Peter Pan* from 1953. Jane Sunderland’s models on social gender are used as a substructure to help clarify how the characters are portrayed as individuals, in relation to other characters and through their own actions and speech acts. The essay shows that there is a major difference in how male characters are portrayed compared to the female characters and that every character of the story lives up to what seems to be socially constructed gender roles.
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Introduction
The story about Peter Pan and his Neverland has enchanted the world and has been cherished by millions of people for approximately a century. In the story, the readers are introduced to many male characters where almost all of them can be regarded as role models and who all possess traditionally masculine traits such as cockiness, fearlessness, bravery and power. But when it comes to the female characters of this story, all of them are represented as weak and in some cases find themselves in need of rescuing, preferably by a male fellow character. But why is this? Is Neverland in fact a boys’ club where female characters are not allowed, except in relation to the male characters?

The central female characters of Barrie’s Peter & Wendy are Wendy, Tinker Bell and Mrs. Darling, who all seem to live up to conventional female gender roles. Mrs. Darling personifies the loving and understanding mother and Wendy the polite and responsible sister. By the same token, Allison Kavey and Lester Friedman describe Tinker Bell in the foreword of their anthology Second Star to the Right: Peter Pan in the Popular Imagination with the quote “the beautiful little fairy who is too small to carry more than one emotion at a time.” (9)

As Rebecca Collins states in her article ”Content Analysis of Gender Roles in Media: Where Are We Now and Where Should We Go”, female and male characters are represented differently in literature as well as in films and these differences almost always lead to a degrading portrayal of the female characters. They are often portrayed in stereotyped roles, such as housewives, non professionals, mothers and sexual gatekeepers (290-98). Male characters are on the other hand represented as role models and heroes. I am going to discuss the portrayal of female and male characters in both the novel Peter & Wendy and the Disney

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1 Referring to the general story of Peter Pan, including both the novel Peter & Wendy and the Disney film Peter Pan.
film *Peter Pan* by using gender theories on femininity and masculinity and how these may be represented in children’s literature.

I chose to use Jane Sunderland’s concepts as a model of analysis in this essay since the majority of her work concerns children’s literature and gender. In her study *Language, Gender and Children's Fiction* she proposes two models of social gender. Model 1 is useful when analyzing how the author or Disney has used various ways to establish a construction of a character. For example, in the Disney production Tinker Bell is presented as a bombshell with blond hair and an hourglass-shaped body, and following the film she is very much associated with her physical attributes. These were certainly attractive qualities during the creation of the *Peter Pan* film, and Model 1 is therefore useful when analyzing these and other characters in their cultural context. Model 2 is more useful when we want to look at how the characters’ gender roles can be explained in the text, for example by their choice of words and how they express themselves in relation to other characters. Sunderland’s two models discuss the concepts of gender and gender relations but in slightly different ways, which is useful in this analysis of a fictional text, as well as a Disney movie.

The first model is based on the idea that people as well as fictional characters are socially shaped, both regarding social and cultural influences but also through literary practices, for example “what adults write for children, what girls and boys read and write” (23). Thus, Model 1 is primarily concerned with male and female human beings, how they act and what they say (27). Since literary practices can be seen as a reflection of the society in which the novel is written, fictional characters can also be regarded as products of a culture or social setting.

Model 2 of social gender is influenced by post-structuralist concepts where sex is considered a set of ideas about men and women and gender relations. Sunderland explains this model as “linguistically constructed in a way in which gender appears important” (29).
As previously mentioned, both models concern gender as a social construction but with a very small shift in focus, Model 1 focusing on “who” (meaning who in the text, the male or female character) says or does something and Model 2 focuses on “what” is said or done. I will explain Model 1 and Model 2 more thoroughly in the section “Sunderland's Models on Social Gender”.

I chose the novel Peter & Wendy and the Disney version Peter Pan because they both have a very young target audience. Therefore, the story of Peter Pan could be one of the earlier encounters children have with socially constructed gender roles. This “innocent” story of Peter Pan and his fairies might affect children both in the way they see themselves, concerning looks and behavior, and also how they consider themselves in relation with others, especially when interacting with the other sex. As Annalee R. Ward claims in her study Mouse Morality: The Rhetoric of Disney Animated Film, children are practically raised on Disney fairy tales, and even though Disney’s tales originate from old fairy tales, the stories are rewritten to fit contemporary American values concerning sexuality, gender roles and moral values (2-5).

As previously mentioned, this essay is going to explain and clarify the stereotypical gender roles constructed in both the novel Peter & Wendy and the Disney film Peter Pan. Since female and male characters tend to be represented differently in both literature and in films which often leads to a degrading portrayal of the female characters (Collins 290-98), the aim of this essay is to discuss these tendencies by examining the representation of the female and male characters in the story of Peter Pan.

The analysis will revolve around the main characters of the story of Peter Pan. Firstly, I will define femininity and masculinity and see what these terms actually imply and how they are viewed today in society, since what we know as conventionally “female” or “male” is
something that is altered through time, and might differ today in comparison with the years in which the story was written or the film was produced.

Secondly, I will develop Sunderland’s two models on social gender and I will explain how these will be applied in my analysis. After this section, I will discuss the Disney film industry and its adaptations of traditional stories to fit contemporary stereotypes, as well as Disney as a “member of the family” where Disney has become a central factor associated with laughter and happiness, and crucial when spending an evening together with your perfect family. After this, I will continue to discuss the complexity to criticize animated films. When all of these aspects have been clarified, I will incorporate them in my analysis of the characters.

