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The Undermining of Maternity Through "Paternal" and Fictional Constructs in James Matthew Barrie's *The Little White Bird*

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Introduction

According to the narrator of *The Little White Bird*, “[i]f you ask your mother whether she knew about Peter Pan when she was a little girl she will say, 'Why, of course, I did, child'” (Barrie 122).[1] Similarly, “if you ask your grandmother whether she knew about Peter Pan when she was a girl, she also says, “Why, of course, I did, child'” (Barrie 122). Thus, Peter Pan's timelessness was decided before the very first version of the play was even written, before its countless cultural adaptations were even considered and, most interestingly, before the character himself was even born to the eyes of the readers. Indeed, one of the fascinating aspects of Peter Pan, amongst many others, can be found in the eternal nature of the protagonist. Just like Barrie had predicted in *The Little White Bird*, The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up became largely trans-generational, and what the author had foreseen in his text became surprisingly real.

In spite of the apparent simplicity of the lines quoted above, the creation of the mythical boy was a complex one, engaging with a multiplicity of literary pieces skilfully sewn together. The list of eponymous works constituting the adventures of Peter Pan is long; it begins in 1904 with the play *Peter Pan, or The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up,* whose written version was not published until 1928. The main reason for this temporal gap can partly be explained by the fact that the play “underwent multiple revisions” (Tatar, *Message* xvii). The end of the story, more specifically, was ceaselessly altered, and Tatar notes that “we do not always have a grown-up Wendy […] with a daughter who will fly off to Neverland to help Peter with his spring cleaning” (*Message* xviii). These changes in the plot “reveal exactly how much [Barrie] loved to see the character come alive onstage and transform and renew himself with each new production” (Tatar, *Message* xviii). While it should not be forgotten

that Barrie was, above all, a dramatist, he nonetheless published a novelised version of his story, *Peter Pan and Wendy* – nowadays referred to as *Peter Pan* – in 1911, which "captures, crystallizes, and broadens what [the author] wanted to say with the figure of Peter Pan" (Tatar, *Message* xx). Consequently, the novel is usually considered to be the reference of the boy's adventures.

This list also features a lesser known version of the story published in 1906, *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens,* in which the boy is only one-week-old. Clearly absent from the range of cultural re-adaptations dedicated to Peter Pan, this version constitutes the very first apparition of the protagonist in literature, initially anchored in the form of chapters at the heart of another novel: *The Little White Bird*. Written in 1902, *The Little White Bird* relates the peculiar but growing friendship between Captain W., the narrator, and a boy named David, and retraces the child's origins through the subjective eye and writing of the storyteller. Throughout the book, David is told various stories about his birth, the way his parents met, and other major events of his life. As Jacqueline Rose suggests in *The Case of Peter Pan, Or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction,* "[t]his structure of stories within stories ('en abîme') [*sic*] makes *The Little White Bird* a story about story-telling itself, and of the child's vital place in that process" (22). It is this complex narrative composition which enabled the very first Peter Pan story to be included in the novel, thus turning *The Little White Bird* into a one-of-a-kind, hybrid literary patchwork.

Above this singular narrative stratum lies an autobiographical layer often recognised by critics, as David's role as George Llewelyn Davies' double has generally been acknowledged. The latter, Rose explains, was "one of the five Llewellyn Davies boys whom Barrie finally adopted" (21).[2] Critic Andrew Nash even goes as far as stating:

> It is appropriate that the story of Barrie's relationship with the Llewelyn Davies family should have been made the subject of both a book and a television drama.[3] […]

> [A]s a work of fiction *The Little White Bird* itself stands as an expression, or an artistic embodiment, of that relationship. (vii)

More precisely, Nash points out that "[t]here were already a number of notes for fairy stories that were clearly suggested by the tales he was telling to George," thus underlying "Barrie's longing for and adoration of [the] child" and the boy's influence over the writer's work (x; Rose 21).

On a contextual level, *The Little White Bird* inherits from a prolific period, the *fin de siècle,* "caught between two ages, the Victorian and the Modern" (Ledger and Luckhurst xiii). Recognisable by its blend of "the old and the new," the *fin de siècle* carries "an exhilarating sense of possibility" (Ledger and Luckhurst xiii). Great-Britain is developing in an unprecedented way, marked by numerous changes: "the new woman, the new imperialism, the new realism, the new drama, and the new journalism, all arriv[e] alongside 'new' human sciences like psychology, psychical research [and] sexology" (Ledger and Luckhurst xiii). Simultaneously, the decline of the British Empire, "rivalled by Germany and America," shapes new anxieties about the future of the nation (Ledger and Luckhurst xiii). This "epoch of endings and beginnings" also witnesses new scientific and technological discoveries altering the Victorian landscape. Darwin's *Origins of the Species* (1859), for example, leads to derivative ideologies such as eugenism, implying a wish for "control over the breeding habits of a new mass population" (Ledger and Luckhurst xv). From these theories stem a fear of degeneration and decay, largely haunting the period.

Of course, such anxieties are echoed in the literature of the time, also going through a crucial evolution. While Henry James "defines the art of the novel," the three-volume novel gradually withdraws from the literary scene to be irrevocably replaced with briefer formats such as the short story (Ledger and Luckhurst xiv). At the same time, "mass generic forms – detective fiction, the spy novel, science fiction – take on the shapes that remain recognizable

today" (Ledger and Luckhurst xiv). This abundance of literary productions, greatly dominated by authors such as H.G. Wells, Kipling, Conrad and Conan Doyle, reflects the agitated context of the *fin de siècle*. Stories are inhabited by mutant bodies, recurrent invasions and disturbing events, inscribed in shorter formats opening new artistic horizons.

In this period of aesthetic transformations, Barrie incorporates the theme of artistic creation and its process in *The Little White Bird*, thus showing a strong concern to redefine art, as his contemporaries did (Nash viii). In his analysis of the novel, Nash draws attention to this recuperation:

> Through his adventures with George, Barrie had found an idea for the exploration of the theme that had been slowly emerging through his writing. Life, expressed through its ultimate source of maternity, was to be contrasted to Art and its source: creative inspiration. (x-xi)

Indeed, at a time when "the asexual world of art is claimed as superior to the real world of sexuality and childbearing," the analogy between artistic and maternal creation perfectly falls within the scope of the *fin de siècle* trend (Nash xi). In other words, "self-fathering" and "the aim of disempowering the biological mother" through creative production is often regarded as a symptomatic trait of male Victorian writings, likely to have been influenced by a drastic evolution in the status of fathers at the end of the nineteenth century (Nash xi).

As Natalie McKnight observes in her study, numerous motifs affected the position of the Victorian masculine parent, starting with "the Industrial Revolution [which] removed fathers' work from the home and [enabled] the cult of motherhood […] to monopolize parenting" (1). While farms and nearby workplaces used to allow closeness between father and child, and accordingly, a strong influence of the paternal figure over education, the development of factories deeply altered this dynamic and gave more room for maternal authority to grow (McKnight 1). Female assertion in the household was also encouraged by a new emerging literature that "helped to establish the 'cult of motherhood' which increasingly

placed the primary burden of parenting on the mother, relegating the father to the role of breadwinner" (McKnight 2). At the same time, the figure of the father became that of a "stern," "fatigued" and "alienated" character, thus strongly intensifying paternal discredit (McKnight 3). Additionally, industrialisation and its growing capitalism established ideal grounds for a new "friendly," "generous" and "playful" fatherly figure, Santa Claus, whose popularity revealed the need to replace the severe and distant nature of the Victorian father (McKnight 4).

Besides the transformation of domestic environments, scientific discoveries modified the position of the male parent within society. As McKnight indicates, studies of "fathering in the animal kingdom tended to show that the role of males in many cases was limited primarily to reproduction and that mothers clearly played the dominant role in nurturing and rearing in most species" (5). Such revelations facilitated reconsiderations within human societies and the repartition of roles amongst men and women were re-evaluated. Inevitably, Darwin's *Origins of the Species* also largely impacted social and theological visions of paternity, "undermin[ing] the Biblical account of history, add[ing] to changing perceptions of 'father' since they eroded faith in God, the ultimate referent for fathers—father with a capital 'F'" (McKnight 1). Consequently, "educated people found it increasingly difficult to believe in the absolute authority of scriptures" and naturally grew to consider science as a "new authority" replacing the father (McKnight 4-5). Male dominance was therefore significantly shaken as society slowly progressed towards a more equal repartition of rights. In what McKnight calls a real "authority vacuum," masculine authors nevertheless seemed to find a way to compensate their waning influence within the literary sphere by "creating their own worlds where they could reign as the undisputed authority" and reassert their status as authors (8).

In Barrie's *The Little White Bird*, this reaffirmation of authority translates into a claim for both authorship and paternity from the narrator, blended into a "self-fathering" behaviour. To do so, Captain W. "tells stories to a little boy in order to recreate him as a fictional character so that he can claim parental possession of him," thus "transcend[ing] natal creation" (Nash xi). In other words, Barrie's narrator gradually becomes the parent of his own fiction, whilst rejecting the maternal figure. Instead, his paternity is put into place through various artistic constructs that this dissertation will aim to analyse. Indeed, the following question will be raised: How is maternity discredited by artistic and paternal constructs in Barrie's *The Little White Bird*? Firstly, it will be argued that Barrie's shaping of an authoritative storytelling voice lays ground for the narrator's subjective influence over his story and audience. The imposing narrative structure will be seen as a wish from the author to designate the male narrator as a central figure of the novel. This narrative construct will be, in the second section, analysed through the prism of paternity, with the conception – or rather *re*-conception – of Barrie's child characters through Captain W.'s discourse. The focus will be put on their new fictionalised identity, created through the storyteller's verbal reconstruction and alteration of their origins. Eventually, the merging of biological and artistic conceptions will be observed to understand the extent to which paternity can function in a purely artistic structure. To do so, the notion of mimesis and the thematisation of the process of creation will be examined.

1. An authoritative narrative voice

The narrator of *The Little White Bird* appears as one of powerful stature and

considerable prominence; Barrie creates the illusion of a dominating figure controlling what he shows to his audience, the way he shows it, and the order in which he shows it. This authoritative effect is attained through numerous literary devices placing the storyteller as an essential figure of the novel. Indeed, the narrator seems to lead the story as he pleases by purposefully omitting its least convenient elements, stressing arbitrary aspects, and shaping the temporal structure of the novel. Yet, under this impression lies a complex authorial performance, hidden behind the imposing position of the narrator. The aim of this section will be to underline the impact of the subjectivity of the narrative voice over the story, and by doing so, to facilitate the understanding of the mechanisms between Captain W. and his characters.

1.1 The influential discourse of the narrator

The illusionary domination of the narrator is, before all else, encouraged by the fact that Barrie makes him the author of his story. As critic Andrew Nash points out, “[i]t is made clear at the end of the work that the narrator is not just telling the story but actively *writing* the book we are reading” (xv, emphasis in the original). Indeed, the narrator openly exposes his project to the readers: “I decided […] to write the book 'The Little White Bird'” (Barrie 257). He even keeps them informed on the development of his novel: “It was only yesterday afternoon, dear reader, [...] that I finished the book” (Barrie 265). By doing so, Barrie places his narrator in a crucial position within the story, and portrays him as the mighty figure of the book. The storyteller seemingly replaces the real author of the novel and therefore appears to be considerably influential.

This play on authorship inevitably establishes a dominant/dominated dynamic embedded in a rather equivocal communication scheme; the narrator comes across as the leading figure of the book, and Barrie creates the impression that he is very aware and committed to this role by making sure the audience will comply with his guidance. However, Nash observes that the novel "has a complicated layering of address and a shifting narrative tone. Some passages are addressed solely to the reader and others principally to David" (xi). In other words, it is not always clear who Barrie puts under the hold of the narrator, as his target audience is ambiguous. On the one hand, the reader is explicitly addressed: "dear reader;" "I have already told you, reader" (Barrie 265; 275). The narrator also alternates with a broader use of the second person pronoun ("What do you think it was?"), which reinforces the impression of a direct communication between him and the reader (Barrie 22).

