

Playing vs fulfilling the role of the mother



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Peter Pan (1911) by J. M. Barrie and The Story of the Treasure Seekers (1988) by Edith Nesbit are Victorian novels that follow the stories of two underprivileged families who entertain themselves and each other with their imagination. In both stories, the eldest female characters Wendy Darling- from Peter Pan - and Dora Bastable- from The Story of the Treasure Seekers - become the mother figure amongst their group of siblings. The role of the mother is very common in children's literature and is traditionally given to an older and female protagonist. The role of the mother is necessary in children's literature especially to give order and to be the person who takes care of the children.

Although the two young girls partake in accomplishing the same role, Wendy plays the role of the mother whereas Dora sees this position as a responsibility that needs to be fulfilled. Since the role of the mother is more of a game to Wendy, she is able to see this position as easy and enjoyable. Her perception of this task is more laid back because to her, it is a game, she is adored for playing this role, and because of the active presence of her parents. On the other hand, Dora struggles with accomplishing this role and does not find it enjoyable at all because it is more so a job for her, she is not appreciated for what she does, and lastly because her parents are absent in her life.

Imagination and playing pretend is a regular habit in the lives of the Darling family - even their Newfoundland dog, Nana, has a role in playing the nursemaid. Acting out the role of the mother is an easy and enjoyable task for Wendy because she is not obligated to take the role seriously. In chapter 6, when Peter tells Wendy that all him and the lost boys need is " a nice

motherly person" (61), Wendy is quick to say that she is just the person they need and replies, "Come inside at once, you naughty children; I am sure your feet are damp. And before I put you to bed I have just time to finish the story of Cinderella" (62). The fact that Peter says that they need a "motherly" person rather than a "mother" suggests that a real mother is not actually needed in their lives, but more so wanted. This adds on to the idea that Wendy is not required to perform any particular responsibilities and that everything she does as a mother is just for fun.

Another scene that proves that Wendy as a mother is all for play is when Peter confronts her about him playing the role of the father. "I was just thinking," he said, a little scared. "It is only make-believe, isn't it, that I am their father?" "Oh yes," Wendy said primly [formally and properly]. "You see," he continued apologetically, "it would make me seem so old to be their real father." "But they are ours, Peter, yours and mine." "But not really, Wendy?" he asked anxiously. (89-90) In this passage, Peter and Wendy confirm that both their roles as parents is not real. This passage also shows how Wendy discreetly wants Peter to play the role of the father because if there is a mother, there has to be a father. Thinking about what should happen in order to make the role feel more genuine demonstrates the actual inauthenticity of Wendy as a mother.

Contrary to Wendy, Dora recognizes the role of the mother as a true responsibility and not a game. She does not think about anybody taking the role as the father; her only focus is on doing her job. Part of Dora's duty in fulfilling the role of the mother is mending her siblings' damaged clothing. "Dora is the only one of us who ever tries to mend anything" (24). Chapter 7

of the novel provides many examples of Dora mending her siblings' clothing. Since the little ones are always recklessly playing around, they often damage their clothing. "[Dora] was trying to mend a large hole in one of Noel's stockings. He tore it on a nail when we were playing shipwrecked mariners on top of the chicken-house the day H. O. fell off and cut his chin: he has the scar still." (47) Another responsibility that Dora has is to take care of her siblings. Whenever Dora thinks that a playful suggestion from her siblings is unsafe, she is quick to let them know that she does not like the idea because of their potential dangers, " And though Oswald said half of us could be highwaymen and the other half rescue party, Dora kept on saying it would be wrong to be a highwayman - and so we had to give that up" (36). Dora as the mother is a role that is not easy or enjoyable for her because she takes her job seriously and want to make sure she does well.

In addition to the role of the mother as a character to be played, Wendy enjoys being the mother of the group because she is adored for it. Wendy, as a mother, is a role that has been admired since Peter had first introduced her to the lost boys. "' Great news, boys,' he cried, ' I have brought at last a mother for you all'" (22). When Peter says " I have brought at last a mother for you all", the " at last" suggests that the lost boys have been looking for a mother and that Wendy is someone of great value to them, even if they never thought about needed a mother beforehand. Playing the role of the mother is an easy job for Wendy especially because she is treated like royalty for it. As soon as the lost boys recognize Wendy as someone of great importance, they do whatever Wendy wants in order to make her happy. "' We've built the little walls and roof and made a lovely door, So tell us,

mother Wendy, "What are you wanting more?" To this she answered greedily: "Oh, really next I think I'll have Gay windows all about, with roses peeping in, you know, and babies peeping out"" (38). Not only do the lost boys treasure Wendy, but so do the antagonists of the story. On page 74, Mr. Smee, Captain Hook's right hand man, says, "could we not kidnap these boys' mother and make her our mother?" Being adored and wanted makes playing the role of the mother stress-free and amusing for Wendy.