**Female and Male, Femininity and Masculinity**

In this section, femininity and masculinity will be defined. I will discuss which stereotypical traits are connected to males and females and how femininity and masculinity are viewed in today’s society. Toril Moi’s essay “Feminist, Female, Feminine” will be used to clarify these terms and the implied meaning of for example associating feminine ‘qualities’ with being female.

Gillian Beer claims in her study *Representing Women: Re-presenting the Past* that the complexity of media, especially in literature, magazines and films, is that when they offer us an explanation or a representation of something, the understanding of it easily goes from being something “learnt and temporary” to something which can be regarded as the actual truth (79). Since media has such easy access to a wide range of people, it becomes easy to establish conventions about gender roles as "truths" and exaggerate gender-tendencies (79). These exaggerated gender-tendencies are connected to traditional gender stereotypes of male and female behavior. For example, women who are considered feminine are associated with qualities such as empathy and weakness as well as with being nurturing. Men who are
considered masculine are portrayed in terms of genius, ambition and dominance, qualities that give the impression of superiority and self-improvement rather than qualities that are possibly more appreciated in relation to others, such as the “female” trait of empathy (Beer 79). All of these attributes and tendencies add to the already established construction of the stereotypical “male” or “female”, and we might get a misleading representation on what it is to be for example a mother.

As previously mentioned, this essay will analyze the representation of the male and female characters in both the novel and the film. Their attributes and behaviors will be examined and added to the investigation whether the character in question lives up to his or her assigned gender role. For example, in the novel, Mrs. Darling is introduced as “a lovely lady” (Barrie 93), and she is solely represented by her physical attributes and how she fulfills the criteria of being the perfect wife and mother. On the other hand, her husband Mr. Darling is represented as a strong and individual character who embodies qualities such as firmness and power. Apart from being a father and a husband, Mr. Darling is also a banker, thus adding yet another layer of identity to the male character, something which the female character lacks. In terms of what attributes are connected to the role of being a stereotypical “female”, Moi states that confusing female with femininity is unproductive, since feminine and masculine are terms which are social constructions. Female and male refer to the biological differences between the sexes, whereas the social construction of femininity has its roots in generalization and culture (108). An example of exaggerated gender tendencies is to assume that all women are feminine and if a woman refuses this label she will most likely be considered unnatural since the “natural truth” about women is that they are feminine. The problem that remains is how to make a more suitable definition of the term femininity without being trapped in the already invented cultural constructions since these are constantly changing (Moi 108).
Moi quotes Simone de Beauvoir's by using the phrase “One isn’t born a woman, one becomes one” (108) and claims that the sexual identity and the standard values that we connect to the term femininity are, as previously mentioned, a social construction. The patriarchal way of linking the word femininity to the sexual identity of all women is often made by connecting characteristics such as modesty, humility and sweetness to the female gender role in such a way that it is linked to the biological sex as well as to the social role (108). The definition of femininity is therefore more complex since essentialism and the social features that we automatically connect to all females are often culturally accepted and deeply rooted in the patriarchal society. When people behave according to the assumption that all men are masculine and all women feminine, we automatically limit women and men to a degrading symbolic and social order (108-111). A common way of analyzing femininity is through binary opposites, the most common one being male/female. By comparing opposites, the possibility of getting the wrong perception of a word is easy when analyzing the term as a hierarchy and appoints superior qualities to one of the words, usually male, while female is appointed as the other, negative equivalent (110).

The purpose of this section has not been to investigate and try to arrive at a proper definition of the term femininity, but to briefly mention the complexity of such a word and consequently illustrate the difficulty of analyzing female gender roles. In the section, “Disney and Gender”, I will discuss an example of this by examining the portrayal of Snow White and how she incorporates almost every trait linked to the stereotypical image of a woman, and how these traits limits her character in terms of agency\(^2\), what she can and can not do according to if she wants to identify herself with the role she has been assigned or not.

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\(^2\) Agency will be further explained in the section titled "Sunderland's Models on Social Gender" on page 11.
Sunderland’s Models on Social Gender

In this section I will explain Sunderland’s two models which both concern social gender. The first model which focuses on how gender is reflected in the language depending on who (a male or a female) is speaking. This model will be explained through five different caveats, where caveat 5 will segue into the second model which focuses on “what” is said in the text (22). I will end this section by clarifying how I will use Sunderland’s two models in my analysis.

Sunderland explains that the first model was mostly used by feminist linguists in the 1970s and 80s and how the main purpose of this model was to focus on “gender differences” as something that is not natural, and to spot potential disadvantages for both women and men when people choose to treat each other as stereotypical males or females (28). It could also be unproductive for a company as well, for example, if a group of men are employed by a woman and are to consider her less capable because she is a woman, then they would question her authority and her decisions more often which might affect the woman and the company in a negative way. Model 1 then had strategic value when analyzing gender tendencies in social contexts, as in this example: a workplace, where the perception of gender is deeply rooted in society (28). In this essay, Model 1 is useful when analyzing the female characters in relation to the male characters in situations where the females are not encouraged to be independent, such as when Wendy constantly tries to adapt to the role of a conventional mother for the Lost Boys and her brothers when they arrive in Neverland.

Sunderland qualifies the first model by clarifying five different caveats. The first one discusses the perception of gender as “a matter of tendencies and not differences” (23). This means that when examining differences instead of similarities between men and women, we may not arrive at absolute differences since they remain generally more similar and the
obvious differences often tend to be exaggerated by the media, which agrees with the views of Beer (79).

Therefore, it is more accurate to speak of gender tendencies since this agrees more with intra-group variation and “gender overlap” (23-24). An example of this from the novel and the film is Tinker Bell, who expresses traits linked to traditional masculinity such as confidence, power and independence in relation to other characters. She also lacks stereotypically feminine qualities, such as empathy and kindness.