Even so, David could be considered his ultimate target, as Jacqueline Rose underlines: "[t]he story is told *to* him, but since it goes back to before his beginning, he has to disappear in order for it to be told" (24, emphasis in the original). This purpose is clearly announced in the first chapter of the book: "'Dear David: If you really want to know how it began, will you come and have a chop with me to-day at the club?'" (Barrie 8). The novel's opening strongly suggests that the little boy is the addressee of the book. Similarly, after the narrator tells the story of Peter Pan, he raises a few questions about the tale in a way that suggests he is talking to a child: "Do you pity Peter Pan for making these mistakes? If so, I think it rather silly of you. […] do you think he is to be pitied for that?" (Barrie 146). This passage gathers both the tone (with the word "silly") and the type of questions (with the repetition of "do you think") that a child would be asked after being told a story, in order to confirm whether or not they understood it. It also strongly implies that a moral should be learnt from the story, in a very didactic way.

Nevertheless, Rose's argument – that David is the ultimate addressee – does not completely exclude the reader from the narrator' audience and, in fact, brings light to the communication pattern of the novel; the reader *is* the straightforward addressee of the book, but the final purpose of the novel remains directed at David who, as the narrator wishes, is expected to learn about his own story throughout the book. Accordingly, both David and the readers, as receivers of his discourse, seem to be under the influence of the storyteller's authority. Clearly, Barrie sometimes toys with this ambiguity: “I know something of men, and, on my soul, boy, I believe I am wronging you” (54). By using the word “boy,” the narrator could either be addressing David, or could simply be using it as an exclamation. This lack of clarity in the enunciation is essential to the author's construct of an authoritative narration: attention is drawn to it by questioning the position of the narrator towards his audience, and his seemingly dominant position is, consequently, highlighted.

Furthermore, this position transpires through the titles that designate the narrator. Instead of giving his name, Barrie chooses various appellations strengthening his dominating character. The first sentence, for example, illustrates this statement: “Sometimes the little boy who calls me father brings me an invitation from his mother […]” (Barrie 1). With the term “father,” the narrator is given a certain paternal authority over David, and this immediate impression of power is the first information given to the reader. By the time the latter realises that the child is not really his son (“'He is not really my father'”), the illusion of a father/son relationship is already well-anchored in the story, thus producing an unbalanced dynamic between the two (Barrie 8). In addition, the narrator is designated by David through military titles: “Oftenest I am but Captain W. – to him” (Barrie 7). The fact that David calls him “Captain” confirms a trenchant dichotomy between the two characters; adult/child, father/son, captain/follower: the narrator is obviously the leader of this relationship. As a

result, the reader is given the instruction to trust the narrator over the child, by reason of this position of power.

This manipulation of identity, where Barrie goes as far as replacing the storyteller's name with more flattering designations, constitutes the first evidence of the unreliability of the narrative voice. Critic Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan defines “unreliability” as a “rendering of the story and/or commentary on it the reader has reasons to suspect” (101). In *The Little White Bird*, a *mise en abyme* is established; the narrator is one of the protagonists of the story, but also the teller of his own actions. He is therefore present at the level of both the discourse and the action, which are closely intertwined. This participates in the frailty of his narration since his existence within the fictional frame of the story prevents all forms of complete objectivity to reside in the text (Rimmon-Kenan 104). In other words, there is “a discrepancy between a reasonable reconstruction of the story and the account given by the narrator” (Chatman 233).

This unreliability mainly translates into the damaging of Mary's image, David's mother, through the narrator's tone, as shown in the following extract:

> Then there was her ring, of which she was as conscious as if it rather than she was what came gaily down the street. She felt it through her glove to make sure that it was still there. She took off the glove and raised the ring to her lips, though I doubt not it was the cheapest trinket. She viewed it from afar by stretching out her hand; she stooped to see how it looked near the ground; she considered its effect on the right of her and on the left of her and through one eye at a time. Even when you saw that she had made up her mind to think hard of something else, the little silly would take another look. (Barrie 11)

Throughout the book, the story is interwoven with similar descriptions of Mary, all largely influenced by the narrator's point of view. This particular extract, for example, is preceded by numerous negative comments about Mary (“'Twenty-six, is she, David?' I replied. 'Tell her I said she looks more'”) already conditioning the reading of this passage (Barrie 1). Here, she is called “silly” and criticised for the inexpensive aspect of her ring, referred to as “the cheapest

trinket.” Her movements are exaggerated and turned into a clownish performance (“she stooped to see how it looked near the ground”), with the enumeration of large gestures (“raised,” “viewed it from afar,” “stretching out,” “on the right of her,” “on the left of her”). This episode illustrates Chatman's definition of narrative unreliability where “[t]he story undermines the discourse” (233). Indeed, the reported fact [Mary is walking down the street] is turned through the narrator's discourse into [Mary is unable to walk down the street without a grotesque behaviour].

However, the narratees, that is, David and the readers, are well-aware of the fact that the scene might have occurred in a different way, which inevitably uncovers the narrator's fraud (Chatman 233). Because Mary's description is so obviously tainted by the narrator's subjectivity, the reader might be lucid about his unreliability; as for David, he is able to realise that the narrator is not being completely objective: “Is it not strange that, though I talk thus plainly to David about his mother, he still seems to think me fond of her?” (Barrie 7). Thus, narrator and narratees are made accomplices; the audience complies with the storyteller's distortion of reality, just like a knowing wink between the two parties. From this dynamic between narrator, narratees and character, namely Captain W., David and the readers, and Mary, stems an ironic pattern serving Barrie's textual construction of an authoritative storyteller. According to Chatman, a narrator can be considered ironic when “the communication is between the narrator and narratee at the expense of a character” (229). Irony is therefore both a product of the narrator's unreliability, who needs his narratees to be manipulated into being on his side, and a matter of distance between narrator, narratees and character; it functions when “[n]arrator and narratee [are] *close* to each other but *far* from the character” (Chatman 259, my emphasis). The dynamics between characters in *The Little White Bird* follow this pattern: Mary's negative descriptions establish a complicity between

the narrator and his narratees, as they are performed at her expense. Only the storyteller and his audience know about her continual denigration, thus creating a closeness between them.

As Chatman underlines, “[t]he narrator-narratee relation can parallel or confirm in some way the themes of the object story” (Chatman 259). In Barrie's novel, the ironic and unreliable discourse of the narrator serves the author's purpose to turn the storyteller into an essential, leading figure for the reader, as it enables Captain W. to give an impression of control over the content of the story and the way it is conveyed. His subjective perception influences the unique version of events that is given to his narratees, who are forced to accept the fact that they will only be able to view the story through the prism of its storyteller. Interestingly, Chatman also points out that the narrator's “motive [for unreliability] can by no means be the sheer joy of storytelling” (234). Using Dostoevsky's *A Gentle Creature,* he remarks that “[w]hat makes the story interesting is the narrator's preoccupation with his own reliability” (235). More specifically, the narrator “expresses self-satisfaction in the power he exert[s]” through this process (235). In *The Little White Bird,* unreliability therefore both emphasises the fictional nature of the reported events, and draws attention to the presence of a storytelling voice constructed in a way that dissuades the audience from contradicting it; when David puts his version of events into question, the narrator reacts: “How now, I reflect, what sort of bumpkin is this?” (Barrie 7). Clearly, any objection to his narrative seems unwelcome.

1.2 Manipulating time through analeptic travels

Not only does Barrie give his narrator an authoritative role over his narratees through

unreliable and subjective discourses, but he also does so through the way the telling of his story is organised on a temporal level. Instead of a linear reconstitution of events, the audience is faced with a real travel through time, which encourages the impression of an influential narrator. Firstly, the latter lays the groundwork of his narrative to allow this time travel, and starts by "establish[ing] a sense of a present moment, narrative NOW, so to speak" (Chatman 63). In other words, he sets the "starting point of the […] narrative" in a fictional, reconstructed present, notably through the use of the present tense (Rimmon-Kenan 48). The first sentence, for example, includes verbs conjugated in the present simple ("calls," "brings" and "reply") coupled with frequency adverbs ("Sometimes" and "always") (Barrie 1). These elements indicate a habitual behaviour, and create the illusion for the reader of an ongoing situation. Similarly, the use of the present perfect participates in the impression of immediacy: "Has it ever been your lot, reader, to be persecuted […]?" (Barrie 2). Here, the reader is associated with the narrator in the pooling of experiences from the past that they are assessing in a common, present moment.

In this use of immediate temporality or "narrative NOW," Chatman identifies a specific axis called "discourse-time" (62). It is defined by the critic as "the time it takes to peruse the discourse" and the "moment occupied by the narrator in the present tense" (62 – 63). In the first chapter, it is what gives the reader the impression that they are sharing the same present as the narrator. The latter uses it to set the scene and give crucial information about the situation. At this point of the narrative, it consists of a way for the narrator to say "'I'm going to tell you the following story'" and to give the context associated to it (Chatman 63). This is why, amongst other elements, he deals with the following matters: the age of Mary A. ("Twenty-six") at this precise moment (expressed by "lately"); his relation to her at this point of the story ("David's mother, to whom I have never in my life addressed one

word"); a few past anecdotes to situate the context ("Once she dared to address me, so that she could boast to David that I had spoken to her"); and the relationship between David and his mother ("David admires her prodigiously") (Barrie 1-4). Thus, his audience is prepared for the story to begin and the time travel to take place.

The narrator's temporal reconstitution of events only really sparks with the introduction of an analepsis. As Rimmon-Kenan defines it, an analepsis "provide[s] past information either about the character, event, or story-line mentioned at that point in the text […], or about another character, event, or story-line […]" (47). She also points out that it "evoke[s] a past which precedes the starting point of the first narrative" (48). In *The Little White Bird*, this analepsis starts at the end of chapter one, and is triggered by the following sentence: "One day, when David was about five, I sent him the following letter: 'Dear David: If you really want to know how it began, will you come and have a chop with me to-day at the club?'" (Barrie 8). Here, the expression "how it began" reinforces the break between past and present by putting a stress on the anteriority of the tale that the narrator is about to start. The shift to the preterit tense can be seen as a warning sign that the immediacy of discourse-time is about to be left to enter the time of a story that is prior to the starting point of the narrative. In fact, the title of the first chapter, "David and I Set Forth Upon a Journey," is in itself a clue that this travel is about to take place.

The particularity of this analepsis resides in its length and density; it covers most of the novel, as the main plot is dedicated to the telling of David's origins and deals with past episodes and anecdotes. To be more precise, it spreads from the very end of chapter one to chapter thirteen, and starts again from chapter nineteen to twenty-five. What is interesting is the fact that "[t]he time of the narrative [covering these chapters] spans the courtship of David's parents, and David's birth, up to the present relationship between David and the

narrator whose end brings the book to a close" (Rose 24). This unusual narrative structure strongly accentuates Barrie's imposing storytelling construct, which gives the impression he can control the content of this analepsis and, by extension, the totality of David's history.

In fact, not only does this analepsis "provide past information," as Rimmon-Kenan suggests, but is also *shows* past information, for the narrator literally takes David back in time: "'…we are going away back, David, to see your mother as she was in the days before there was you.' We hailed a hansom. 'Drive back six years,' I said to the cabby, 'and stop at the Junior Old Fogies' Club'" (Barrie 9). This is where the narrative manipulation of this temporal reconstruction reaches its climax; while he could have simply told, in a linear way, the story of the little boy, Captain W. shows his narratees a reconstitution of David's own past, that he will be able to influence in order to set his authority over its content. Beyond the temporal aspect of this action, it is almost a physical manipulation, as the transition between chapters one and two attests: "You can't think how little David looked as we entered the portals of the club;" "As I enter the club smoking-room you are to conceive David vanishing into nothingness, and that it is any day six years ago at two in the afternoon" (Barrie 9; 10). Here, the terms "little" and "vanishing into nothingness" render the temporal transition corporeal, and David seems to go through actual physical transformations. Although the reader is well-aware of the fantasised aspect of the action – do they really *move* back in time? – the narrator acts as a guide in the exploration of David's origins and, rather than merely telling him about his past, decides to display its main events. However, because his sayings are highly unreliable – as previously proven – it is very likely that the story of the little boy will be altered through the storyteller's subjectivity.

