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Running Away to Neverland: The Fear of Adulthood in John Green's *Paper Towns*
and J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*

In the prologue of John Green's young adult novel, *Paper Towns*, Margo Roth Spiegelman and Quintin Jacobsen discover a dead man's body in the park as children. While Quintin flinches away, Margo seems keenly aware of it, as she physically steps towards it. After returning home, Margo visits Quintin outside his window, speaking intently about her investigation of the dead man. Yet, while Margo is interested in discovery, Quintin is not. He wants to just forget the entire matter, at his mother's suggestion. After Quintin closes the window, separating the two children, he looks to see Margo's eyes fixed on something behind him, "Something monstrous that had already drained the blood from her face" (Green 13). This monstrosity that Margo sees can be interpreted as the reality of adulthood and therefore, eventually death, as one falls into the transition from adolescence into adulthood. As she has chosen to focus on their experience in the park, this presence of death now haunts her. In defying adulthood--traditions of society, such as marriage and motherhood--she almost kills herself later in the novel, but admits to Quintin that "when it came down to it, the skin of my wrist looked so white and defenseless that I couldn't do it" (262). So, instead she runs away, as if trying to find her own Neverland, similar to that of J. M. Barrie's Neverland in *Peter Pan*. This fear of adulthood and theme of death is also explored by Barrie in the character of Peter Pan himself. After running away to live with the fairies and later Neverland, Peter develops a hatred for adults, as displayed in his reaction to Mrs. Darling, who "when he saw she was a grown up, he gnashed the little pearls at her" (Barrie 12). By running away, Peter ultimately becomes the immortal child, having control over the fate of his adulthood. The one close experience with death that Peter does experience is his time on Marooner's Rock after saving Tiger Lily from

Hook and his gang of misfit pirates. His fear is evident, yet he determines that death would be the ultimate adventure (110). Fortunately, Peter does not drown, as he is saved by the Never bird. In this way, he escapes his fate and maintains his role as the immortal child. This view of *Paper Towns* in relation to *Peter Pan* will discuss Margo and Peter Pan, as they face experiences with death and adulthood, as well as the temptation of Neverland itself--the place where time and death stops. The transition into adulthood will also be examined, as Wendy Darling and Quintin accompany Peter Pan and Margo out the window to Neverland. Yet opposed to Peter and Margo's fascination with Neverland--running away from adulthood and its subsequent consequences of responsibility, and ultimately death--Wendy and Quintin choose to be content in their growing up and will eventually take their place in the adult society, even after they literally journey outside the window on a tempting adventure away from reality.

The first line in Barrie's novel, "All children, except one, grow up" shows the boy, Peter Pan, as the immortal child, forever staying young, free of the threat of death and adulthood (1). In this way, he also embodies the idea of death itself, as he is immortal. In the essay, "The Neverland of Id: Barrie, Peter Pan, and Freud," Michael Egan explores the symbols of Death and Time in the character Peter Pan and the place of Neverland itself. He describes Barrie's Neverland as "an unpredictably predictable universe to which each dreaming child can fly. It is a place where the inhabitants--Wendy and Tinker Bell, specifically--can die and yet survive death; where age and growth can be transcended" (47). This control of fate is seen by Wendy's close encounter with death after being shot down by the Lost Boys at Tinker Bell's jealous command. "The Wendy lady lives," the Lost Boy, Slightly, cried after seeing her alive and well (Barrie 76). Also, as Egan has stated, Tinker Bell is spared of death after drinking the poison Hook intended for Peter. She is brought back to life after Peter addresses all children dreaming of Neverland to