The second and the third caveats of Sunderland's first model concern how the cultural context affects the concept of “gender-tendencies” and how gender and identity are terms which are constantly changing. Disney films\(^3\), which are in many ways becoming a part of the family, are known for altering stories to fit contemporary American values and norms, both in terms of stereotyping and adds new qualities to an already established character, such as the character of Peter Pan. In the book, he is represented both as a boy and a fairy, which means that he possesses various qualities, some traditionally masculine ones and several which are un-gendered. However, in the Disney version, there is no doubt that Peter Pan is a traditionally masculine boy, both in terms of appearance and behavior.

Sunderland returns to literary practices and discusses how young girls identify with female characters and social roles that may or may not be important to them but are nonetheless assigned characteristics connected to girls' feminine identities by their social environment. For example, when someone always asks questions about family and positions you as a mother when you are at work, you might experience more than one identity at the same time. This might be conflicting since you have constructed your identity at work to be more impersonal and distant in relation to your colleagues (25).

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\(^3\) The many aspects of Disney will be further explained in the section titled "Disney and Gender".
Sunderland ends Model 1 with her last two caveats, the fourth one being “agency,” which she explains when, in this case, a character act according to their sense of femininity and masculinity in certain situations. For example, Peter Pan is the obvious leader of the Lost Boys and acts with great superiority in every situation, but at the same time, he wants to be childish and playful and take part in their games as an equal. Peter experience another side of himself when he addresses Wendy, especially when he flatters her and says; “Wendy, one girl is more use than twenty boys.”(120) Agency is consequently context dependent and also something that we express intentionally or unintentionally (25).

The final caveat concerns discourse and allows Model 1 to segue in to Model 2. Here, it is language that constructs gender, compared to the previous caveats where language use is a reflection of gender, e.g. “men speak in a certain way because they are men.” (27) Sunderland clarifies this caveat by explaining that it is possible to construct gender in speech to emphasize your current identity or role, for example, “Speaking as a father . . .” (27) clearly trying to establish your role as a father. Here, it is clear that the choice of words does not mean that the speaker is a father, but could be used as a way to express a more dominant gender role with superior attitude (27).

What differs between the first and second model is that the first model on social gender focuses on “who” in the text, which refers to the male or female character, whereas the second model focus on “what” the characters says and does. Model 2 emphasizes the idea that gender is constructed in language, both written and spoken, and which concerns both men and women who express themselves in a way that enforces gender is made relevant. An example trying to show the subtle differences between Sunderland’s two models is when Wendy exclaims “How exactly like a boy!” (Barrie 119). Analyzing this sentence through the first model, places the focus on Wendy as a female and raises the question why she would say such a thing. For example, does this speech-act possibly enforce Wendy’s sense of superiority
towards Peter Pan? Since she points out that he obviously does not possess the same quality as she does, which in this case is sewing, In effect, she undermines him and his abilities as well as all boys. Examining this same sentence through the second model, it becomes an illustration how Wendy uses this sentence to construct a boy’s gender role.

Model 2 shifts focus from the biological differences between males and females to “what” is said in the text. Sunderland mentions the phrase “Girls as girls and boys as boys” (31) which shows that there is an understanding of what the characteristics of a girl and a boy are, even if the traits we add to our perception of a “girl” could be misleading (31). Qualities such as kind, nurturing and shy are the characteristics assign to the traditional role of being a girl, and more dominant qualities such as adventurous, competitive and curious are assigned to the traditional role of a boy. However, these qualities are not more or less negative than the other, but it is the encouragement of them by for example adults that makes them limiting to that boy’s or girl’s self image. The girl might possess the majority of the qualities given to the boy, and might therefore feel trapped when constantly encouraged to be something else. This aligns with Moi’s theory on constructed gender and gender tendencies, whereby a woman who does not live up to the constructed gender role is regarded as “unnatural” and might try to adapt accordingly, just to fit the already established stereotype (108).

Model 2 also stresses that gender often is made relevant in situations where it does not need to be. For example when a boy holds the door for a girl and says “ladies first” – gender is made important. If the boy were to open the door for someone just to be polite, gender would not matter (32).

Sunderland’s models cover other areas of gender theory and children’s literature apart from the ones I have outlined above. However, these fall outside the scope of my study and will not be discussed.
Disney and Gender

In this section I will discuss the various aspects of the Disney Industry. In contemporary culture, Disney has come to function both as a “member of the family” and as a complicated ideology machine. The difficulties of analyzing and criticizing Disney will also be discussed and the relationship between Disney and gender. I will use examples from the analysis of Snow White made by Eleanor Byrne and Martin McQuillan, in Deconstructing Disney to illustrate Disney’s use of traditional gender stereotypes.

The many aspects of Disney inspired ideology have been very successful at sneaking their way into the domestic lifestyle and have in many ways become a new member of the family. To watch a Disney movie together is associated with laughter, smiles and being a happy family (Byrne & McQuillan 58). However, what might seem as Disney’s greatest success (becoming a part of the family) could also be considered as a problem when analyzing gender roles.

Byrne & McQuillan claim that Disney is a very complicated ideology machine to criticize since it still has massive influence on Western popular culture, family entertainment and children’s literature (1). Despite its very popular status, Disney has endured numerous criticism for sexism, racism, censorship, propaganda, homophobia, conservatism, cultural and economic imperialism and stereotyping (2-3). Similarly, Susan Ohmer, the author of the essay “Disney’s Peter Pan: Gender, Fantasy and Industrial Production” argues that the difficulty with analyzing Disney comes with their use of animations and cartoons. Animated cartoons, with their target audience of children and young adults, might be difficult for the critics, the film industry and parents in general to criticize, since this type of medium provides an escape from the real world and is deeply associated with evoking childhood pleasures. Since there is a strong connection between childhood and animation, critical adults might feel excluded from this world and therefore restrain themselves from addressing parts of the Disney film
they might find offensive. Critics might even refuse to examine cartoons, fearing that they
will cease to enjoy them (151-52).