In chapter two, "The Little Nursery Governess," the option of modifying the events actually tempts the narrator. At this point of the story, Captain W. explains how he intervened

in the reconciliation between Mary and her future husband, without which "'there would never have been a little boy called David A –'" (Barrie 18). By dropping a letter on the street while passing by Mary's lover, the narrator arranges for them to meet at the post-office: "I dropped my letter unseen at his feet, and sauntered back to the club. Of course, a gentleman who finds a letter on the pavement feels bound to post it, and I presumed that he would naturally go to the nearest office" (Barrie 17). In this episode, the narrator's influence over David is fully unveiled. Because the little boy was always taught by the storyteller, that "all children in [their] part of London were once birds in the Kensington Gardens," he quickly understands that without his future parents reconciling, he can become a bird again: "So when David saw his chance of being a missel-thrush again he called out to me quickly: 'Don't drop the letter!' and there were tree-tops in his eyes" (Barrie 18; 20). Here, the calculating attributes that Barrie gives to his narrator almost causes the story to be altered, until both characters come back to reason; David is explained how sad his mother would be to see her son turned into a bird, and realises how unfair this would be: "'You can drop it,' he said with a sigh. So I dropped the letter, as I think I have already mentioned; and that is how it all began" (Barrie 20).

Yet, as the reconciliation goes just according to plan, the narrator expresses his frustration: "She was crying outright, and he was holding both her hands. It was a disgraceful exhibition. The young painter would evidently explode if he could not make use of his arms. She must die if she could not lay her head upon his breast" (Barrie 17). The exaggerated aspects of this description ("crying outright," "disgraceful exhibition," "explode," "she must die") attest of the narrator's ambivalent reaction to the scene; his deed is altogether good but unsatisfying. Andrew Nash interprets this episode as a wish for the narrator to abuse his power, as his frustration bespeaks his desire "to deny reality and live inside a purely

imaginative world that he, as the author of the story, can control completely" (xiii). Through his attitude towards the outcome of his action, the reader understands that he "considers changing the events of the story he is writing so that he did not drop the letter that reconciled David's parents but attempted to woo Mary himself" (Nash xiii). However, "reality is always intruding upon the narrator's fantasies," here personified by David who breaks into the narrative: "David plucked my sleeve to ask what I was looking at so deedily" (Nash xiii; Barrie 17). Although the narrator is limited in his re-appropriation of David's history, the fact that he is contemplating the idea of altering past events emphasises his influential position as storyteller. Barrie restricts the extent to which he can control the story, for David will never wholly belong to him since his past cannot be reshaped.

1.3 An impressionist and subjective rendering of the story

The narrator's "depiction" of the story can also be seen in many ways as comparable to impressionist art. The analogy between Barrie's novel and painting arises from the revelatory nature of the plot; as Chatman points out, the "modern plot of revelation" can be defined as a "displaying" of a situation which "will stay pretty much the same" throughout the book (48). He adds that "events are reduced to a relatively minor, illustrative role," and that a chronological telling of the story, as previously analysed, is not compulsory (48). In other words, narratees and readers are only witnessing the unveiling of a situation exposed by the narrator without expecting major plot twists. In this respect, *The Little White Bird* could be seen as an artistic composition representing the relationships and dynamics between the narrator, David and Mary; the description of this literary canvas thus becomes the main

function of the narrative. More specifically, Barrie situates his storytelling voice in an impressionist perspective which greatly adds to the illusion of a biased and influential narration. As it will be further argued, two main features of impressionism participate in the authoritative aspect of the narrative frame: the subjective choice of the episodes included in the novel, and the heterogeneous fragmentation of the story. Inevitably, these elements create a sense of dependency from the reader to the narrator: because the text is articulated by Captain W.'s personal perceptions, the reader is forced to play his game, comply with his guidance and, as a result, needs to understand his point of view to appreciate the story.

Impressionism resides in the rendering of subjective and individual perceptions, attained in painting through a focus on "the liveliness and changing mood of light" which principally aims to depict "fleeting moments" (Gunderson 14; 8). As Proust argues, "the order in which we perceive [things]" prevails on "their causes" (653). Accordingly, personal perceptions appear as an essential criteria in the impressionist representation of "fleeting moments," as "Impressionist painters put on a canvas only what they themselves [can] see, and from a particular location" (Berrong 217). In *The Little White Bird*, these "fleeting moments" constitute the main content of the analepsis previously examined. In the telling of David's origins, the narrator focuses on anecdotal episodes which he does not necessarily link together in a chronological order but rather, in his own order of importance. As a consequence, Barrie uses a selective voice regulating what is shown to the audience and what is omitted. Both "fleeting moments" (the analepsis) and subjectivity (the way their content is conveyed) merge in his writing, to give this illusion of an impressionist construct.

The title of chapter three, "Her Marriage, Her Clothes, Her Appetite, and an Inventory of Her Furniture," clearly illustrates this argument. This enumeration echoes the idea of a visual composition, constituted of abstract elements characterising a protagonist, here Mary.

Besides, it openly conditions what the narrator is going to deal with, and the readers know exactly what they are going to learn about. While this enumeration emphasises the presence of certain components, it also simultaneously underlines the absence of others; the narrator's audience can therefore wonder how the importance of a particular fact is valued over another. For example, why would the narrator choose to deal with Mary's appetite rather than her hobbies? Considering Proust's definition of impressionism, it could be argued that these elements only retain the attention of the narrator because they match his subjective perception; Mary's clothes and pieces of furniture seem to be what caught the storyteller's attention, but anyone else would have probably listed other aspects. This is where the impressionist dimension emerges: the stress is put on the perception of the narrator and the audience is, accordingly, constrained to see the story through his eyes.

Within this chapter, the impression of “fleeting moments” is reached through the depiction of three subsequent scenes, presented in a furtive way, and enabling the reader to visualise a triptych. The first picture is the following:

> A week or two after I dropped the letter I was in a hansom on my way to certain barracks when loud above the city's roar I heard that accursed haw-haw-haw, and there they were, the two of them, just coming out of a shop where you may obtain pianos on the hire system. I had the merest glimpse of them, but there was an extraordinary rapture on her face, and his head was thrown proudly back, and all because they had been ordering a piano on the hire system. (Barrie 21)

Here, the subjectivity of the narrator's perception is underlined by the terms “heard” and “glimpse,” which suggest a sensory recollection of the event. The intense joy emanating from this episode is signified by the description of laughter, “haw-haw-haw,” and the “extraordinary rapture on [Mary's] face”. The condensed nature of this “fleeting moment” is reflected by one dominant impression, that of happiness, clearly marking the narrator. A few lines below, a second picture is unveiled:

> When next I saw them, they were gazing greedily into the window of the sixpenny-halfpenny shop, which is one of the most deliciously dramatic spots in London. Mary

> was taking notes feverishly on a slip of paper while he did the adding up, and in the end they went away gloomily without buying anything. (Barrie 21)

Again, an intense concentration of feelings can be observed in this passage, but this time, conveying a negative emotion with the vocabulary of insufficiency and misery (“greedily,” “dramatic,” “feverishly,” “gloomily”). The atmosphere drastically changes to contrast with the first picture; both images are vivid and schematic (happiness precedes sadness), which enables the analogy with an impressionist construction. The “fleeting moments” are clearly represented, and altogether, form a bigger picture: that of Mary and her husband.

In the third picture, the absence of emotion completes the composition:

> A few days afterward I found myself walking behind her. There is something artful about her skirts by which I always know her, though I can't say what it is. She was carrying an enormous parcel that might have been a bird-cage wrapped in brown paper, and she took it into a bric-a-brac shop and came out without it. (Barrie 22)

Because the narrator only sees Mary from behind, he is unable to transcribe her state of mind. Instead, the reader is given very little information: Mary transports a packet to a shop. While this scene is neither happy nor sad, it is extremely useful in the construction of an impressionist effect, as it represents the absence of elements inherent to all visual compositions. Just like white paint embellishes other colours on a visual piece of art, the neutrality of the third picture participates in the enhancement of the preceding episodes. Above all, these descriptions enable the audience to visualise Mary's relationship to her husband through the junction of three succinct episodes, tainted by the narrator's perception. Thus, it can be argued that this “verbal triptych” is a subjective construct recalling impressionism in its depiction of “fleeting moments,” and preventing the reader from considering the story and characters from a neutral point of view.

Moreover, the narrative of *The Little White Bird* conforms to the most technical aspects of impressionism as some of its elements can be, to a certain extent, compared to the distinctive brush strokes of the painters. As critic James J. Kirschke explains, “the

Impressionists tended to apply their brushwork in loose touches and comma strokes of unmixed color (a technique which also tends to leave to the eye of the beholder the task of synthesis)" (18-19). The effects of this technique, Canaday points out, is obtained by "'blending' [colours directly] on the canvas" rather than mixing them on the palette (183). In Barrie's work, this corresponds to the fact that various narratives are juxtaposed within the novel without completely "blending," and coexist in a heterogeneous way. In this literary patchwork, the components of the stories meet directly on the page, just like impressionist brush strokes mix on canvas, and it can be argued that Barrie aligns his narratives in a similar, raw way, to sharpen the effect of an artful composition.

In chapters fourteen to eighteen, for example, the author incorporates the tale of Peter Pan, with no obvious connection nor transition to the rest, and this narrative *mise en abyme* can be seen as an impressionist "brush stroke" in the story. Because the tale appears as temporally detached from the rest of the novel – the Peter Pan chapters are not contextualised and function like a stand alone story – it gives the impression of coexisting with David's adventures. In the following extract, the very beginning of the tale is presented in an atemporal way:

> If you ask your mother whether she knew about Peter Pan when she was a little girl she will say, 'Why, of course, I did, child,' and if you ask her whether he rode on a goat in those days she will say, 'What a foolish question to ask; certainly he did.' Then if you ask your grandmother whether she knew about Peter Pan when she was a girl, she also says, 'Why, of course, I did, child,' but if you ask her whether he rode on a goat in those days, she says she never heard of his having a goat. Perhaps she has forgotten, just as she sometimes forgets your name and calls you Mildred, which is your mother's name. Still, she could hardly forget such an important thing as the goat. Therefore there was no goat when your grandmother was a little girl. This shows that, in telling the story of Peter Pan, to begin with the goat (as most people do) is as silly as to put on your jacket before your vest. (Barrie 122)

This lack of temporal marks is underlined by the trans-generational dimension of the extract ("your mother," "your grandmother"), transcending the timeline of the novel. In other words, the only piece of information given to the reader is that this story has existed for a long time.

Hence, the distinctions between Peter's adventures and David's story are clear-cut, deepened by a complete temporal independence, and recall the juxtaposition of multiple, sharp elements in impressionist painting. In fact, it can be argued that this composition progressively shapes the image of the narrator, and shows several pieces of his fantasised world to the reader, Peter and David being equally part of it. The audience has to adapt to these universes, and the storyteller easily frames the reader into a specific environment by adding multiple details to his worlds.