“clap your hands; don’t let Tink die,” and so “Tink was saved” (153-54). Therefore, Neverland is then seen not only as a place where Indians, pirates, and mermaids live, and flying is possible with Peter Pan, it is also seen as a place where the fantastic happens--such as defying death. Egan goes on to discuss Peter Pan becoming Time itself as he unconsciously imitates the sound of the crocodile, the ultimate symbol of Time throughout the novel. In this way, “Peter thus becomes both Time and Fate” (Egan 52). This idea of death and time in *Peter Pan* is also discussed by critic, Sarah Gilead, in “Magic Abjured: Closure in Children’s Fantasy Fiction.” She describes Peter Pan as being “forever young;” she later continues, “he embodies the adult obsession with time and death” (285). Again, Peter is viewed as the immortal child, reflecting the concept of the adult’s view of time and death. Gilead goes on to say that “Peter is death itself as well as the desire for eternal childhood” (286). Peter as Death encompasses the idea of immortality as well as the adult’s longing for childhood. This idea of eternal childhood also reflects the fear of adulthood seen by Peter Pan himself, supporting the idea of the general fear of adulthood by children, as well as Margo’s own fear in *Paper Towns*. This fear then hinders Margo in her transition into adulthood, causing her to resemble more of Peter Pan, the boy who never grows up.

This transition into adulthood for the young teen is a predicament filled with nervousness and thoughts of identity. In *Young Adult Resources Today: Connecting Teens with Books, Music, Games, Movies, and More*, Melissa Gross looks at the transition of the teen, “The main crisis that young people are dealing with is identity versus role confusion. During this stage, young people become increasingly aware that adulthood is imminent and that they will need to find their senses of identity and independence to move forward in life” (18). She goes on to say that “this transition from childhood to adulthood also poses concern for personal contribution to society, as

well as personal satisfaction in life itself” (15). During this stage, the pressure of societal contribution is heavy, giving the fear of adulthood more, proverbial, heads to cut down. Also in *The Adolescent Mind: Myths of Youth and the Adult Imagination*, the notion of adolescence is explored by Patricia Spacks, taking into account the years of exploration, pain, and growth the teen and/or child faces. This outlook of adulthood as viewed by young people is also mentioned as being similar to death. When Spacks discussed what adulthood meant with a group of students, they responded, “It means having all your problems solved.” She then followed up this view of adulthood by saying that “this sounded indistinguishable from death” (4). Again, the pressures of this transition are viewed as death, supporting the idea of general fear of adulthood that both Margo and Peter Pan face, as well as the thought that adulthood could be a worse fate than death itself, as shown in *Peter Pan* on Marooner’s Rock and later in the Darling’s home.

In the beginning of *Paper Towns*, when Margo and Quintin first find the dead man in the park, it invokes a curiosity in Margo. While young Quintin is apprehensive to be close to a dead body, Margo is more active. Quintin takes two steps away from the body, and Margo takes ‘two equally small and quiet steps forward. ‘His eyes are open,’ she said. ... ‘I thought you closed your eyes when you died’” (Green 10). This experience young Margo has, invokes a curiosity to find out who the dead man was and why he died. While Margo goes out on an investigation, playing the kid-detective, Quintin is encouraged by his parents to simply forget the event, and not to concern himself with the concept of death:

Both my parents are therapists, which means that I am really goddamned well adjusted.

So when I woke up, I had a long conversation with my mom about the cycle of life, and how death is a part of life, but not a part of life I needed to be particularly concerned about at the age of nine, and I felt better. (11)

Keeping the persona of the innocent child, Quintin, without facing the fact of death, is more immune to the later fear that Margo ends up developing towards adulthood. This difference between Margo and Quintin is also displayed by the literal window itself, as Margo stands outside the screen, even with the window opened, “As I turned on my side, I saw Margo Roth Spiegelman standing outside my window, her face almost pressed against the screen. I got up and opened the window, but the screen stayed between us, pixelating her” (12). This is a literal separation of the two children, reflecting the distance they will eventually have with each other as adolescent teenagers. This window is also later represented as a physical threshold in both *Paper Towns* and *Peter Pan* into the transition of adulthood for Quintin and Wendy. After Margo explains her investigation of the dead man, Quintin closes the window. He then sees Margo’s eyes change in response to a monstrosity only she sees, though Quintin does feel an eerie presence behind his back. Yet, he is too nervous to turn around and see for himself, maintaining his innocence, “And I felt too afraid to turn around and see” (13). This monster Margo sees is a representation of the adulthood and death, as she recognizes the imminent transition children must eventually face from adolescence into adulthood.