Disney has built its image around a shielded myth, complex words such as *timeless*,
*universal* and *classic* are often used in the same context as Disney. The image Disney has
created is based on the impression that everything about Disney and their films is joyful and
connected to family values. By making the audience feel safe and comfortable with the image
that Disney has created for itself, it is easy to overlook the preconceived ideas on gender
stereotypes, ethnicity and race that Disney might be a part of establishing (151-52).

In *Mouse Morality: The Rhetoric of Disney Animated Film*, Ward states that children
are raised on Disney films, as mentioned in the introduction, and that Disney has come to
achieve great influence in the making of children’s morality and teaches them the difference
between right and wrong. Since Disney is a powerful storyteller, which provides entertaining
narrative, visuals and well-written music, and, furthermore, if children believe that what they
see represents an adequate picture of real life, Disney has a huge part in shaping children’s
view on ethnicity, sexuality and gender (2-5).

To explain Disney in relation to gender stereotypes, Byrne and McQuillan use examples
from the film *Snow White*, in which Snow White possesses stereotypical traits of domestic
talents such as cleaning and cooking which she gladly performs while singing and whistling.
On top of this, she is also maternal, thoughtful and has a great love for animals (61-62). Later
on in the story, Snow White is saved by a kiss from a prince and this all aligns with Beer’s
ideas that women are considered in terms of weakness and men as strong and superior (79).

Except for the evil and cruel stepmother, Snow White is the only female character in the
film and is therefore the only character girls can regard as a female role model. Boys who
watch *Snow White* might recognize their mothers or themselves in her, and as Sunderland
argues, automatically assign these misleading characteristics to every woman or girl they know (27).

Both Snow White and the Disney version of Peter Pan need to be viewed as a products of the historical and cultural contexts in which they were first created, Snow White in 1937 and Peter Pan in 1953. During the time when Disney was in the middle of creating Peter Pan, the very meaning of “Disney” experienced a major make over. This period marked an era when the industrial, economic and social climate changed a lot due to the Second World War and the depression. Between 1942 and 1953 Disney decided to develop beyond animation and cartoons to produce live action films. Disney started to launch international productions and expands within television. This contributed to changing the Disney film industry and can be traced in Disney's version of Peter Pan, which had its premiere in 1953 (Ohmer153).

Douglas Brode argues in his book Multiculturalism and the Mouse: Race and Sex in Disney Entertainment (2005) that even though gender roles and the representation of female characters have developed during this time, the female characters, made by Disney, remain as helpless princesses, hoping for a man to save her and live “happily ever after”. Even though Peter Pan was released in 1953, the same stereotypical female character can be seen in The Little Mermaid from 1989 and in Beauty and the Beast from 1991 (170 - 71).

The Lost Boys and Girls

In the analysis of the characters, Sunderland’s two models on social gender (23) will be used. They will be complemented by the theories on femininity and masculinity outlined above, as well as the various comments on the Disney Industry in order to spot gender stereotypical traits in both the female and the male characters.

Kavey & Friedman claim that what is so fascinating about a character such as Peter Pan is the duality of his personality. He is courageous and independent, which of course are admirable qualities, but he is also careless and seems to constantly forget about his friends.
What becomes so appealing with this character is that he “depends on the other characters’ need for him to exist” (9). However, he is still independent of the people who need him by maintaining his own individuality. He is reachable, but still unreachable, even for the readers of this novel (9).

Peter Pan is a child who never experienced the desire to grow up, and he constantly points to the positive aspects of being forever young and not answerable to anyone. When he shares his story with Wendy he says that he ran away when he was born because he overheard his parents discussing what he would become when he grew up. His parents wanted him to become a man, but Peter ”want[s] always to be a little boy and have fun” (121). Here, having a mother and father is not of much worth compared with his desire to live as an eternal child, and he also considers mothers to be “overrated persons” (118). However, he seems to need Wendy to function as some sort of substitute to do the things he cannot do, for example tell stories. One of Peter’s more obvious traits is that he is extremely childish, and he expresses this in many situations throughout the novel. Why he does not seem to have any desire to have a parent, or especially a mother, could be because he does not want to have someone superior to him. Martha Stoddard Holmes, the author of Peter Pan and the Possibilities of Child Literature argues that this is a continuous theme throughout the novel where children and adults are seen as binary opposites and express frustration on both sides (141). As Moi’s study shows, binary opposites are commonly analyzed in a way in which we appoint superior qualities to one word. Here, superiority is given to the child since Peter is the main character and the voices of adults are of no relevance in this story (110). Thus, Peter is contributing to establishing the superiority of children and children’s sense of independence, as well as his own.

When Barrie first introduces the readers to Peter, he describes him as “A lovely boy, clad in skeleton leaves and the juices that ooze out of the trees” (103). You immediately get
the impression that this character seems to possess many different qualities some of which are
gender related and some which are not since he is both a young independent boy and a fairy. The identity of Peter Pan is constantly changing, and as Sunderland demonstrates in the third
caveat of Model 1, gender identity is constantly changing and consists of multiple layers, which could be conflicting in certain situations (26). For example, Peter Pan is the obvious leader of the Lost Boys and acts with great superiority in every situation, but at the same time, he wants to be childish and playful and take part in their games as an equal.

There is a lack of a more detailed portrayal of Peter and except for his personality there are no physical features that could be added to the description of him except for how he acts in situations and how he talks. Thus, as Sunderland’s second model shows; gender is expressed through speech and written text (29-31).