Furthermore, Peter Pan's story functions with a system of co-narrations. The narrator explains how the story emerged, and unveils a play on authorship, shared with David:

> I ought to mention here that the following is our way with a story: First, I tell it to him, and then he tells it to me, the understanding being that it is quite a different story; and then I retell it with his additions, and so we go on until no one could say whether it is more his story or mine. In this story of Peter Pan, for instance, the bald narrative and most of the moral reflections are mine, though not all, for this boy can be a stern moralist, but the interesting bits about the ways and customs of babies in the bird-stage are mostly reminiscences of David's, recalled by pressing his hands to his temples and thinking hard. (Barrie 123-124)

Not only does this multiplicity of voices underlines the idea of a narrative composition, but it also draws attention to the importance of the storytelling voices leading the novel. While the main narrator is largely prominent, Barrie also recalls that it is the sharing of this voice which gives depth to his novel. Once again, the numerous brush strokes characterising impressionism seem to work in a similar way; the narrator's voice could be seen as the dominant shade of the painting, complemented by other minor pigments, that is, other voices. What is more, the alignment of David's and Captain W.'s voices reflects the adjacency of Peter's tale to David's. Consequently, the reader is given a “task of synthesis” identical to the one experienced by the viewer of an impressionist painting:

> The eye ‘mixes’ [brush strokes] and in doing so creates colors with more vibration, more sparkle, than would have been possible if the various reds or greens or blues or pinks had been mixed on the palette and applied in large areas in the conventional way or pulled together by ‘blending’ on the canvas.” (Canaday 183)

In *The Little White Bird*, this method serves the authoritative dimension of the storytelling voice, as it heightens its subjectivity. Instead of "creat[ing] colors with more vibration, more sparkle," Barrie creates a narrative voice with more definition, more intensity, which inevitably influences the reader. The latter cannot appreciate the story through neutral eyes, and is led to accept the storyteller as the ultimate authority of what is put on canvas and the way it is organised.

2. "Conceiving" child characters

As it has now been established, Barrie creates a strong storytelling voice through a narrator incarnating authority over both the content of the novel he is writing and the way it is delivered to his audience. In fact, this control goes as far as re-appropriating the characters of his story; just like any other constituent of the narrative, the protagonists are somewhat "owned" by the storyteller. Indeed, the narrator either changes the origins of his child characters, namely David, Timothy and Peter, with tales of fiction, or makes it clear that he is their ultimate creators, in a way that suggests his ownership over the fictionalised identity he builds for them. Consequently, they progressively become his own creation, as he (re)invents their birth within a fictional frame only he seems to be able to control. In other words, the narrator "transcend[s] natal creation" in order to be the crowning creator of his characters (Nash xi). Thus, the re-appropriation of these protagonists is achieved through their conception or rather, *re*-conception, by the narrator. The term "conception" should be used here with its double meaning; it is both "the process of forming an idea or a plan" and "the process of an egg being fertilized inside a woman's body so that she becomes pregnant"

(Oxford 313). Indeed, as this section will suggest, the storyteller takes advantage of his influential position to perform these two actions. Firstly, he "forms" David, Timothy and Peter by making them appear in his narrative and by using his authority to shape their characters in a way that suits him. Secondly, he somehow (re)gives birth to them with a new past, rewritten origins and a fictionalised history. Once again, the controlling aspect of the narrative voice emerges.

2.1 The undermining of Mary's maternal authority

David is the main "victim" of the narrative alterations of his story, as his origins are being retold throughout the book by the storyteller who replaces his biological conception with his own tale. This tale, precisely, is the following:

> David knows that all children in our part of London were once birds in the Kensington Gardens; and that the reason there are bars on nursery windows and a tall fender by the fire is because very little people sometimes forget that they have no longer wings, and try to fly away through the window or up the chimney.
>
> Children in the bird stage are difficult to catch. […]
>
> That the birds know what would happen if they were caught, and are even a little undecided about which is the better life, is obvious to every student of them. Thus, if you leave your empty perambulator under the trees and watch from a distance, you will see the birds boarding it and hopping about from pillow to blanket in a twitter of excitement; they are trying to find out how babyhood would suit them.
>
> Quite the prettiest sight in the Gardens is when the babies stray from the tree where the nurse is sitting and are seen feeding the birds, not a grownup near them. It is first a bit to me and then a bit to you, and all the time such a jabbering and laughing from both sides of the railing. They are comparing notes and inquiring for old friends, and so on; but what they say I cannot determine, for when I approach they all fly away. (Barrie 18 – 19)

The most striking element of this extract is the way it is introduced: David, more than simply believing in the narrator's story, "knows." Thus, the tale is presented as a truth, both to David and the readers. The confident tone of the passage seems to depict a succession of facts that cannot be disproved nor even doubted, underlined by the use of the present tense implying

generalities (“the birds know,” “they all fly away”). Every detail of the narrator's story seems embedded in an ongoing routine, notably with the use of frequency adverbs (“sometimes,” “all the time”), evolving on rather realistic grounds (“the reason […] is because”). Consequently, David has every reason to believe that his birth was part of this very process, which inevitably puts Mary out of the picture and gives the narrator a more relevant role in the birth of the child. It seems as if David was born a second time, in a purely fictional, creative and asexual way.

Later on, the narrator broadens his story by explaining that children are simply “sent” to their mothers by a bird called Solomon Caw:

> They always ask for the best one he has, and if he likes the letter he sends one from Class A; but if it ruffles him he sends very funny ones indeed. Sometimes he sends none at all, and at another time he sends a nestful; it all depends on the mood you catch him in. He likes you to leave it all to him, and if you mention particularly that you hope he will see his way to making it *a boy this time*, he is almost sure to send another girl. And whether you are a lady or only a little boy who wants a baby-sister, always take pains to write your address clearly. You can't think what a lot of babies Solomon has sent to the wrong house. (Barrie 135, emphasis in the original)

Again, these details successfully transform the idea of natal conception into a completely asexual phenomenon. Such tales, Nash argues, have “the aim of disempowering the biological mother and laying claim to prior knowledge of her child” (xi). Indeed, the narrator finds a way to get round the biological process of birth by claiming that David was never a baby in his mother's womb but rather, a bird in the Kensington Gardens. Most importantly, this is also what David believes. This rewriting enables the narrator to assert his authority over the little boy and to recuperate his birth as his own fictional invention. Furthermore, this tale makes it possible for the narrator to affirm that he met David before Mary even did: “The first time I ever saw David was on the sward behind the Baby's Walk. He was a missel-thrush, attracted thither that hot day by a hose which lay on the ground sending forth a gay trickle of water, and David was on his back in the water, kicking up his legs” (Barrie 19). In this way,

“the narrator can claim true ownership of David on the grounds that he saw him before anyone else,” thus extending his control over the boy (Rose 25). Interestingly, this conception of ownership is extremely childish, and contrasts with the parental role the narrator wants to assume: just like a child demanding a toy in a shop on the pretext he noticed it first, Captain W. objectifies David in order to own him through his discourse. This behaviour strengthens the asexual character of the boy's birth, but instead of replacing the mother with a mono-parental, fatherly figure, only provides him with an irresponsible companion ready to consider birth as a game.

On a descriptive level, David is also largely depicted as a bird, starting with his birth: “At eighteen minutes to four we heard the rustle of David's wings” (Barrie 39). By replacing the scream of a newborn by a “rustle” of “wings,” the narrator places the boy in the frame of his fictionalised natal creation, and excludes Mary from her role as legitimate mother. The child's past as a bird thus cannot be dissociated from his identity according to the narrator who indicates that “[n]o sooner do you cast eyes on him than you are thinking of birds” (Barrie 3). In fact, the alleged claim that David was always a bird emerges from the first pages of the novel: “It is difficult to believe that he walks to the Kensington Gardens; he always seems to have alighted there: and were I to scatter crumbs I opine he would come and peck” (Barrie 3). Here, the narrator's inconceivable fantasy – David being more animal than human – is stated in such a way that it appears to be indisputable. The storyteller's audience itself is then caught in a state where his rewriting of David's origins almost becomes acceptable. Moreover, it should be noted that the reader is given very few details as to what David looks like, except for these comparisons to a bird, the narrator having decided that “[i]t would ill become me to attempt to describe this dear boy” (Barrie 91). Deprived from any realistic, human description, the storyteller's narratees are forced to play the narrator's game

and inevitably end up complying with the child's animal attributes.

The manipulative nature of the retelling of David's origins fully appears when the narrator reports the way David deals with his past as a bird. First, the child is described as "having forgotten all about it" before "it all came back to him, with a number of other incidents" (Barrie 19). This sudden return of memory is nonetheless largely provoked by the narrator who shamelessly influences him into "remembering": "I told him to think back hard, pressing his hands to his temples, and when he had done this hard, and even harder, he distinctly remembered a youthful desire to return to the tree-tops" (Barrie 123). This lack of spontaneity, underlined by the exaggerated staging of the narrator, confirms the latter's manipulation. At one point in the narrative, the storyteller even adds: "I notice that it is now he who tells it to me rather than I to him, and when we come to the string he rubs his little leg as if it still smarted" (Barrie 19-20). This makes it clear that the so-called recollections of the child were only tales he heard from the narrator. Yet, they do seem to have a physical impact on the little boy who remembers imaginary pains from his previous experiences as a bird. Above all, the fact that David himself is the one telling the narrator about his own fantasy is assuredly the mark of Captain W.'s successful manipulation.

Indeed, David and the narrator progressively swap positions during the story; the little boy takes his bird heritage very seriously, and becomes the one who teaches the narrator about his past:

> All children could have such recollections if they would press their hands hard to their temples, for, having been birds before they were human, they are naturally a little wild during the first few weeks, and very itchy at the shoulders, where their wings used to be. So David tells me. (Barrie 123)

This extract bespeaks a certain wit from the narrator who is the only one to know of the spurious nature of his tale. However, Captain W. plays along with David and gives him credit for what he says. He is even a compliant student, obediently listening to his suggestions: "the

interesting bits about the ways and customs of babies in the bird-stage are mostly reminiscences of David's, recalled by pressing his hands to his temples and thinking hard" (Barrie 124). Ironically, it almost seems as if the narrator is put in a submissive position, quietly learning about the child's past, while the victim of this story really is David, who was influenced into believing in these imaginary memories. On a more general level, in *The Little White Bird*, the boy does not share any childhood memory; instead, these "birdhood" remembrances seem more significant to him which, to a certain extent, confirms the narrator's re-appropriation of David over his mother and attests of his influence over the child.

2.2 Creating and shaping Timothy

The influence of the storytelling voice over the child characters also emerges with the example of Timothy who, contrarily to David, is purely fictional. In his case, every single part of his existence is created by the narrator, from his birth to his death. Despite his imaginary dimension, the child is nonetheless thoroughly governed by Captain W. who refuses to let go of his authority over him. To begin with, Timothy's birth is based on a lie, or rather, a misunderstanding that the narrator attempts to gain control over. In chapter four, "A Night-Piece," the storyteller finds himself wandering on the street with Mary's husband. The latter, as the reader soon learns, is "alone" and "waiting" for his child, David, to be born (Barrie 33). Progressively, the man assumes that the narrator is in an identical situation: "however it came about he had conceived the idea that I was an outcast for a reason similar to his own, and I let his mistake pass, it seemed to matter so little and to draw us together so naturally" (Barrie 37). This sentence indicates the narrator's wish to position himself above Mary's husband; he blames him for what he calls a "mistake" but, through quite a patronising

tone, decides it is not worth correcting him.

Inevitably, the misunderstanding grows and causes the narrator to continue in his role:

> 'I could not lie down,' he called up hoarsely,' until I heard your news. Is it all right?'
> For a moment I failed to understand him. Then I said sourly: 'Yes, all is right.'
> 'Both doing well?' he inquired.
> 'Both,' I answered, and all the time I was trying to shut the window. It was undoubtedly a kindly impulse that had brought him out, but I was nevertheless in a passion with him.
> 'Boy or girl?' persisted the dodderer with ungentlemanlike curiosity.
> 'Boy,' I said, very furiously.
> 'Splendid,' he called out, and I think he added something else, but by that time I had closed the window with a slam. (Barrie 40)

Because the narrator refuses to lose control over the situation, he decides to give birth to a fictional child rather than clarify the misunderstanding. The fictional attributes of this child reside in the fact that it was created in the performative discourse of the storyteller. "Performativity," as John Austin defines it, means that "the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action – it is not normally thought of as just saying something" (6). In the narrator's case, the birth of his imaginary child is effective from the moment he "pronounces" his existence. This affirmation takes place at three different points in his dialogue with Mary's husband. Firstly, he confirms the fact that the birth did happen: "'Yes, all is right'". Although the object of this affirmation is implicit, the word "all" validates whatever the narrator's interlocutor means by it, that is, his baby's birth. Secondly, he certifies the existence of a mother and a child with the use of "'Both.'" Lastly, he completes the birth of his baby by choosing its gender: "'Boy'". Thus, Timothy's birth is perfectly asexual, as its whole process exclusively takes place in the performative discourse of its creator.

