Growing Up: Redefining the Meaning of Home

 Returning to the discussion of Spielberg’s E. T. and its second important intertext, Peter Pan, we must first note that, in J.M. Barrie’s story, the process of growing up is conceived as a dialectic of exile and homecoming. Early on in the story, Peter Pan – “the boy who wouldn’t grow up,” according to the subtitle of the original stage version (179) – leads Wendy and her two little brothers away from the family home, taking them with him to Neverland. There, Wendy and her brothers have all kinds of dangerous adventures, but ultimately they return to the family home where, in time, they grow up and become adults. Years later, when Wendy tells her daughter Jenny about her adventures in Neverland, the girl wonders why Wendy is no longer able to fly, which apparently she had been capable of as a child. Wendy, however, knows exactly why adults, unlike children, remain earthbound: “they are no longer gay and innocent and heartless” (174; ch. 17). And it is true that Peter appears heartless throughout Barrie’s story; we learn, for instance, that with regard to heroic deeds, “it was his cleverness that interested him and not the saving of human life” (82; ch. 4). Indeed, as Annie Hiebert Alton rightly notes, Peter’s heartlessness is that of a very small child who “seems unaware of the feelings of others” (174n1). Accordingly, as an eternal child Peter is free from the ties that bind one to others, and can simply do whatever he pleases. This freedom, however, comes at the cost of familial belonging, for as we learn at the end of a chapter entitled “The Return Home” – in which Wendy and her brothers are reunited with their parents – Peter “had ecstasies innumerable that other children can never know, but he was looking through the window at the one joy from which he must be for ever barred” (169; ch. 16). In Peter Pan, in short, there is an irreconcilable conflict between, on the one hand, freedom from interference with one’s desires, and, on the other, the freedom to belong and be part of a family home – with everyone except Peter eventually opting for the latter.

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18 For a recent, book-length study of Barrie’s story (including adaptations and sequels) see Kirsten Stirling, Peter Pan’s Shadows in the Literary Imagination (2012).
19 See Ann Yeoman, Now or Neverland (1998) for an extended Jungian reading of Peter Pan as a puer aeternus.
20 This may, of course, be a misleading dichotomy – but the point is that the text establishes it as such.
The idea that as children we enjoy a greater degree of freedom than is the case later in life may, of course, be merely an instance of nostalgic idealization – and nostalgia is in fact a crucial concept in any discussion of home because it can be understood, like trauma, as one particular symptom of alienation and unbelonging. According to Kimberley K. Smith, the term *nostalgia* was coined in 1688 by the physician Johann Hofer, who used it to describe a severe, even potentially fatal illness diagnosed among Swiss mercenaries, and in Hofer’s view caused by the mercenaries’ physical absence from home (509). In the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Smith continues, the concept’s meaning broadened and complicated: “Once defined simply as a desire to return home, to a specific *place*, nostalgia was gradually being conceptualized as a longing to return to a former *time* – and usually a time the patient only *imagined* to be better” (512; original emphasis). Smith’s main point, however, is that we should not simply dismiss the longing for the past as “mere nostalgia,” but instead regard nostalgic desires “as a valuable basis for social critique” (523). While we may all agree that it is impossible to simply return to a past state, nostalgic subjects may nevertheless have perfectly valid reasons for rejecting the current state of affairs. More generally, nostalgia is an expression of individual or collective values and desires that, as such, may very well be legitimate. If Elliott, for instance, longs for the time before his father left the family home, then a certain degree of nostalgic idealization may well be involved, but this does not invalidate the boy’s desire to be reunited with a person he loves. At the same time, Roberta Rubenstein suggests that “nostalgia, or homesickness […] is the existential condition of adulthood” because the process of growing up turns all into “exiles from childhood” (4–5) – an idea symbolized in *Peter Pan* through adults’ exile from Neverland.

At any rate, the implications of growing up as depicted in *Peter Pan* match precisely some key concerns of *E. T.*, as the latter, too, tells the story of a child who must learn to respect the feelings of others as part of the process of coming of age. The importance of a respect for the feelings of others is made clear early on in Spielberg’s film when Elliott, after his first brief encounter with E. T., fails to convince his mother (as well as his brother and sister) that he has really stumbled upon something unusual in the field behind the family’s suburban home:

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21 See Jan Willem Duyvendak: “Nostalgia is not necessarily problematic, so long as we understand that nostalgia says more about contemporary society than it does about the past” (107; see also Kirk 606; Peters, “Exile, Nomadism, and Diaspora” 30).
MARY
[M]aybe you just probably imagined that it happened.

ELLIOTT
I couldn’t have imagined it! […] Dad would believe me.

MARY
Maybe you ought to call your father and tell him about it.

ELLIOTT
I can’t. He’s in Mexico with Sally. (Mathison 63)

Elliott’s mother is evidently shaken by her son’s heartless reference to the father’s new lover, and eventually leaves the kitchen in tears. Michael, Elliott’s older brother, is furious: “Damn it! Why don’t you… grow up? Think of how other people feel for a change!” (Mathison 64). Michael thus explicitly defines Elliott’s task as the need to be more empathetic, and it is thus significant that Mary will later read the story of *Peter Pan* not to him, but to his little sister, Gertie, who is still young enough to be “gay and innocent and heartless,” whereas Elliott has already left behind the stage of infantile narcissism and begun his journey toward adulthood. Indeed, the film’s *mise-en-scène* during the sequence discussed above emphasizes Elliott’s transitional state, as Elliott is shown sitting on one side of a rather oddly-shaped, triangular kitchen table, with Gertie placed on her own on another, and both Mary and Michael positioned at the third (Figure 4). Elliott is thus situated symbolically between a very small child and two more adult figures, while at the same time the framing of the shot makes him appear as still closer to his younger sister. The remainder of Spielberg’s film then tells the story of how Elliott is saved from the error of his former, childish ways by his encounter with E. T. the Messiah. Accordingly, when at the end of the film E. T. is ready to go back home, it is no longer Elliott, but Gertie who is in need of spiritual guidance from the alien, whose message to her is as simple as it is clear: “Be good” (Mathison 146).
And yet, above and beyond these rather homely pieties, the film’s juxtaposition of *Peter Pan* with elements from the story of Jesus Christ also has some rather more unsettling effects, which becomes apparent if we examine closely the scene in *E.T.* in which the two intertextual references are most explicitly intertwined. The scene in question occurs roughly in the middle of the film and shows Elliott and E. T. hiding in the closet of Gertie’s bedroom while Mary is reading to Gertie from *Peter Pan*. The passage Mary reads to Gertie tells the story of how Peter tries to save the fairy Tinker Bell by breaking the frame of the fictional world and appealing to the children in the audience:

**MARY**

“Her voice is so low I can scarcely tell what she is saying. She says, she says she thinks she could get well again if children believed in fairies. Do you believe in fairies? Say quick that you believe!” [...]  

**GERTIE**


It is precisely during this scene about children’s belief in fairies that Elliott, hidden in the closet, cuts himself on a sawblade and starts to bleed, which prompts E. T. to heal the boy’s wound with the gentle touch of a finger (Matthison 103–104). This surprising juxtaposition suggests a parallel between, on the one hand, a belief in the healing powers of a Messiah, and, on the other, a belief in fairies – as if the two were one and the same.\(^{22}\) This, in turn, illustrates the extent to which intertextual play can develop a dynamic of its own, with various

\(^{22}\) For a different (and more detailed) reading of the parallels between *E. T.* and *Peter Pan* see Patricia Read Russel’s essay “Parallel Romantic Fantasies.”