This transition can be viewed as the child’s fairytale journey, especially clear in *Peter Pan* with Wendy’s own journey through the window with Peter, as well as her journey home to, in essence, grow up and become a mother, taking her place in the adult world. This journey is described by fairytale critic, Bruno Bettelheim:

[The] symbolic language of fairy tale states that after having gathered strength in solitude, [children] now have to become themselves. Actually this development is fraught with dangers: an adolescent must leave the security of childhood, which is

represented by getting lost in the dangerous forest; learn to face up to his violent tendencies and anxieties, symbolized by encounters with wild animals or dragons; get to know himself, which is implied in meeting strange figures and experiences.

Through this process the adolescent loses a previous innocence. (226)

This journey is described in *Peter Pan*, with Wendy Darling's journey with Peter, as she passes through the window, out of the childhood security of the nursery, to go to Neverland--a dangerous forest--where she faces threats such as Hook and his deadly pirates. Through this experience, she is also put into situations where she is faced with taking on an adult position, as wife and mother. This position is put upon her as the boys first make her a little house, "Wendy lady ... for you we built this house." Wendy responds gladly, saying that it is a "lovely, darling house." Immediately the boys are deemed as her children, "'And we are your children.' ... Then they all went on their knees, and holding out their arms, cried 'O Wendy lady, be our mother'" (83). By taking this position of mother, Wendy becomes the angel of the house. Not only is she perceived as the boys' mother, but she also acts as Peter's wife:

She repeatedly refers to herself as wife and mother, as does the narrator, and in the chapter called 'The Home Under the Ground' behaves exactly as a stereotypical Victorian wife. Peter reciprocates. She calls him 'Father' and he responds by referring to her as his 'old lady.' They both cast the lost boys, together with John and Michael, in the role of their children. (Egan 45)

When Wendy decides to go back home to London, content with her decision to grow up, unlike Peter, she has decided that she is not afraid of adulthood, but welcomes it.

In *Paper Towns*, this transition occurs, in a similar fashion to *Peter Pan*, as Margo comes to Quintin's window, just as she did as a child after their discovery of the dead man. This time

she comes as a teenager, dressed in all black, intent on taking Quintin away on a night of adventure, pranks, and ultimately breaking into Sea World. Quintin's surprise at Margo's arrival, years after the window first closed between them, is displayed by Quintin's commentary, "And so May fifth could have been any day--until just before midnight, when Margo Roth Spiegelman slid open my screen-less bedroom window for the first time since telling me to close it nine years before." Margo then convinces Quintin to come with her for the night, and so he goes, despite his content behavior of staying within the norm, "I liked routine. I liked being bored. I didn't want to, but I did" (Green 25). Even when Margo tells him she needs him to come with her that night, he argues that he has school tomorrow, an excuse. Margo replies, "There's school tomorrow and the day after that, and thinking about that too long could make a girl bonkers. So yeah. It's a school night. That's why we've got to get going, because we've got to be back by morning" (28). Quintin's concern about school reflects his desire to stay within social normalcy, while Margo is completely at ease, almost to the extent of having a frivolous attitude towards living, like Peter Pan as the immortal child. After their crazy night, Quintin returns to his room, while Margo disappears into the night, much like Peter and Wendy's own relationship. The next day at school Quintin looks for Margo, but she has vanished without anyone, including her own family, knowing where she has gone.

Margo's vanishing is similar to Peter Pan's own initial vanishing as he discovers his fear of adulthood. As graduation is imminent for Margo, as well as the suffocating expectations of growing up, going to college, and eventually getting married and having children of her own, she runs away to find her own Neverland on the road. These social expectations are placed on Peter Pan as well, for in his first few days of boyhood, he hears his mother talk about plans for him as a grown man. This pressure adolescents feel from parents is discussed by Roberta Trites in

Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature. In the book, young adult fiction is explored, taking a look at teenagers and the struggles they face as they grow from adolescence into adulthood, finding their own way in the world. Also, Trites discusses the dominance teenagers see by their parents, and how in this view of dominance, rebellion often occurs, “Adolescent characters themselves often create repressive parental figures to dominate them. The adolescents, in turn, rebel against this perceived domination in order to engage their own power” (54). This rebellion shown is not only against the teenagers/children’s parents, but the structure of society itself, as the pressure of adulthood claws at the young adolescent, until they can either give in and be content, or run away from it. And, as displayed by both Peter and Margo, this pressure causes them to, in essence, fly out the window to their own Neverland.