This fictional birth is finally sealed with the naming of the baby:

> About a week afterward I had the ill-luck to meet Mary's husband in Kensington, so I asked him what he had called his little girl.
> 'It is a boy,' he replied, with intolerable good-humour, 'we call him David.'
> And then with a singular lack of taste he wanted the name of my boy.
> I flicked my glove. 'Timothy,' said I. (Barrie 46)

By giving a name to his lie, the narrator puts Timothy and David on the same level of existence. As a matter of fact, a parallel between the two is established soon after, with Mary's husband declaring that “Timothy was as good a name as David,” before “hop[ing] that they would become friends” (Barrie 46). This suggestion upsets the narrator who writes that “he could not allow Timothy to mix with boys of the David class” (Barrie 46). This reluctance reflects a controlling wish for the narrator who contemplates his fictional role as a father and already establishes rules for his child. Clearly, it also calls attention to his frustration in the knowledge that the interaction between the two boys is simply impossible because Timothy does not really exist. The spontaneity of the narrator's answer regarding the name of his child – over whom, it should be noted, he quickly claims ownership (“my boy”) – is surprising. However, it remains coherent with the character of the storyteller, who never seems overtaken by events.

During Timothy's short existence, the narrator takes his legitimacy very seriously, and expects everyone else to do so. Thus, when the child does not get the attention he deserves, his father reacts: “But no more about Timothy. Gradually this vexed me. I felt what a forlorn little chap Timothy was, with no one to say a word for him” (Barrie 46-47). To compensate this lack of care from the external world, Captain W. exposes the fictional development of the child to Mary's husband through matters like “teething,” “bibs” and “general intelligence” (Barrie 47). Nevertheless, his knowledge being very limited as to how children grow up, he soon finds a subterfuge to seem plausible:

> It is well that dogs and little boys have so much in common, for it was really of Porthos I told him; how he slept (peacefully), how he woke up (supposed to be subject to dreams), how he fell off again (with one little hand on his nose), but I glided past what we put in his bath (carbolic and a mop). (Barrie 50-51)

These animal attributes echo David's progressive “transformation” into a bird. Here, the narrator transposes the authority he has over his dog onto his fictionalised child, in an

immoderate effort to keep the situation under control. Indeed, he seeks to gather as many details as possible about Timothy so that people's perception of the child is only guided by the specific personality he defines for him.

More importantly, the shaping of Timothy's fictional personality extends to his very death, entirely staged by the narrator. Just like his birth, the child ceases to exist in the same way he was born, that is, through the discourse of his creator. Once again, it is the performativity of the latter's speech which causes his disappearance, in a conversation taking place with Mary's husband: "'How is Timothy?' he asked; and the question opened a way so attractive that I think no one whose dull life craves for colour could have resisted it. 'He is no more,' I replied impulsively" (Barrie 56). Here, the narrator's utterance is effective; similarly to the boy's coming to life, Timothy's death is the result of a communication putting an end to his fictional existence. In spite of this fictionality, the effect of such news is immediate: "The painter was so startled that he gave utterance to a very oath of pity, and I felt a sinking myself, for in these hasty words my little boy was gone, indeed" (Barrie 56). As expected, Mary's husband, being oblivious to the narrator's artifice, is shocked by the announcement. For his part, the narrator seems trapped in his own fictionalised situation, as if he had managed to convince himself that Timothy was really born in the first place. Furthermore, he seems aware of the performative dimension of his "hasty words," which very much resonate like an involuntary homicide.

Timothy eventually seems to be the limit to the narrator's fictional tales. While his short existence was always determined by his creator, his death is precipitated by external factors that the storyteller cannot have control over. He explains:

> So accomplished a person as the reader must have seen at once that I made away with Timothy in order to give his little vests and pinafores and shoes to David, and, therefore, dear sir or madam, rail not overmuch at me for causing our painter pain. Know, too, that though his sympathy ran free I soon discovered many of his inquiries

> to be prompted by a mere selfish desire to save his boy from the fate of mine. Such are parents. (Barrie 57)

Two main causes, both beyond the narrator's reach, emerge from this extract. Firstly, the limits to the child's existence become clear, and his father soon realises he cannot offer a reasonable life to his fictional son, hence his wish to “save” him from a miserable “fate.” This awakening is further developed in the following lines, where he states that he “could at the time see no other easy way out” for “[i]t was no life for a boy” (Barrie 58). The narrator thus finds himself confronted to the frontier of his own lie, and by extension, his own fiction. Secondly, the explanations he gives as to why he had to let Timothy go put Mary and her family at the core of his decision. Being a witness of their increasing poverty, the narrator chooses to sacrifice his fictional child “in order to give his little vests and pinafores and shoes to David”. In other words, reality suddenly surfaces to interrupt his fantasy. The apparent authority and control of the narrator keep being disrupted by external factors that constantly cause him to adapt. In one respect, it seems like he is the victim of his own fiction, as the following statement attests: “I was loath to see him go” (Barrie 58). Timothy's death thus represents the ultimate sacrifice of the narrator's fantasy over reality.

2.3 Peter Pan as the illustration of the narrator's influence

It can be argued that Peter Pan crystallises the narrative manipulations performed onto David and Timothy. In *The Little White Bird,* his role is to reinforce the narrator's apparent control over his child characters by being an illustrative example of his influential discourse. To start with, he is the emblematic figure of the fictionalised tale of natal creation narrated by Captain W. to David. He is indeed the example given to the latter for him to believe that

children are birds before they are babies: “he escaped from being a human when he was seven days old; he escaped by the window and flew back to the Kensington Gardens” (Barrie 123). Peter Pan's story thus constitutes a proof for David, who will later relate to his experience, that every child goes through this process. The narrator even plays around with this identification and tries to extend it to his readers: “If you think he was the only baby who ever wanted to escape, it shows how completely you have forgotten your own young days” (Barrie 123). Once again, the storyteller's method is based on the manipulation of memories, that he tries to replace with imaginary episodes. Hence, Peter Pan epitomises the narrator's influence over his child characters as he embodies the fictionalised childhood that the narrator wishes David and Timothy had.

Consequently, he is given animal attributes just like David and Timothy are, in an identical attempt to separate his existence from any biological conception. In fact, his experiences through “birdhood” are thoroughly depicted, and his descriptions are interwoven with similarities to birds. For example, the narrator declares: “It is wonderful that he could fly without wings, but the place itched tremendously” (Barrie 124). Although the little boy does not actually transform into a bird, the narrator indicates that his body shows tempting signs to do so by replacing his absent wings with tingling sensations. In addition, Peter is given a metaphorical beak, which takes the form of the pipe of reeds he is playing: “Peter's heart was so glad that he felt he must sing all day long, just as the birds sing for joy, but, being partly human, he needed an instrument, so he made a pipe of reeds” (Barrie 131). Again, the metamorphosis is not complete, but the narrator makes it clear that the little boy tends towards a return to his animal origins. By stressing this point, he implies that his “birdhood” prevails over his childhood, and Peter is somewhat given as an example to follow for the other child characters.

Nevertheless, the storyteller's choice not to completely “animalise” Peter is meaningful, and the boy's state is meticulously balanced between human and bird. Clearly, this choice encourages the illusion of a leading narrator who simultaneously makes him human enough to allow children's identifications to him, and bird enough to weaken the idea of maternal conception. In other words, the elements shaping Peter Pan are largely orientated towards the manipulation of the narrator's child characters, and it seems like Captain W. leaves nothing to chance as to the amount of humanness and birdhood put into Peter. These to-and-fro movements between human and bird states translate in the fact that Peter, once he reaches the Kensington Gardens, does not quite remember how to behave like a bird:

> he flew over to the Round Pond to have a drink. He stooped, and dipped his beak in the pond; he thought it was his beak, but, of course, it was only his nose, and, therefore, very little water came up, and that not so refreshing as usual, so next he tried a puddle, and he fell flop into it. When a real bird falls in flop, he spreads out his feathers and pecks them dry, but Peter could not remember what was the thing to do, and he decided, rather sulkily, to go to sleep on the weeping beech in the Baby Walk. (Barrie 125)

In this extract, Peter's human nature appears through a series of oppositions: what he believes to be “his beak” becomes “his nose,” and his action contrasts with what “a real bird” would do. As a result, the little boy eventually “sulkily” resigns, which shows his disappointment in “not remember[ing] what was the thing to do.”

The discrepancy between what Peter thinks he is and what he really is resides in the fact that the boy does not realise he is human: “He was quite unaware already that he had ever been human, and thought he was a bird, even in appearance, just the same as in his early days” (Barrie 124). Solomon, the leader of the birds in the Kensington Gardens described as a “wise old fellow,” effectively summarises Peter's state by calling him a “[p]oor little half-and-half” and a “Betwixt-and-Between” (Barrie 128-129). By naming it, the narrator underlines the importance of both sides of his stories; on the one hand, if the boy had been fully human, the narrator's tale on natal creation would not have the power to undermine biological

conception. Peter would have then just been considered a “normal” child born thanks to his mother, who would gain too much importance in this process. On the other hand, if he had been a bird, the narrator would not have been able to use this tale to influence David and create a link between the two. Unfortunately, this in-betweenness causes great despair for Peter, who seems to be unable to deal with his own sadness: “Poor little Peter Pan! he sat down and cried, and even then he did not know that, for a bird, he was sitting on his wrong part” (Barrie 127). The idea of right or wrong implied in this sentence bespeaks the need for the narrator to constantly recall that whatever the boy does, he cannot do it in accordance with either of his states.

Most importantly, Peter Pan is the perfect example of a child without a mother. With his story, the role of the mother is undermined, as the narrator's audience gradually witnesses him getting by on his own: “Of course, he had no mother—at least, what use was she to him?” (Barrie 147). His independence is even described in a positive way: “You see, though still a tiny child, it was really years and years since he had seen his mother […]. But you must not think that Peter Pan was a boy to pity rather than to admire” (Barrie 188). This underplaying of the child's separation from his mother places the narrator as the one and only creator of his child characters; he invents Peter Pan's story, but also Timothy's, and “rewrites” David's through Peter's tale. The mother therefore appears as a shallow element in the conception of the child, which the storyteller attempts to re-appropriate.

With the tale of Peter Pan, the narrator invents a pretext to dismiss the mother. After his adventures in the Kensington Gardens, the little boy decides to come back to her: “The window was wide open, just as he knew it would be, and in he fluttered, and there was his mother lying asleep. Peter alighted softly on the wooden rail at the foot of the bed and had a good look at her” (Barrie 158). However, the boy seems reluctant to wake her up: “But why

does Peter sit so long on the rail, why does he not tell his mother that he has come back? […] Sometimes he looked longingly at his mother, and sometimes he looked longingly at the window" (Barrie 159). This question, raised by the narrator, points out the hesitation of the child who, in spite of his wish to be with his mother again, feels the need to remain free. The storyteller explains: "He had quite decided to be his mother's boy, but hesitated about beginning to-night" (Barrie 160). When Peter eventually comes back for good, his disappointment is tremendous: "the window was closed, and there were iron bars on it, and peering inside he saw his mother sleeping peacefully with her arm round another little boy" (Barrie 162). It is precisely the feeling of being replaced with another child that triggers Peter's dismissal of the motherly figure, and his bitterness is clearly exposed in these lines. Later on, when he meets a little girl called Maimie Mannering in the Kensington Gardens, he tries to convince himself that she will not feel the need to ever go back to her mother: "'She will forget her mother in time, and be happy with me,' he kept saying to himself" (Barrie 191). He even tells her that her mother is not worth her return: "'Your mother' – he gulped again – 'you don't know them as well as I do'" (Barrie 192). He then adds: "'they are all the same. I dare say she is looking for another one [child] already'" (Barrie 193). When Maimie protests, he argues: "'You should see the letters Solomon gets from ladies who have six'" (Barrie 192-193).