There are several situations in the novel where Peter’s gender is made relevant (Sunderland 31). One example is when Wendy observes Peter trying to glue his shadow back with the help of a soap bar and exclaims “How exactly like a boy!” (Barrie 119) making Peter’s action relevant as something only a boy would do. Here is a situation which demonstrates the ambivalence created by the tension inherent in gender expectations. Sunderland explains in Model 2 that both men and women can uphold ideas about gender characteristics, such as in the example above. Depending on the situation, men and women may stand both to gain and to lose from upholding gender conventions. Thus, the characteristics that Wendy assigns to Peter might be in conflict with his sense of self but they might also contribute to establishing Peter’s role as a careless and indifferent boy and therefore be considered as something positive (25-27). Following the pattern of binary hierarchies, as Moi points out, Wendy becomes superior by assigning infantile qualities to Peter (110).
There are also several other situations where gender is made relevant through in direct speech. In the sentence, “Peter, boy like, was indifferent to appearances” (Barrie 119), Peter is given certain traits to establish his role as a boy. Here Barrie addresses the reader’s perception of what a boy should be, assigning masculine features to Peter’s character. Other examples of this is that Peter is cocky, fearless and dominant and he is often very self-absorbed and expresses self-admiration towards his own cleverness in several situations. For example, when he dives through the air to save Michael from falling into the sea, he seems to be more impressed by his own action than “the actual saving of another life” (Barrie 134). Another example of this same situation is when Wendy stitches Peter’s shadow back to his foot, and he forgets this a minute later when he cries “Oh, the cleverness of me!” (119), clearly degrading Wendy and the help she provides. Aligned with the ideas of Sunderland, Peter’s role is constructed in the various situations he is in (Sunderland page) Likewise, all of his qualities correspond with the findings of Beer, where men seem to possess qualities such as ambition and dominance, which are considered superior in relation to traditionally feminine qualities such as empathy and love (Beer 79).

In the Disney version of *Peter Pan*, the characteristics assigned to Peter are adventurousness, fearlessness, cockiness and ignorance. He is the leader of the Lost Boys and more authoritative in the film where the boys follow his every command and he represents everything that is idealized in a child. Just like in the novel, Peter Pan is superior to every other character in the film, and even when he is faced with the adult character of the story, Captain Hook, he behaves as if though he is not faced with a worthy opponent but merely another child whom he can trick and play with as he pleases.

If we were to consider the characters of Peter Pan and Captain Hook through Sunderland’s second caveat which discusses how the cultural context affects the concept of gender in society, these two characters are both male, strong, and admirable in their own way,
but the superiority of Peter is not a matter of gender tendencies but a result of the cultural construction where society expects the hero to be superior; Peter as the hero of the novel and the film is therefore automatically superior to the grown up pirate. It seems to be some sort of mutual understanding of how Peter and Hook are supposed to behave around one another. Their predictable behaviors and quarrels clearly establish that Peter is the superior, undefeated character despite the fact that he is a little boy (23-25).

One side to the character of Peter that is more obvious in the film compared to the novel is the tension between Peter and the female characters. Ohmer describes the beginning of the shaping of Disney’s *Peter Pan*, where Disney decided to create some sort of ”puppy love relationship”(162) between Peter and Wendy to attract the adult audience and also incorporate a “love and jealousy” angle between Tinker Bell and Wendy (162). Disney created two focus groups in which they divided men and women to investigate what they thought of *Peter Pan* and the changes that were made to the characters and the story. In the all-male group, they became concerned that Peter became more of a sissy, whereas the all-women group thought that Peter’s character became more sexualized (161-62). However, Disney arrived at something in-between by developing the relationship between Tinker Bell and Wendy and adjusting the sexual tension of the story in something that would be appropriate for children which is Disney’s primary target group (161-62).

The character of Wendy is deeply rooted in the traditionally female gender-role that is set out for her. She is described according to the cultural constructions that Moi discusses: polite, kind, nurturing, with a great sense of empathy for Peter and the Lost Boys and expressing an obvious desire to become just like her mother when she grows up (108). When she is first introduced in the novel, she is described as a “tidy child” (Barrie 101). Wendy could be viewed as a traditional, stereotypical female who performs domestic duties such as cooking and cleaning, acts as the substitute mother of the Lost Boys and experiences feelings of
responsibility and concern about others. She is a product of her historical context and is an obvious social construction: “The cooking I can tell you, kept her nose at the pot.” (170) The domestic qualities which, as Beer argues, are obvious feminine characteristics, are automatically assigned to the character of Wendy and become a part of her identity and the way she is viewed in relation to other characters of the novel. Unlike Peter Pan, who seems to be completely superior to the other characters of the novel, Wendy behaves as if her life is dependent on the safety of her brothers, Peter, and everyone else she has come to care about. She is consequently not considered an independent individual, but an individual in relation to other characters. Her most obvious trait is to be nurturing and she shows maternal instincts throughout the novel (Beer 79).

Throughout the novel, Wendy is constantly reminded of the relevance of her femininity. The two models Sunderland presents are both useful when examining the foregrounding of a gender role such as in the case of Wendy. Through the first model, the relevance of Wendy’s femininity can be spotted through the ways she behaves in relation to the male characters. Through the second model, the relevance of Wendy’s femininity is noticeable when examining the text and how the other characters express themselves in a way to make this important (25-27). For example, when Tinker Bell tricks the Lost Boys into shooting Wendy down from the sky and she seems to be dead, Peter becomes very upset and angry. He then decides to build a house around her since they do not want to move her body. When John, her younger brother, later comes back he exclaims:

“Build a house?”

“For the Wendy”, said Curly.