Throughout the novel *Peter Pan*, the role of the mother is mentioned explicitly, which is not the case in *The Story of the Treasure Seekers*. In fact, Dora is not known for taking the role of the mother. Despite Dora's hard work in trying to be a mother to the Bastable children, Dora is solely known as the older sister. On page 31, Oswald, the older brother of the group, compares Dora to elder sisters in books and says that she is "just like them". Since the Bastable children do not understand the effort that Dora puts into taking care of them and trying to make them happy, they do not appreciate her for all that she does for them. An example of the lack of gratitude the Bastable children have for Dora is after she knitted a scarf for her younger brother, Noel, "Once she knitted a red scarf for Noel because his chest is delicate, but it was much wider at one end than the other, and he wouldn't wear it" (39). Even though Dora tries her best to do good deeds for her younger siblings, they fail to understand Dora's intentions. Even Oswald, who is the eldest of the Bastable children, is oblivious to Dora's objectives. Throughout the novel, he describes Dora as a person who is disliked.

In chapter 10, Oswald says, "Dora said she wouldn't play; she said she thought it was wrong, and she knew it was silly - so we left her out, and she

went and sat in the dining-room with a goody-book" (54). Rather than being adored for being responsible, the Bastable children recognize Dora as an interference to their fun. In chapter 11, Dora breaks down after being completely overwhelmed by the ingratitude from her siblings. We walked home very fast and not saying much, and the girls went up to their rooms. When I went to tell them tea was ready, and there was a teacake, Dora was crying like anything and Alice hugging her. I am afraid there is a great deal of crying in this chapter, but I can't help it. Girls will sometimes; I suppose it is their nature, and we ought to be sorry for their affliction. 'It's no good,' Dora was saying, 'you all hate me, and you think I'm a prig and a busybody, but I do try to do right - oh, I do! Oswald, go away; don't come here making fun of me!' (64) In this passage, Dora expresses the misery that comes along with her attempts in fulfilling the role of the mother. Being unappreciated makes this role especially difficult and stressful for her.

Last but not least, a factor that contributes to the amusement and ease of playing the role of the mother for Wendy is that her parents are actively present in her life. Since the Darling children have parents that constantly play with them and give them their time and affection, they recognize the role of the mother as someone to look up to and adore. Peter Pan also recognizes the strong affection from Mr. and Mrs. Darling, "O Wendy, your mother was telling you such a lovely story" (47). Mrs. Darling is always reading stories to her children. Encouraging the children to use their imagination allows Wendy to try to play the role of the mother as best as she can. In addition to the encouragement to be creative, Wendy does not feel any reason to worry about her parents. Since Wendy is confident in the love

her parents have for her, she does not have any concern about losing them.

“ Wendy did not really worry about her father and mother; she was absolutely confident that they would always keep the window open for her to fly back by, and this gave her complete ease of mind.” (65) With the presence of her parents, Wendy is able to have all the fun she wants in Neverland without a single burden. On the other hand, the biggest and most important reason why Dora struggles with fulfilling the role of the mother is because of the absence of both her parents.

In *The Story of the Treasure Seekers*, the Bastable children cope with the loss of their mother by distracting themselves and helping their father, who is always working, obtain money. Near the beginning of the novel, Oswald says, “ Our Mother is dead, and if you think we don’t care because I don’t tell you much about her you only show that you do not understand people at all” (45). This quote displays the desire of Oswald to not discuss the pain he feels now that his mother is gone. Another example that shows the Bastable children ignoring the thought of their mother is when Albert-next-door’s uncle confronts the children about Albert’s mother’s fear, ““We’re very, very sorry. We didn’t think about his mother. You see we try very hard not to think about other people’s mothers...”” (14) Although the Bastable children, as a whole, try not to think about their mother, she is constantly on Dora’s mind because she passed on her role to her, “ And when Mother died she said, “ Dora, take care of the others, and teach them to be good, and keep them out of trouble and make them happy.” She said, “ Take care of them for me, Dora dear.”” (34). Fulfilling the role of the mother is especially hard for Dora because she feels the obligation to put the little girl in her aside in

order to successfully satisfy this role. Dora spends so much time taking care of her siblings that there is not anyone who stops to take care of her.

In conclusion, although J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* and Edith Nesbit's *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* give the role of the mother a similar importance, there are different ways of perceiving the role as the person accomplishing it. When the role is being played for the sole purpose of having fun, it is easy and stress-free to do. However, the role of the mother is more hectic and difficult to fulfill when one is obligated to take it seriously. Although Wendy and Dora both have the intentions to be a good mother figure and take care of their group of children, it is Dora who takes the role of a real mother due to the fact that it is a job rather than a play to her.