Accordingly, the process of storytelling, be it to someone else or oneself, seems to be used as a weapon against the motherly figure, and Peter does not hesitate to use the tales he heard as proof of what he argues. When Maimie shows reluctance to stay with him, he does not try to convince her by giving her good reasons to do so such as, for example, the beauty of the gardens or the amusement she could get from living with fairies. Instead, the stories he heard represent for him the ultimate reason why she should not go back to her mother. This

implies that Peter believes in words, trusts them more than facts, and considers them more powerful than acts themselves. When Maimie says that her mother will not replace her with another daughter because, "'my mother has Tony, and surely they are satisfied when they have one,'" Peter refers to Solomon's letters, or in other words, verbal constructions, to prove her wrong (Barrie 192). Yet, the facts given by Maimie are indisputable: her parents only gave birth to two children because they did not need nor want more. The idea that words prevail on acts largely serves the discourse of the narrator. With Peter's story, David is given the opportunity to consider the power of words and the limited importance of actions. As a matter of fact, this precisely echoes Captain W.'s recuperation and fictional conception of his child characters. If words are of more weight than acts, then David's, Timothy's and Peter's (re)creations through storytelling are more valuable than their biological, maternal births. Hence, paternity becomes achievable through speech, and above all, without maternity, and the sexual act of conceiving is no longer considered essential.

What is more, it should be noted that Barrie plays with words by describing tombstones in the Kensington Gardens, engraved with the following inscriptions: "W. St. M." and "13 a P.P. 1841" (197). In fact, these stones do exist in reality: they are milestones "marking parish boundaries in Kensington Gardens," in London (Stirling). Barrie interlaces this fact with his fiction: "They stand together at the spot where the parish of Westminster St. Mary's is said to meet the parish of Paddington" (197). But for Peter, these stones are the indicators of a tragedy: "Here Peter found the two babes, who had fallen unnoticed from their perambulators, Phoebe aged thirteen months and Walter probably still younger, for Peter seems to have felt a delicacy about putting any age on his stone" (Barrie 197). The fact that Barrie recuperates these inscriptions to include them in Peter's adventures and give them a completely different meaning can be seen as a play on the boy's – and by extension the

narrator's – excessive attachment to words. Barrie seems to mock his own protagonists by ironically suggesting that words are so powerful that, depending on the way they are read and interpreted, they either give directions or a shelter to two dead children. At the same time, this play on words also serves Peter's argument, that is, the undermining of maternal figures, since the babies seem to have died because of the inattention of their mother.

3. The merging of biological and artistic conceptions

The previous section raises the following question: what is the power of words in the undermining of maternity? If abstract and artistic constructs are considered by the narrator to be a valuable approach to the creation of child characters, they nonetheless meet maternity in a rather conflicted way throughout the pages of *The Little White Bird*. As previously observed, the narrator's own fantasised world enables him to reach the role of artistic creator as long as he is not confronted to reality. So far, the dismissal of maternity, particularly intense in Peter Pan's adventures, has only been examined through the perspective of a fictional construction, that of an authoritative storytelling voice reflecting a certain influence over its protagonists. This third and last section will focus on the undermining of maternity in relation to the desire for paternity expressed by the narrator. Indeed, it will be argued that motherhood and fatherhood interact in a complex way, blending artistic and biological spheres. While art is used by the author to depict and express paternity, it is also limited by natural realities, and maternity appears as a phenomenon that *has* to be confronted by the narrator.

3.1 The narrator's desire for paternity

The fact that the narrator appears to be very involved in the “conceiving” and the shaping of his child characters not only illustrates the authoritative nature of his voice, but also indicates his desire to have a child. Indeed, his influence, particularly manifest with his young characters, cannot be justified by mere domineering impulsions, and the undermining of the maternal figure previously observed should not be considered a trivial coincidence. Instead, his behaviour can be analysed through the prism of paternity, as his wish to learn how to be a father, particularly to David and Timothy, seems to be what partially explains his controlling tone. To start with, he confesses several times his lack of knowledge regarding children (“I know really nothing about children”), often coupled with a strong desire to improve (Barrie 91). His first encounter with David, for example, highlights this attitude:

> I had various thoughts. Was he awake? If not, better let him wake naturally. Half-an-hour was a long time. Why had I not said quarter-of-an-hour? Anon, I saw that if I was to sit there much longer I should have said an hour, so I whistled softly; but he took no notice. I remember trying to persuade myself that if I never budged till Irene's return, it would be an amusing triumph over Mary. I coughed, but still there was no response. Abruptly, the fear smote me. Perhaps he is not there. (Barrie 90)

Thus, this extract is tainted by both the narrator's insecurity and curiosity, expressed by a succession of questions (“Was he awake?”; “Why had I not said quarter-of-an-hour?”). Rhetorical for the most part, they bespeak his doubts as to how to manipulate the child, with a great concern to do it right. Furthermore, the frequent use of conditional elements underlines his hesitance (“If not,” “if I was to sit,” “if I never budged,” “Perhaps”). Evidently, the choice for the term “fear” strengthens the apprehension of the narrator. In addition, the latter even toys with David's nurse by exaggerating this lack of knowledge: “'It is a girl, is it not?' I asked, thus neatly depriving her of coherent speech as I pushed her to the door” (Barrie 90).

As a result, the storyteller is constantly seeking for external advice as to how to be a

father, and his concern to learn about other parents' experiences increases throughout the book. William, his club waiter, is the first character to be faced with his questions: “'How does your baby sleep, William?' I asked in a low voice, 'how does she wake up? what do you put in her bath?' I saw surprise in his face, so I hurried on without waiting for an answer” (Barrie 64-65). This interrogation holds both comical and touching dimensions; while the narrator's impulsive and sudden attitude – that of enumerating questions and leaving at once – is risible, his spontaneity translates his uneasiness in the role of father he wants to give himself. Hence, this awkwardness underlines his inability to perform as a paternal figure. Moreover, the narrator also interrogates the members of his club: “'When I was [David's] age,' I said to Irene, 'I was running about.' I consulted them casually about this matter at the club, and they had all been running about at a year old” (Barrie 89). The terms “consulted” and “casually” give a strong impression of a detached, clinical call for advice, which suggests that the narrator tries as far as possible to hide his need for help.

In his quest for information, women are also solicited. Nurses, to begin with, are thoroughly imitated: “I had sat me down on one of the garden seats in the Figs, with one hand resting carelessly on the perambulator, in imitation of the nurses – it was so pleasant to assume the air of one who walked with David daily” (Barrie 97). This meticulous staging of nonchalance is, obviously, paradoxical. By acting like the nurses, the narrator seeks to progress in parenthood, and his attempt to look apathetic about David shows how eager he is to regard paternity as a common, standard phenomenon. Yet, the shallowness of his behaviour – he is not actually indifferent to the child – accentuates his fascination for fatherhood and makes it evident that his excitement is difficult to contain.

Similarly, mothers are carefully observed:

> If you are a burgess of the gardens (which have a vocabulary of their own), the faces of these quaint mothers are a clock to you, in which you may read the ages of their

> young. When he is three they are said to wear the knickerbocker face, and you may take it from me that Mary assumed that face with a sigh […]. (Barrie 100-101)

This surprisingly detailed description of mothers' expressions which, according to the narrator, varies depending on how grown their children are, exposes the storyteller's interest in parenthood. The analogy between their faces and a clock indicates an intensive examination of their behaviour, and the temporal dimension implied by the clock suggests that the narrator spent a lot of time analysing them to finally come to these conclusions. Thus, the figure of the mother appears to be a great source of inspiration for him, and although Mary is so often discredited in the novel, she is nonetheless considered, in this extract, a valid point of reference. Indeed, her belonging to the sphere of mothers, that the narrator seems to take as an example to follow or, at least, a group worthy of his attention, betrays a certain admiration for her. Of course, the narrator quickly recovers a superior tone, as he later adds: “fain would she have kept her boy a baby longer, but he insisted on his rights, and I encouraged him that I might notch another point against her” (Barrie 101). This everlasting wish to undermine Mary's authority over David can be interpreted as a frustrated reaction to her maternal instincts that, only a few lines before, were admired by the narrator. Being deprived of this gift, the narrator establishes a competition with her, in which he uses other means to assert his authority.

Timothy fully “embodies” this wish for fatherhood through the immaterial properties attributed to him; the narrator is haunted by the idea of being a father and this haunting is expressed through the insubstantial, ghost-like aspect given to his fictional child. As previously observed, the fact that Timothy's birth occurs through a performative discourse lays ground for this immateriality. He is, from the start, an imaginary construct of the narrator who brings him in and out of flesh according to his own inspiration. This to and fro movement, constantly travelling between the boy's materiality and his incorporeality,

establishes a binary pattern very recurrent in the narrator's depictions of the child. Indeed, the physicality of his interactions with Timothy are systematically followed by the vanishing of the boy. For example, at some point in the narrative, the storyteller declares: “I clung to Timothy, though I wished fervently that I knew more about him” (Barrie 50). The tactile connotation implied by the verb “clung” validates a sense of materiality for the child who, for a moment, seems to be real. However, the narrator's lack of knowledge regarding his son recalls his ghostly nature; the reason why he cannot learn more about him is because he does not actually exist.

A similar pattern is replicated further on in the novel:

> I seem to remember carrying him that evening to the window with uncommon tenderness (following the setting sun that was to take him away), and telling him with not unnatural bitterness that he had got to leave me because another child was in need of all his pretty things […]. (Barrie 58)

Once again, physical interactions (“carrying him […] with uncommon tenderness” and “telling him”) are automatically cancelled by the fading of the boy (“take him away” and “he had got to leave me”). The introduction to the passage, “I seem to remember,” also induces the fictionality of the child, and particularly matches the definition of what a ghost is, that is, “a very slight amount of something that is left behind or that you are not sure really exists” (Oxford 651). The narrator himself seems uncertain of his own creation, which perhaps explains his constant travelling between the child's existence and disappearance. Hence, Timothy is depicted as a flickering light, going from a burning, lively intensity to an absent, shadowy substance. A few lines later, this unsteadiness is reiterated: “he let go my finger and faded from before my eyes into another and golden ether” (Barrie 59). Here, the physicality of the child is consolidated; he is described as holding the narrator's hand, and although he disappears again, he does so “before [his father's] eyes”. This strongly implies a visual phenomenon, which deepens the ambiguity of his existence.

Interestingly, Timothy's ghostly state of simultaneous being and non-being recalls another of Barrie's child characters: Peter Pan. In Fernández's and Corcuera's article "Gothic Peter Pan," both critics suggest a spectral reading of the character. First of all, the fact that Peter relates to birds – and swallows in particular – echoes Celtic mythology where these animals are "associated with death and the ability of the soul to reach the other world through flight" (3). The following extract is used to illustrate their argument:

> But he has still a vague memory that he was a human once, and it makes him especially kind to the house-swallows when they revisit the island, for house-swallows are the spirits of little children who have died. They always build in the eaves of the houses where they lived when they were humans, and sometimes they try to fly in at a nursery window, and perhaps that is why Peter loves them best of all the birds. (Barrie 196)

Critics add that "Peter Pan is probably a dead child who, for one reason or another, has not been completely transformed into a swallow" and is "trapped between two worlds, since he does not accept his death, or, at least, is unaware of it" (4). While Fernández and Corcuera choose not to develop this point, it could nonetheless be argued that Peter's in-between state was conditioned by Solomon Caw's discourse, designating him as a "'Betwixt-and-Between'" (Barrie 129). In this way, Fernández and Corcuera develop a logic where Peter's mother, rather than having "forgotten him," chooses to move on because "unlike Peter, she does know that her son is dead and is not going to return" (4). In other words, Peter acts like a "ghost who is not conscious of his death and continues to interact with others as if he were alive" (4).