“For Wendy?” John said aghast. ‘Why, she is only a girl” (Barrie 161)
Here, Wendy is considered “only a girl” by her brother John, and therefore unworthy of the gift of a house that the Lost Boys want to give her. John, by stating this, is clearly considering males as the superior, more powerful and dominant gender compared to the weak female as Beer argues (79).

Another situation when gender is made relevant, although as something Wendy considers to be extremely flattering, is when Peter Pan tells the story of the Lost Boys and how they come to Neverland as a result of falling out of their hospital beds. Wendy asks if there are no girls and Peter responds “Oh no; girls, you know, are much too clever to fall out of their prams” (123). This is another example of discourse used to enforce the differences between men and women, according to Sunderland’s second model. Here, Peter is not only using language to support his own need for differences between girls and boys, he also fulfills Wendy’s and makes her feel proud to be a girl at this particular moment. Since she does not oppose his statement, she tacitly agrees (32).

When applying Sunderland’s first model of social gender on a character such as Wendy, it becomes clear that she has learned to behave according to the established gender norms of her time. Wendy applies the fixed qualities to her own role as a future woman and consequently integrates them to her sense of self. She is already developing from the social role of a daughter to the role of a mother, where a woman is caught up in a web of dependencies.

An example of a similar situation is when Wendy is positioned as a traditional mother by the Lost Boys and Peter Pan, and at first, she declines; “but you see I am only a little girl. I have no real experience”(Barrie 165). But when the Lost Boys insist and say that they only need someone who is “motherly”, she beams and exclaims; “Oh dear! . . . you see I feel that is exactly what I am” (166). Here, she is first positioned (by herself and her brothers) as a daughter and sister, but after the request for a mother made by the Lost Boys, Wendy also
incorporates this identity. This is something that she feels conflicted by, especially when her youngest brother Michael forgets about his real parents and believes that Wendy actually is his real mother. The role of the mother is not, however, Wendy’s own idea but a position where she is placed by Peter Pan and the Lost Boys and which Wendy gladly accepts. She tries to live up to the part of substitute mother to the Lost Boys by copying actions that she remembers her mother doing, which agrees with Sunderland’s theories on agency, which is, for example when a character such as Wendy act in a certain way according to her sense of femininity based on observations she has made of her mother. Agency is also context dependent, thus Wendy’s behavior in this particular situation might differ from other situations where Wendy is not positioned as a mother (25).

Despite that Wendy is a good example of a traditional female character, she also makes gender-roles relevant in the novel by using phrases such as the previously mentioned example “How exactly like a boy!” (Barrie 119). Her sentence not only adds misleading qualities to Peter, but to all boys and she apparently has an already existing knowledge of what boys in this exact situation would do. In other words, according to the gender stereotype, boys behave stupidly and are unaware of the actual functions of a soap bar.

Wendy, as a female character, could be a representative of Sunderland’s two models. The first model is linked to Wendy’s appearance and the second model is associated with Wendy’s behavior, for example, when she constructs gender when she speaks (23-27). The representation of Wendy’s preconceived notions of boys are based on social norms. Readers of this particular section might also recognize Wendy's judgments as something that they would personally think, and might not even be aware of her making gender relevant in a situation where it does not need to be because of preconceived notions of what a conventional “boy” or “girl” is. As Sunderland demonstrates, this preconceived notion could be made by both males and females, and has its roots in already existing norms in society (31).
In the Disney version, Wendy still possesses the stereotypical traits of a polite, kind and responsible girl, defined by her relationship and behavior with the other characters. Just like in the analysis of Peter Pan, Wendy’s more extreme sides seem to be missing. She still gladly plays the substitute mother for the Lost Boys, but her more emphasized nurturing sides are missing. However, she is still a product of what Moi explains as the “patriarchal society” (108-11) where she is automatically seen as the weaker sex.

Wendy is a product of her time, and even though she is at times a very strong character, she is the one who continues to live up to her assigned role as the nurturing “mother,” both in relation to the Lost Boys and to her brothers. In the novel and the film, Wendy’s character is built on agency\(^4\), in other words, how she acts according to her sense of femininity. As Sunderland explains, a character’s gendered actions are context dependent (26) but there are not many situations where Wendy breaks character and stops behaving in a way which could be seen as conflicting in comparison with her previous role. Just like in the example of Snow White\(^5\), Wendy seems to possess very stereotypical qualities connected to the “female” role such as being able to wash and clean. Wendy as a character is very similar to Snow White and they can both be described as maternal, loving, thoughtful and nurturing (Byrne & McQillan 61-62).

In the film, when it is just about bedtime in the hollow-tree for the Lost Boys, Wendy sings a song as praise for all mothers and challenges the boys’ will to stay in Neverland and grow up as savages. Since the film portrays Wendy as having accepted the maternal role, it constructs her as feeling the need for it to continue until they return home and she is faced with her own mother and can return to the social role of a daughter.

There is one situation where Wendy does go against the established gender roles and that is when Peter has just saved Tiger Lily from Captain Hook, and one of the Indians

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\(^4\) The fourth caveat in Sunderland’s first model on social gender, explained on page 11.

\(^5\) Made by Byrne & McQillan, mentioned on page 9.
commands Wendy to fetch firewood. She is clearly upset and decides to defy the convention that requires her to obey by ignoring her task (Byrne & McQuillan 63-64).

Mrs. Darling is the female character of the book that seems to impersonate the socially constructed female gender role to its fullest. When she is first described in the novel, she is represented by her looks; “a lovely lady, with a romantic mind and such a sweet mocking mouth.” (Barrie 93) Her most important and admired trait is that she has a mysterious “kiss” in the corner of her mouth which seems to be unreachable. Just like Wendy, Mrs. Darling’s qualities are seen as admirable and just like Sunderland argues, conventional “female” traits which make her respond to the social constructions of the society she finds herself in. She lives up to all the given characteristics assigned to her different roles, both as a mother and a wife, and she does not express any other layer of identity (25).