Sadly, this rebellion is dealt with contrastingly by the mothers seen in both *Peter Pan* and *Paper Towns*. Peter Pan runs away from home, after hearing his mother’s plans, but one day he does return only to find that his mother has closed the window to his bedroom. Peter tells of his disappointment and hatred towards mothers, after Wendy has given defense about her own mother, Mrs. Darling, to the Lost Boys, “‘Long ago,’ he said, ‘I thought like you that my mother would always keep the window open for me; so I stayed away for moons and moons and moons, and then flew back; but the window was barred, for mother had forgotten all about me, and there was another little boy sleeping in my bed’” (Barrie 130). In *Paper Towns*, Margo calls her mother at the end of the novel, at Quintin’s suggestion, after he finds her in New York, far from Orlando, their childhood home. After she ends the call, Margo relates her phone conversation with Quintin, “It’s like she thinks my job is to please her, and that should be my dearest wish, and when I don’t please her--I get shut out. She changed the locks. That’s the first thing she said” (Green 264). In this way, the window has been barred against her, like Peter Pan’s own situation

with his childhood bedroom. In this phone conversation with her mother, Margo also admits, “I don’t know Mom, I decided to move to a fictitious place.” Again, Margo is off looking for her own Neverland, which at the moment is Agloe, New York, before she hits the road again, with nowhere in particular to go, only knowing that she will not remain within the prison she’s made society out to be.

As Margo is unsettled and negative towards a society that would have her take her place as an adult, she runs away to this Agloe, a paper town, “Agloe is a place where a paper creation became real. A dot on the map became a real place, more real than the people who created it the dot could ever have imagined” (261-62). This place, created in imagination by man, has been left alone, sitting like lost childhood in the dust. So, as Margo decided that she could no longer be content in her fate of adulthood and societal demands, she goes to a place symbolizing Neverland--a place invented in a child’s dream, a place that can crumble like paper as the child grows up. Neverland is described in *Peter Pan* as being different for each child, as it is a dream in their mind, “It is, Barrie suggests, the child’s mind during sleep” (Egan 44). These dreams children have are all different, as Barrie writes, that “of course the Neverlands vary a great deal” (Barrie 7).

At Margo’s initial disappearance, while she traveled and lived in her Neverland, Algie, Quintin believes that she wants him to find her, following the unintentional clues she’d left behind. As the months pass and graduation looms, Quintin starts to think that Margo actually wanted him to find her dead body in one of these paper towns scattered across Florida, imitating the dead body they’d found in the park as children so many years prior, “God, Margo, I walked through so many of those abandoned subdivisions looking for your body. I really thought--I really thought you were dead.” It’s at that moment that Margo reveals her temptation of suicide.

She describes the innocent white skin and that she couldn't follow through with the deed because, as she admits, "It was as if what I wanted to kill wasn't in that skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under my thumb, but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get at" (Green 262). Ultimately, this action of suicide would not kill the thing inside of her that she feared most, that being the fate of her adulthood. So instead, she does the next thing she can think of. She will leave Algeo and go on the road, traveling as a bum, a beatnik kid, living a frivolous lifestyle, unconcerned with the people she's left behind.

The close encounter that Margo faces with death is also experienced by Peter Pan, after he rescues Tiger Lily from Marooner's Rock and Hook's band of misfit pirates. Yet, his experience is not a thing he seeks out as Margo has done, for he chooses to sacrifice himself so that Wendy will live by flying away with Michael's kite to the safety of the island's shore. He then finds himself faced with drowning, and, as Barrie writes, "[Peter] was afraid at last." This is the only hint of fear ever seen by the frivolous Peter Pan, the immortal child. After watching the waves climb higher to his perch on Marooner's Rock, he declares that death would be "an awfully big adventure," (Barrie 110). Here, Peter has accepted his death. Yet instead of dying, he is rescued by the Never bird, who offers her nest to Peter so he may ride it back to the shore. As Peter sits in the nest, letting the waves carry him back to land, he is redeemed from the fate of death. This image of nests and eggs also reflects Peter's youthfulness, "I'm youth, I'm joy ... I'm a little bird that has broken out of the egg" (188). In escaping from Marooner's Rock, Peter keeps his place as the immortal child, with control over the fate of his adulthood.