What is more, the spectral properties of the protagonist lie in two of his surprising abilities, namely "his mysterious absence of weight" and his enigmatic materiality (Fernández and Corcuera 5). In Barrie's *Peter and Wendy*, the little boy, although slightly different from his prior version of the Kensington Gardens, is still able to fly and seems eager to demonstrate his skills: "'I say, Peter, can you really fly?' Instead of troubling to answer him

Peter flew round the room, taking the mantelpiece on the way" (Barrie, *Annotated* 49). Just like ghosts, Peter's total freedom of movement contrasts with common human abilities, and his extraordinary bodily functions emphasise his belonging to another sphere. For its part, materiality also encourages the spectral dimension of the boy, most strikingly in the episode of the shadow in *Peter and Wendy*: "She returned to the nursery, and found Nana with something in her mouth, which proved to be the boy's shadow" (Barrie, *Annotated* 26). By making Peter's shadow manipulable, Barrie insists on the anomaly of the child's body. The materiality of the shadow is exposed in various ways; Peter attempts to "stick it on with soap from the bathroom," before Wendy declares that "'[i]t must be sewn on'" (Barrie, *Annotated* 38; 40). Later on, it is even described as being "a little creased" (Barrie, *Annotated* 40).

Just like Timothy, Peter moves in and out of materiality, and the figure of the lost child seems to inevitably go through ambiguous "embodiments" in Barrie's works. Through this comparison to Peter Pan, the timeless, imaginary child, Timothy can be placed on a similar level and thus serve the same role, that of simultaneously materialising and de-materialising the contemplation of the dead child. In *The Little White Bird,* it also emphasises the narrator's impossibility to access fatherhood by reason of the void left by his absent son.

3.2 Representing fatherhood through mimesis

The wish for fatherhood expressed by the narrator is, as this section will argue, turned into an artistic construct and inscribed into a literary frame through the use of mimesis. This notion is effectively defined by Emmanuel Vernadakis as the following: "Pour Platon, comme pour Aristote, la mimésis est une représentation imitative d'êtres, d'objets, d'actions etc.,

dont l'artiste rencontre l'original dans la réalité." However, both philosophers share different conceptions of the term:

> Selon Aristote, la mimésis est une imitation cérébrale et ludique de la nature. La reconnaissance de l'original derrière l'imitation procure, chez le spectateur, un plaisir esthétique dont l'intensité dépend du degré de vraisemblance de l'objet imité: plus l'artiste suit les lois naturelles, plus le plaisir est franc.
> Selon Platon, la mimésis éloigne le spectateur de la vérité, notion que l'esprit ne peut pas concevoir tant qu'il réside dans la prison du corps. L'artiste platonicien qui, comme nous tous, vit dans un monde d'impressions, reproduit des imitations illusoires qui détournent doublement le spectateur de la vérité déjà déformée par la nature. (Vernadakis)

Although Plato induces a moral duty in his definition and, by doing so, drastically opposes Aristotle's views on "aesthetic pleasure," both argue that mimesis is inherent to a process of imitation resulting in the production of an artistic creation. In other words, mimesis comprises both the reproduction of reality, and its integration, be it faithful or not, into a work of art.

In literature, mimesis is constrained by specific rules which, according to Hume, makes it a "selective" operation (xi). Indeed, "[a]uthors must take a set of complex actions that occupy the three dimensions of space and the fourth of time, and transform them into a linear sequence of words" (Hume xi). Contrarily to visual arts, where different restrictions apply, literary mimesis involves a mutation from what is *seen* to what is *said.* In fact, this particular constraint opposes mimesis to diegesis, for "[a]ll that a narrative can do is create an illusion, an effect, a semblance of mimesis, but it does so through diegesis" (Rimmon-Kenan 109). Put another way, there is a distinction between the act of "showing" and "telling:"

> 'Showing' is the supposedly direct presentation of events and conversations, the narrator seeming to disappear (as in drama) and the reader being left to draw his own conclusions from what he 'sees' and 'hears'. 'Telling,' on the other hand, is a presentation mediated by the narrator who, instead of directly and dramatically exhibiting events and conversations, talks about them, sums them up, etc. (Rimmon-Kenan 108)

In *The Little White Bird*, the subjective involvement of the first person narrator only limits the

mimetic process to a "telling" of the imitated. Accordingly, this diegetic passage from the visual to the verbal demands a "stylization and convention" shaping the literary text and inevitably limiting its resemblance to its model (Hume xi). This model, Hume suggests, necessarily "depart[s] from the norms of what can be called consensus reality" (xi). It is what constitutes ground for universal experiences or, in other words, what is commonly agreed upon as conditioning the world. Amongst these elements, "[w]e agree that food, oxygen, and liquid are necessary for life; that bodies fall; that stones are solid and hard; that humans die" (Hume xi). All these examples codify the reality that the author will be able to represent in his/her work, in a way varying from realism to complete imagination.

In fact, Hume distinguishes two "impulses" driving literature:

> These are *mimesis*, felt as the desire to imitate, to describe events, people, situations, and objects with such verisimilitude that others can share your experience; and *fantasy,* the desire to change givens and alter reality – out of boredom, play, vision, longing for something lacking, or need for metaphoric images that will bypass the audience's verbal defences. (20, emphasis in the original)

Thus, she shows that literary mimesis can only depict reality to a limited extent. Nonetheless, Hume notes that such limits are voluntarily exploited by certain writers in an attempt to "invite the reader to escape reality; or to acknowledge the possibility of a different reality; or to accept and live by the author's moral explanation of reality" (xiv). Consequently, mimesis should not be understood as a narrow, finite process, but rather as a starting point to the author's creativity. Hence, the intrinsic link Hume establishes between mimesis and fantasy is less paradoxical than it seems; the "deliberate departure from the limits of what is usually accepted as real and normal" can only occur in a frame imposed by mimesis and its imitation of reality (xii).

In *The Little White Bird*, the narrator imitates Mary's role as a mother by giving birth to a book while she gives birth to her second child, Barbara. As Nash formulates it, "he views

writing as a substitute for giving birth" (xi). The parallel between writing and conceiving a child is striking; after being told that Mary "contemplated the writing of a book," the narrator establishes the following link: "I decided, unknown even to David, to write the book 'The Little White Bird,' of which she had proved herself incapable, and then when, in the fulness of time, she held her baby on high, implying that she had done a big thing, I was to hold up the book" (Barrie 255; 257). Critic Maria Tatar even suggests that Mary "'aborted'" the book in the eyes of the narrator, thus continuing the analogy between writing and giving birth (*Neverland* lxxxvi). Here, the mimesis has a double dimension; firstly, the imitation appears in the very act of conceiving. The production of the book, the narrator declares, is put at the same level as Mary's pregnancy, as Captain W. wishes to present a more elaborate creation than her baby. In other words, the artful, written production imitates the natural, biological conception in an attempt to surpass it. This process corresponds to Hume's association of mimesis to fantasy; the narrator's book-writing is both a "desire to imitate," here Mary's pregnancy, and to "change givens and alter reality," by turning it into a masculine, textual "gestation." Secondly, mimesis also occurs within the book itself. Its content consists of an imitation of parenthood, expressed through storytelling. Indeed, the narrator's attempt to imitate maternity by giving birth to a fictional son (Timothy), as well as his retelling of David's origins to claim ownership over him, show a strong concern to act as a paternal creator, in the most unusual ways. The constant undermining of Mary's motherly role establishes an continuous link between the narrator's attitude to creation and hers: Captain W. recuperates Mary's natural gift for motherhood and uses it to his own level, that is, through art and fiction.

Moreover, the competition installed between the narrator and Mary corresponds to the dual structure of mimesis. As critic Terrance King observes, mimesis "rests upon a binary

notion of correspondence (imitated versus imitation, world versus language, and so on)" (65). More specifically, he identifies in this notion a "sense of symmetry" that he positions on a "vertical axis" (65; 67). He explains:

> … one does not have a purely symmetrical geometry of right versus left, nature versus culture, imitated versus imitation, but an asymmetrical hierarchy where one term presents itself as superior to its companion, a case where in a given discourse we may have right over left, nature over culture, imitated over imitation. (67)

For King, any opposition tends towards an uneven balance, where one term necessarily dominates its pair by reason of a "culturally imposed hierarchy" driven by "ideological and metaphysical interests" (67). Thus, right will be valued over wrong, just as peace will be more respected than war. In order to justify this argument, King quotes Derrida and his analysis of philosophical values:

> All metaphysicians have proceeded thus, from Plato to Rousseau, from Descartes to Husserl: good before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation, etc. This is not just *one* metaphysical gesture among others; it is *the* metaphysical exigency, the most constant, profound, and potent procedure. (Derrida 93)

Hence, if every opposition contains an order of importance, mimesis, by opposing the imitation to the imitated, holds a hierarchical dimension, too. As Derrida points out, the "imitated [comes] before the imitation".

This binary construct is indeed very present in *The Little White Bird* and the narrator's imitation of Mary's maternity. However, it can be argued that it is subverted. While his book (the imitation) should be less valued than Mary's maternal conceptions (the imitated), the narrator nonetheless claims artistic creation to be superior to maternal conception: "'In fine, madam, you chose the lower road, and contented yourself with obtaining the Bird. May I point out, by presenting you with this dedication, that in the meantime I am become the parent of the Book? To you the shadow, to me the substance'" (Barrie 265). This extract perfectly summarises the narrator's approach to creation: the "lower road," that of maternity,

contrasts with his artistic project, valued through the opposition between “shadow” and substance”. Yet, as previously established, his mimetic book *is*, in itself, an attempt to reach fatherhood or, in other words, to subvert biological conception and turn it into an artistic process. In this way, the narrator is not aware that in establishing a parallel between his book and Mary's children, he bespeaks his wish to imitate something he values: parenthood. Accordingly, his imitation remains a pale copy of the imitated, and is therefore necessarily situated below it. Mary, for her part, notices this paradox: “'But it is I who have the substance and you who have the shadow, as you know very well,' said she” (Barrie 273). Here, the hierarchy is restored, and the narrator himself eventually admits she is right: “I have always known that this was the one flaw in my dedication” (Barrie 273).

If mimesis occurs at the level of the narrator, it also does at the level of the author. Indeed, as Hume recalls, “[w]estern literature is traditionally discussed as representing reality,” and “most of them [western authors] have ostensibly aimed to produce something 'like life'” (xi). Barrie, as a writer, is therefore inevitably using this device. As a result, a *mise en abyme* can be observed in his novel: the author's *The Little White Bird* is a mimesis of Barrie's reality and surroundings; it contains the narrator's *The Little White Bird,* a mimesis of Captain W.'s reality too, but this time, a reality reconstructed by the author. As main subject of imitation, it involves Mary, and the attributes given to her by the writer. Hence, the “lifelike actions” identified by Hume do not refer to the same levels: the author's imitation refers to the real world, as every human knows it, and the narrator's imitation copies the imaginary frame invented for him by the writer (xi). Thus, it can be argued that mimesis itself and its process are the main subjects of the novel, hidden behind the theme of fatherhood. By constructing a *mise en abyme*, Barrie draws attention to the very process of creating, and makes it the ultimate essence of his novel. By doing so, he raises the following question: is it

really just fatherhood that the narrator is looking for, or rather, the power of creation in its broadest sense? The parallel between book-writing and child conception makes the answer uneasy, and blurs the line between artistic and biological conception. However, the insistence on fiction underlined by the *mise en abyme* of mimesis suggests that it is the theme of creation, in any form, and its process, that Barrie exploits in his novel.