There are several obvious examples where you notice that Mrs. Darling is portrayed as the ideal woman. For example, she was “married in white” (Barrie 94), which establishes her innocence and virginity. She is also described as the perfect wife, “she kept the books perfectly . . . not so much as a brussels sprout was missing” (94).

Mrs. Darling also contributes to her husband’s authority by defending his behavior, even when she finds it a bit odd. For example, when the Darlings are expecting their first baby, Mrs. Darling looks at her husband pleadingly, clearly establishing him as the decision maker regarding whether they can afford to keep the baby or not, even if you can tell that Mrs. Darling has the greatest desire for a baby. Even here, the superiority of the male gender, as Beer mentions, is very clear and obviously degrading to the female in this situation where they are discussing something that will have a huge impact on both of them, a child (79).

Mrs. Darling has a noticeably reduced part in the Disney version compared to the novel. She is only part of the film at the beginning, and in a few minutes at the end, which gives us a minor impression of her. However, she is still the character who fulfills the socially
constructed feminine role to its fullest, and her main purpose is to be the wife of Mr. Darling. Her qualities, as Beer argues, are linked to her being a traditional “female” character; maternal, nurturing and empathetic (79).

Since Disney has been very successful in creating an image based on “joyfulness,” it is easy to overlook preconceived ideas on gender stereotypes and the very obvious characteristics of Mrs. Darling in her only function as a thoughtful mother and wife. As Ohmer mentions, this might be a result of Disney using animated cartoons where all aspects of the character, both appearance and personality, are in many cases highly emphasized and therefore also more difficult to criticize (151-52). However, the stereotypical features of Mrs. Darling are not only her role as a mother and a wife, but also the ones that are linked to her appearance as a tall, slender, gorgeous and well-dressed woman. She does have three children, a dog and she runs the household, but she is always properly dressed, stain-free and loving with no sign of the work that she probably puts in to raise three children and take care of her husband. Sunderland argues that these misleading characteristics could easily be linked to all mothers or other females (27), and young boys and girls who watch Disney might get the wrong idea and imagine that mothers should look and behave accordingly.

According to Moi, it is common to consider femininity and masculinity as binary opposites where one of the words is automatically considered superior than the other, in this case masculinity (105). In the case with Mr. and Mrs. Darling, the male character’s superiority to the female character is easily noticed. It is obvious in terms of decision-making and also in terms of independence where Mrs. Darling is a housewife and Mr. Darling is a banker who provides for his family (110). We get the impression that Mr. Darling is the direct opposite of Mrs. Darling. She possesses qualities such as empathy and kindness where he is firm, logical and realistic. As mentioned above, Mr Darling is the one who calculates the expenses to see if they can afford to become parents (Barrie 94).
The construction of male/female and husband/wife are useful for noticing binary opposites, where one character is more superior to the other. Here it becomes obvious that the individuality of the characters is not the main focus. Instead, as Sunderland argues, the establishment of femininity and masculinity are often highly emphasized as completely different terms (24-25). This is clear both in the novel and in the film.

Mr. Darling also has a noticeably reduced part in the Disney film compared to the novel. He only appears in one scene and this is when he storms into the nursery and is upset because he cannot find his cuff links. He expresses great authority and receives respect from the other members of his family at the beginning of this short scene which, as Beer discusses, clearly establishes his position as the masculine, and hence superior, head of the family (79).

Tinker Bell is introduced in the novel as “exquisitely gowned in a skeleton leaf, cut low and square, through which her figure could be seen to the best advantage” (Barrie 115). She is very similar to the other female characters of this novel due to her exaggerated femininity, which agrees with Sunderland’s theory of making gender relevant (32). The quote above triggers an image based on preconceived characteristics of a “girl”. Since Tinker Bell is not really a girl, but a fairy, the perception of a fairy becomes almost identical with the perception of a girl even if it is clearly misleading.

According to Murray Pomerance, the author of *Tinker Bell, the Fairy of Electricity*, the one thing that makes Tinker Bell’s personality different from the other female characters is that early on in both the book and the film she expresses jealous love of Peter and a possessive attitude towards him. She expresses strong emotions such as aggression towards her competitor Wendy, and she always seems to be more confident than her fellow female characters. At times, Tinker Bell fulfills the stereotypical image of a male character and she also lacks the other typical traits that the other female characters have, such as domestic interests, empathy, kindness and the general acceptance to be degraded by their fellow male
characters. Except for her feminine attributes, there is only one more thing that agrees with the construction of a woman-fairy which shares the same characteristics, and that is Tinker Bell’s need of other children’s imagination for her to exist. Thus, she is not an independent character in the same sense as Peter Pan, because she, unlike him, is always dependent on people’s belief that fairies do exist (Pomerance 17).

There is not much difference between Disney’s Tinker Bell compared to J.M. Barrie’s. She still possesses her negative attitude and aggression towards Wendy, her jealous love of Peter and some sort of grouchy temper when she is not at the center of his attention. Tinker Bell fulfills Disney’s representation of female characters as semi-independent, she has a mind of her own but she is still dependent on a male character to give her love and affection (Brode 171). The only characteristic that is more obvious in the film is that all of her physical feminine attributes are highly emphasized.