Even in the end, after Wendy decides to take her brothers back to London, Peter remains the free immortal boy, returning to Neverland instead of staying with Wendy, her brothers, and the Lost Boys. Even when Mrs. Darling offers to adopt Peter, just as she has done with the Lost

Boys, he turns her down after knowing she would have him go to school and later an office. Peter asks if, “soon [he] should be a man,” in which Mrs. Darling answers, “Very soon.” He then responds in a very passionate way, “Keep back, lady, no one is going to catch me and make me a man.” Mrs. Darling then reaches out for him in a motherly fashion, but Peter is repulsed by her (195). In this response to the very thought of becoming a man, death is viewed as a more suitable option, as he’d previously accepted death on Marooner’s Rock, as an “awfully big adventure.”

This hatred for adults and adulthood also hinders Peter, for after he leaves the nursery to continue living with the fairies, he later returns with no memories of his battles with Hook or even Tinker Bell, ““Who is Captain Hook?’ he asked with interest when she spoke of his arch enemy. ‘Don’t you remember,’ [Wendy] asked, amazed, ‘how you killed him and saved all our lives?’ ‘I forget them after I kill them,’ he replied carelessly.” This behavior shows Peter’s frivolous nature of living and his careless view of others, even about Tinker Bell as Wendy asks if he at least remembers the fairy. He responds, “Who is Tinker Bell?” (198). Karen Coats writes in *Looking Glasses And Neverlands: Lacan, Desire, And Subjectivity In Children's Literature*, “Peter Pan represents the loss of memory and a kind of arbitrary cruelty, both of which are linked to death. ... Neverland turns out to be, after all, a very violent place, a place that kills memory” (95). Peter’s view of adulthood is also described in “J.M. Barrie’s Peter Pan In and Out of Time: a Children’s Classic at 100,” by Donna White and Anita Tarr, “In *Peter Pan*, return to the mortal world does not result in death as it does in most other tales of visits to the fairy realm, but it does result in becoming an adult, a fate, the play implies, which is worse than death” (87). This, “fate worse than death” displays an even clearer picture of Peter’s hatred and fear of adulthood, again emphasizing death as the better adventure.

While Peter Pan will not remain in London with the Darlings to grow up, he does try once more to tempt Wendy away from her mother, back to Neverland. At once Wendy is alight, “‘How lovely,’ Wendy cried so longingly that Mrs. Darling tightened her grip” (Barrie 195). Ultimately, it is not just her mother keeping Wendy back, as she decides to go with Peter only once a year for spring cleaning, but it is also her calling to adulthood that she has already comes to terms with. As time passes, Wendy grows up, and has a daughter of her own, Jane. On a year that Peter actually remembers to visit Wendy, he discovers that she has grown up and has lost the ability to fly. So, instead of taking Wendy, Peter takes Jane, and after that, generation after generation of children, “Jane is now common grown-up with a daughter called Margret; and every spring-cleaning time, except when he forgets, Peter comes for Margret and takes her to Neverland,” and so this tradition will carry on, “When Margret grows up she will have a daughter, who is to be Peter’s mother in turn; and thus it will go on” (206-05). Peter will continue to be the careless and forgetful boy, while the people he encounters will either die or simply be forgotten.