3.3 Creation as a theme and the fear of non-creation

Barrie's emphasis on artistic creation and its very conception is not exclusively intensified by the *mise en abyme* of the mimesis, but also by the status of the narrator. Indeed, it can be argued that the author recuperates Victorian realism and certain elements of its omniscient narration to create an illusion of fiction, only to subvert it and remind the readers that they are faced with a work of art. Critic Caroline Levine characterises omniscient narration as "narrative perspectives not lodged in any single consciousness but able to move in and out of multiple spaces and minds and to present connections among people which they themselves might not be aware of" (98). Put another way, the omniscient narrator has an overall view of the characters' situations, and knows their thoughts and states of mind in detail. The narrator therefore benefits from a God-like status, and gives the impression of a mighty figure capable of infiltrating any of the protagonists' lives. As Levine points out, this type of narration "may also have served a consolatory cultural function in a rapidly secularizing culture; that is, omniscient narration could fill the place left by a disappearing God," due to the emergence of Darwinism and religious scepticism in the nineteenth century (98).

While the narrator of *The Little White Bird* is not omniscient – he is, in fact, just

another character in the story – he nonetheless seems to be gifted with similar divine powers for, as previously established, Barrie creates the illusion of a manipulative narrator altering the limits of his characters. To start with, he invents a fictionalised past for David and shapes an additional stage in his life, namely, "birdhood." By doing so, he reaches a God-like status without which he would not have been able to perform such interventions; only a superior force would allow such fundamental changes. Similarly, he "creates" Timothy out of nothing, in a completely asexual way, and this, once again, is something mere mortals cannot do. Most strikingly, when Mary is pregnant with her second child, the narrator misleads David into believing that the sex of the baby can be determined by the result of a cricket game: "For long I was obdurate, but the time was summer, and at last I agreed to play him for it, a two-innings match. If he won it was to be a girl, and if I won it was to be a boy" (Barrie 260). Hence, the narrator appears to hold the key to yet another asexual birth, and by fooling David into believing him, he instantly gives himself a divine authority allowing any miracle. As a result, Barrie's storyteller seems anchored in the continuation of omniscient narration, not because he *knows* everything, but because he *pretends* he does and appears to be powerful on many levels.

The construction of a "divine" narrator, just like a knowing wink to the realist novel Barrie inherited from, enables the author to build the illusion of fiction, where the storyteller represents the voice of the novel, transforming reality as he pleases. However, the author only creates this impression to destroy it in the most effective way. This destruction occurs through the deconstruction of fiction, or rather, the emphasis on its process. To do so, Barrie uses metanarration, that is, the act of "commenting on the process of narration," to denounce the fact that his novel and its telling are nothing more than an artistic construct (Nünning 12). Because Barrie's narrator continuously makes comments about his own narration, he is placed

as a mediator of fiction. By underlining this role, the author also inherently points out at the fabricated dimension of the story, which has to go through a process of storytelling to exist. It is therefore made clear for the reader that the elements of the story are provided by a narrator, and not just *there*, which largely highlights the fictional essence of the novel.

Metanarration mainly occurs with the use of two verbs, "tell" and "mention," which accentuate the fact that the narrator is progressively shaping his story: "I may mention here that..."; "I must mention"; "I ought to mention here that..." (Barrie 6; 27; 123). In this way, it looks like the storyteller is meticulously assembling his narrative, and the attention of the reader is drawn to this very construction. Hence, fiction is exposed as an artful construct rather than a spontaneous discourse: "Let me tell […] what next took place;" "I shall tell you presently how...;" "I have promised to tell you also about..." (Barrie 63; 144; 146). The fact that the process of telling is detailed and, above all, dismantled before the eyes of the audience, shows that the story is only a fabrication. The presence of modal verbs ("may," "must," "ought") also implies a notion of duty, which again reminds the reader of the existence of a solid frame of storytelling. This duty to "tell" is central, as it asks the question: how would the fictional content of this story subsist without this frame? Necessarily, the reader realises that fiction does not and cannot stand alone, and needs a third party (the narrator), in addition to the author, to exist. Consequently, the reader is aware of the process of creation of the story.

The layering of the stages composing the narration, and the importance given to these stages, results in a metafictional effect. Patricia Waugh defines "metafiction" as a "fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (2). She also adds that metafiction follows the "principle of a fundamental and sustained opposition: the

construction of a fictional illusion (as in traditional realism) and the laying bare of that illusion" (6). As previously observed, the *mise en abyme* of the narrator's *The Little White Bird* within Barrie's novel, similarly entitled, doubles this metafictional opposition. At the level of the narrator, metafiction is attained through metanarration; the telling of the story is deconstructed and presented as a fictional construct effectively "draw[ing] attention to its status as an artefact." The illusionary realism of the story is no longer effective, as the narrator's tale reflects its own conception. This mirroring effect fully raises the question of "formal self-exploration," described by Waugh as inherent to metafiction (2).

At the level of the author, the very inclusion and focus on the narrator's own novel toys with the idea of metafiction. As Waugh points out, "the lowest common denominator of metafiction is simultaneously to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction" (6). Barrie slightly shifts from this definition: he does not directly draw attention to the process of his own fiction, but of his narrator's. Although the narrator's fiction is, ultimately, the author's creation – the narrator is just an imaginary construct – this intermediary subtly displaces the metafictional effect. It can be argued, in fact, that it multiplies and intensifies it. Beyond the formal aspect of self-reflexivity lies a thematic dimension, inserted by the presence of the narrator's novel. In other words, the fact that the narrator is writing a book himself, and because this is an important element in *The Little White Bird,* fiction and its process of creation are thematised. Rather than appearing as an element structurally shaping the novel, self-reflexive writing emerges as the subject of the book. Consequently, fiction is no longer an illusion the reader can dive into. Instead, the reader is taken in and out of the fictional frame and is forced to contemplate its construction, or put another way, the idea of artistic construct itself.

Because Barrie is "obsessed with the question of what it means to create art," and

explores this question through the deconstruction of artistic creation, imagination and its practical application are inevitably placed at the centre of the novel (Nash viii). According to critic Ronald D.S. Jack, imagination is used "as a vehicle for studying the final questions of birth and death" in Barrie's works (10). Indeed, the theme of fiction in *The Little White Bird* is materialised in a way that almost suggests a vital need for creation, and its association with natal conception bespeaks anxieties stemming from the "possibility of not being born" (Albin-Faivre, *Legacy* 34). Put another way, the fear of non-creation, as expressed by the narrator in his search for fatherhood, "can be interpreted as an inverted form of suicide, suicide in negative" (Albin-Faivre, *Legacy* 34). This is why, perhaps, "[m]others are writers and writers are mothers" in Barrie's works; creation *has* to be perpetuated, and the doubling of artistic conception with maternal figures strengthens this possibility for creation. In *The Little White Bird*, this pair is crucial, and the roles are shared by Mary and the narrator. When Mary fails to write the book she had planned to publish, the narrator fills this gap and writes it instead; when the narrator shows his incapacity to become a father, Mary gives birth to David and Barbara. In this way, the process of creation remains safe and secured; it will continue, one way or another.

Conclusion

The Little White Bird is a complex literary construct with many knots to unravel. In his novel, Barrie challenges his readers and confronts them to existential reflections subtly hidden behind the playful voice of his narrator; parenthood is questioned, as well as the meaning of creation. While triviality sometimes emanates from his amusing, gently devilish discourse, Captain W. yet expresses serious concerns about the role of fathers at the dawn of

the twentieth century and puts into question his own place in the debate. Mary's maternity is depicted as a menacing phenomenon clouding the novel, difficultly comprehensible to the narrator and, perhaps, Barrie himself. The undermining of her pregnancy is manifest, and is dealt with in the most artistic way.

Firstly, the fact that the narrator is made the central figure of the novel gives the impression of a strong influence over his characters and audience. By choosing an authoritative storytelling voice to relate his story, Barrie inevitably conditions its reading and induces a power relationship favouring, on the surface, the narrator. More than an absence of neutrality, this type of narration highlights Captain W.'s dominant performance in the relating of his story. His subjectivity is used as a tool to lead the story and manipulate his audience, and this authorial construction produces a unique atmosphere placing readers and protagonists under a strong narrative influence. It is precisely this illusion of influence that integrates the idea of paternity to the novel. Progressively, the narrator expresses a wish to become a fatherly figure, coupled with a constant discredit of Mary's maternity, and his authoritative voice facilitates the development of this theme. The fictional re-appropriation of his child characters and their origins thus emerges as the result of this desire, since it enables him to position himself as their artistic creator through authorship, with the aim to somewhat “own” them. Because he cannot do so through biological devices, writing appears to be the only solution to his project.

Nevertheless, the end of the novel widens paternal ambitions with the theme of creation, which eventually appears to be Captain W.'s main concern. The plot twist, that is, Mary telling him that his novel is less about David than it is about Timothy, creates an ambiguity leading to a reflection of the mere act of conceiving, no matter who, no matter what. Hence, the fear of non-creation appears to be the veritable explanation to the pursuit of

child conception that, at first sight, seemed to be the main subject of the book. However, and rather surprisingly, artistic paternity does not materialise as a reactionary phenomenon to maternity. While women are gifted with the power to counter death, by effectively giving birth, Barrie seems to paint a melancholic picture of what is it like to be deprived of this capacity, and it is, more than vehemence, the powerlessness of Captain W. that the reader is faced with. After the overwhelming demonstration of authority displayed in the narrative voice throughout the novel, the last chapter of *The Little White Bird* unveils the portrait of a disconcerted man, upset to find out about the limits of his own creative impulses and anxious to resolve them. Clearly, Captain W. incarnates the trouble of the human condition: if one cannot create nor leave a trace on earth, immortality, even in its most indirect forms, cannot be attained.

Perhaps this concern is particularly masculine, at a time when the decline of paternity underlines the importance of motherhood. If Barrie chooses the collaboration between sexes, illustrated by Captain W. and Mary's final encounter, further studies on his contemporaries would shed light on the various behaviours adopted by male writers in the treatment of this subject. In 1890, Oscar Wilde already intertwines artistic and biological conceptions with *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Similarly to Barrie's novel, maternity is dismissed to favour the artistic creation – or, in Wilde's case, re-creation and perpetuation – of the human self and body. When Basil paints Dorian to immortalise his beauty, the painting becomes the antithesis of biological conception; Dorian's youth and attractiveness are unnaturally maintained through a an artistic and masculine performance, enabling the experience of life without the interference of maternity. On his side, Robert Louis Stevenson depicts a character staging his own rebirth, with *The Strand Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). This time, science is used to conceive Dr Jekyll's evil alter ego, but again, motherly figures are particularly absent

from the story. While the thematisation of human (re)creation is extremely recurrent at the turn of the century, the bypassing of maternal involvement is remarkably repeated.

Moreover, it would be interesting to question the reader response to these subjects. While *The Little White Bird* is a novel for adults, Barrie's imaginary world as well as his narrator's childish tone and behaviour question the age of the audience actually involved in its reading. Just like many writers from the *fin de siècle*, such as H.G Wells, Arthur Conan Doyle and the ones previously mentioned, Barrie deals with maternity in a way that relate to a young population, and numerous works exploring a similar subject are classified as children's literature. Hence, it would be useful to examine the consequences of such mature themes as art and parenthood on adolescent groups, in an age where life, death and the question of origins emerge as crucial interrogations in their construction of identity. Such studies would allow a better understanding of the reasons why maternity, in its most universal dimension, will never cease to fascinate humankind.

Notes

1. The bibliographical indication “Barrie” automatically refers to *The Little White Bird*. Further indications will be provided when other works from this author will be quoted.

2. It should be noted that the spelling of the name “Llewelyn” varies from one critic to another.

3. The film *Finding Neverland,* directed by Marc Forster (2004), specifically depicts this relationship between J.M. Barrie and the Llewelyn Davies family.

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