Tinker Bell is not just a female fairy, but she is a curvy little bombshell with red lips and blonde hair. Beer argues that this kind of representation can be misleading for girls and boys watching this film (79). Disney has clearly exaggerated the idea of a fairy into an ideal which is no longer accessible for every girl. To be able to play the part of a fairy, a girl would have to be very pretty, thin and preferably blonde. Since the conventions of what a fairy is have already been made by Disney, the wide range of children who watch the film come to share an idea of what a fairy should look like; Disney’s Tinker Bell.

Just like Wendy, Tinker Bell can be analyzed through Sunderland’s first model on social gender and even though she is a fairy, her position as a female forces her into the feminine role and she performs accordingly throughout the novel and the film. Something worth considering is also the fact that Tinker Bell does not speak, except for ‘the fairy language’ which Peter is the only one who understands. Thus, he speaks for her.
However, her performance is context-dependent, and there are times when she chooses to challenge her gender role, for examples, she displays cockiness, aggression and independence in several situations. For example, when she convinces the Lost Boys to shoot Wendy down from the air, she gets very angry with Peter for telling her that her behavior was wrong, showing no sign of recognition that her own actions might have caused his anger (Barrie 159-61). Since Tinker Bell expresses traits which, as Sunderland argues, could be assigned both to a female character as well as a male character, she is a good example of “gender overlap” where you can spot both similarities and differences without arriving at an absolute truth (23).

**Conclusion**

The story of Peter Pan introduces the magical Neverland with a variety of characters and gender roles that might first be invisible to the eyes of the reader. Both the novel and the Disney version of *Peter Pan* aim at a young audience and as Ward claims, children are practically raised on Disney fairy tales (2). When a character or explanation is represented in literature and films, the understanding of it easily goes from something “learnt and temporary” to something which is regarded as the actual truth. Thus, it is easy to establish conventions about gender roles as “truths” and exaggerate “male” and “female” gender-tendencies (79).

In both the novel *Peter & Wendy* and Disney’s *Peter Pan*, the representations of the male characters differ a lot from the female characters. Peter Pan, the main character, is associated with qualities such as cockiness, carelessness and courage. He considers himself superior and dominant. According to Gillian Beer, male characters who possess qualities such as genius and dominance which are considered superior are idealized. Traditionally feminine characteristics such as kindness and empathy are seen as less valuable (79).
The character of Wendy, is deeply rooted in the gender-role that is set out for her. She is described according to the cultural constructions that Moi discusses, she is polite, kind, nurturing and easily adapts from the social role of a daughter in to becoming the substitute mother for the Lost Boys (108). Wendy has throughout the novel been constantly reminded of the relevance of her gender in different situations from her parents wanting for her to grow up and become an adult, to Peter’s flattery, the domestic duties requested by the Lost Boys and the assessment of her worth when John asks why the Lost Boys are making a house for Wendy since she is “only a girl”(Barrie 161).

Both Peter Pan and Wendy can be analyzed through Sunderland’s models where gender is recognized as being constructed within a society and dependent on the cultural context. Sunderland’s second model focuses on “what” is being said and there are several situations in the novel where Peter’s gender is made relevant through indirect speech, such as when Wendy observes Peter trying to glue his shadow back with the help of a soap bar and she exclaims “How exactly like a boy!”(Barrie 119). Here, Wendy makes Peter’s action relevant as something only “a boy would do” since she chooses to address him by his biological sex and not by name.

In the Disney version, both Peter Pan’s and Wendy’s more gender-neutral sides are not emphasized as much as in the novel even though they still keep their individuality as characters. This might be as a result of the Disney industry building its image around complex words such as timeless, universal and classic and assigning traditional views on gender as parts of these concepts. Furthermore, since a few years passed between the novel and the film, it was probably altered to be more suitable to the broader mass.

Mr. and Mrs. Darling are the characters which express highly emphasized feminine and masculine qualities which are represented in a way to make them as different from each other as possible. Mrs. Darling is trapped in the socially constructed role of a wife and mother and
she is introduced in the novel with a detailed description of her appearance. Mr. Darling, on the other hand, clearly establishes his role as the masculine and superior father and is described as logical, firm and realistic. He is also a banker, which gives him more complexity as a character in comparison to Mrs. Darling. The obvious construction of gender roles is highly emphasized and the individuality of the characters is not the main focus. The focus is instead on how different they are as representatives of the terms femininity and masculinity (Sunderland 24-25), which is something that is very obvious in both the novel and in the film.

The only character who differs from the rest in terms of individual qualities associated with her character is Tinker Bell, who can be seen as the most independent of all the female characters. She has confidence, a possessive attitude and considers herself superior compared to, for example, Wendy. However, she is not as independent as she seems since fairies depend on children to believe in them to exist.

The obvious difference between the film and the novel, is how Disney has altered the characters and made their physical appearance much more emphasized. Peter Pan went from an ambiguous fairy to a full-scale boy, and Tinker Bell went from a tiny light to an Americanized bombshell. These changes in emphasis might be a result of Disney using animated cartoons. When using this particular medium, the viewers almost expect the characters to be extremely curvy, thin or muscular since this is part of the convention and todays viewers tend to consider themselves aware of the fact that these characters are illustrated. Therefore, these characters and their appearances are much more difficult to criticize due to their protection by their animated form (Ohmer 151-152).

The experience for the reader or the viewer is at times quite similar. Even though the novel is a few years older than the Disney version, we have no trouble recognizing Peter Pan, Tinker Bell or the others. The personalities of the characters are generally the same, even
though some of both Peter’s and Wendy’s characteristics are more emphasized in the novel, maybe as a result of Disney trying to make the characters more popular to the broader mass.

Every character of the story lives up to socially and culturally constructed gender stereotypes and even if they do develop from the beginning of the story and become confident or dependent towards the end, they still move within the construction of the preconceived notions of what femininity and masculinity are.

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