Similar to Peter Pan’s return trip to London with Wendy and the offer to remain with the Darlings and grow up, Margo is also offered a chance to go back with Quintin. She responds to his offer to at least come back with him for the summer, “It’s not just the gossip and the parties and all that crap, but the whole allure of life rightly lived--college and job and husband and babies and all that bullshit” (Green 263). Just as Peter felt repulsed by thoughts of growing up into a man with a job in an office, Margo despises the idea of growing into a woman with the responsibilities of marriage and motherhood. This societal obligation Margo feels being pushed on her, reflects the obligation women felt, especially in Victorian culture, mirroring the image of Wendy and her mother in *Peter Pan*. Patricia Spacks states in *The Female Imagination*, that

women were the “guardians of culture, upholders of society” (227). Yet just as Margo will not differ in her opinion of adulthood and society, Quintin will not relent on his content behavior towards adulthood, “The thing is that I do believe in college, and jobs, and maybe even babies one day. I believe in the future. Maybe it’s a character flaw, but for me it is a congenital one” (Green 263). Quintin has accepted his role in adulthood, just as Wendy does, and because of this, he does not go with Margo on the road.

The road is also a temptation Quintin faces, like Wendy’s own feelings towards Neverland. Yet, like Wendy, he determines that it is not the answer, “But then what? Do I just keep leaving places, and leaving them, and leaving them, tramping a perpetual journey?” (192). Quintin knows that there is no real purpose in running away, other than the act itself. This temptation, though, is not only the road, but it is Margo herself, just as Peter is Wendy’s temptation. Quintin would love to follow Margo, yet he also knows that he cannot, “I stand in this parking lot, realizing that I’ve never been this far from home, and here is this girl I love and cannot follow” (269-70). Though in the end of *Paper Towns*, the reader does not physically see Quintin and Margo separate, they do embrace, knowing in their hearts it is the final goodbye, as they “play the broken strings of [their] instruments one last time” (270). The two will separate, Margo to drive away with no real purpose, disappearing like a child in the night sky, while Quintin will return to Orlando, go to college, get married, have children and eventually die.

Like Peter Pan and his fate of forgetfulness after remaining the immortal child, Margo is hindered by her unwillingness to accept adulthood, as she travels on the road with no real purpose, other than running from her fear of adulthood and displaying an act of rebellion against social norms and expectations. Though in first response, one might see Margo as breaking out of society and being the independent female character, opposed to other female characters in

modern young adult fiction, she has not fully blossomed into a completely independent female character, as she is only driven by apprehension in regard to society and adulthood. In the essay, "Perception and Reality: Examining the Representations of Adolescents in Young Adult Fiction," Jeffery Kaplan discusses female characters in young adult fiction and the preconceived notions they deal with:

The female protagonists are still overwhelmingly 'white, middle class and heterosexual.'

Yes, although young adult authors, writes Rubinstein-Avila, ascribe to their heroines such strong descriptors as 'strong,' 'gutsy,' 'feisty,' and 'independent,' the expectations of these female characters are still embedded within the expectations of a socially conservative and sexist patriarchy. (42)

Though Margo is not completely knowledgeable of her own purpose or future, she does break out of the social norms intended for women--marriage and motherhood--cutting a bit down from this general stereotype previously described. Yet, again, because Margo is driven by mostly fear and rebellion, she has not fully established a purely strong female character for young adult fiction. Though because this position is at least closely established by Margo, there is more room and encouragement to have strong, independent female characters in young adult fiction today, yet hopefully, with more thought to their future purpose.

Ultimately, Peter and Margo's fear of adulthood hinders them, causing them to run away to their own Neverland. Both run in an attempt to control fate. Peter takes the form of the immortal child, enabling himself to have power over death and time, and Margo hits the road, breaking out of the prison she's made adulthood out to be. In their frivolous nature, Peter is forgetful and careless of others, and Margo does not think twice about her sudden disappearance, leaving Quintin to wonder if she'd killed herself. Peter and Margo's hatred for adulthood is not

recognized by Wendy or Quintin, as they both choose to go “through the window,” entering the transition from childhood/adolescence into adulthood. Also, even in their return to society, to eventually take their place in adulthood, both Wendy and Quintin stay true in their course, despite the temptations Peter and Margo display. Therefore, due to Wendy and Quintin’s act of returning home, they are free to grow in mind and body into adulthood, while Peter and Margo, in choosing to run away from adulthood and societal obligations, will live a purposeless lifestyle in their own Neverland of magic and asphalt roads, fraught with forgetfulness and frivolous behavior that hinders a purpose driven life.

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