



IN THE PRESENCE OF A TRAGEDY: THE NEVERLAND SAGA OF MICHAEL JACKSON

“... the lost boys return with Wendy to the grown up world, and Peter Pan is left alone, trapped in an endless web of make-believe which confirms Wendy’s sense when she first encountered him, that she is ‘in the presence of a tragedy’”.

Peter Pan and the Myth of Eternal Youth, Anne Yeoman

The sad spectacle of popular music icon Michael Jackson emerging from his Neverland Valley Ranch to face charges of pedophilia and child molestation raises many questions and concerns for those of us interested in individual, family and social trauma. Our ubiquitous “pop psych” commentators are quick to explain that the entertainer’s often childish and bizarre behavior, fascination with children and childhood can be understood as an attempt to reclaim his own lost childhood. Upon closer examination, it would appear that the phenomenon of Michael Jackson represents a much more complicated weave of an individual, his family and contemporary American culture.

Jackson’s biographers have offered extensive chronicles of the Jackson family dynamics and rapid rise of “The Jackson Five” in show business. In, *Michael Jackson: The Magic and the Madness*, J.R. Taraborrelli describes the economic and social struggles of a working class Black family living in the grim industrial town of Gary, Indiana. Patriarch Joseph Jackson appears as a flagrant womanizer and ill-tempered disciplinarian, lacking in affection, who often administered severe corporal punishment to all of his nine children. Michael’s mother Katherine is portrayed as an excessively controlling religious fanatic who did nothing to protect her children from ongoing violence.

Michael Joseph Jackson born on August 28, 1958, is the seventh of nine children. His father was quick to recognize his extraordinary talent and as a young child Michael was performing together with his older brothers as the lead singer of “The Jackson Five.” For publicity purposes the Jackson parents were fiercely determined to promote an image of a happy, loving, close knit family. According, to Taraborrelli, the ongoing strain of living with this fiction eventually took its toll on all family members and, for Michael in particular, who was described as sensitive, vulnerable and inclined to withdraw into his own fantasy world.

In light of these revelations, it may be not so surprising that Michael eventually purchased a California ranch which he named Neverland Valley, after the home of forever young, Peter Pan, the boy who would not, and then could not, ever grow up. A recent documentary shown on ABC-TV in February, Michael Jackson discusses his love of Peter Pan with British journalist Martin Bashir. “Peter Pan”, Jackson says, “represents youth, childhood, never growing up, magic and flying.” When Bashir asks if he identifies with Peter Pan, Jackson replies, “I am Peter Pan”.

From an archetypal and mythical perspective, however, this attempt to escape into idyllic childhood does not bode well. Even in the original version of this story, Neverland was not a particularly safe haven. There were treacherous pirates, ambivalent indians, malevolent mermaids and jealous fairies, as well as those omnipresent dangers of illusion and entrapment. Those willing to look beyond Walt Disney’s 1953 animated version and a series of charming stage productions, wherein Peter is portrayed by a series of androgynous female actresses, will discover a strangely disruptive and subversive figure. In the original story, Peter Pan is often ambivalent, deceitful, self-absorbed, and ruthlessly manipulative toward all of those within his realm.

If we trace the story of Peter Pan back to his creator, J.M. Barrie (1860-1937) the shadow side of Neverland appears even darker in the deeply moving, and also disturbing, account of this Scottish author and his “lost boys”. In “*J.M. Barrie and the Lost Boys: The Real Story of Peter Pan*”, Andrew Birkin describes the childhood trauma of Barrie’s older brother David dying, on the eve of his fourteenth birthday, when the author was barely six years old. In adulthood, following the collapse of his childless marriage, Barrie grew close to five brothers from the Llewelyn Davies family. Eventually; Barrie became their guardian and surrogate father, after they were orphaned. Here we find a story of obsession, a search for pure childhood and harrowing threads of ongoing tragedy, suicides and premature death.

George, the oldest of Barrie’s “Lost Boys”, died at the Western Front during World War I at the age of twenty-two. The third boy, Peter, lived until 1960. He suffered from depression, tormented by gossip and allusions to his namesake. Peter came to loathe his association with what he termed “that terrible masterpiece”. As an adult, Peter would not discuss the book. Eventually, “the real Peter Pan” threw himself under a train.

According to Birkin, J.M. Barrie died in a state of ill health and deep despair. He was never able to recover from the death of his favorite, the fourth boy, whose name, interestingly enough, was Michael. The cause of death was said to be drowning, together with a male friend, and there were rumors of homosexuality and a suicide pact, which Barrie did not dispute. Michael died just a few weeks short of his twenty-first birthday. From then on, Barrie spoke of Michael as “ the lad who will never grow old ”. Rumors about Barrie’s sexuality, or lack thereof, homosexuality and pedophilia were never substantiated, and have remained within the realm of speculation.

To return now, to the subject of “ our Michael ” who may be one of the most magical, elusive and popular entertainers, ever, we are faced with the challenge of sorting fantasy from reality. No one disputes the reality that the mercurial Jackson remains a superstar whose album “

Thriller ” was the best selling album, ever. Now however, with current legal allegations, Michael must now, also struggle to “ save face ” in the court of public opinion.

This metaphor of “ saving face ” is particularly telling, given the history of Michael’s surgical transformations from someone who looked like a really handsome black kid into some kind of ghoulishly pale apparition. Biographers tell us that, as Michael’s fame, wealth and isolation from his family increased, he developed an ongoing fascination with those identified as outsiders and freaks, who were outcast and exploited. He reportedly sought information about “ freaks of nature ”, bearded ladies, Siamese twins, and became obsessed with the Victorian story of “ The Elephant Man ”, John Merrick, who suffered multiple, grotesque deformities as a result of his neurofibromatosis.

How then to view Jackson’s series of surgical transformations? From a cultural perspective, dissatisfaction with one’s physical appearance is endemic within our decidedly narcissistic society. Everyone’s face changes along with the aging process, but with the rich and famous, faces often get younger as celebrities get older. Since celebrities are regarded as cultural role models, cosmetic surgery has become an integral part of this image driven American way of life. Face lifts, tummy tucks and liposuction, are considered routine procedures. Women have surgery to change the size and shape of their breasts. It is no longer unusual for men to have pectoral and calf implants. Moreover, these operations are routinely performed on prime time television.

Jackson will admit to only two nasal surgeries, one to repair a fracture and the other to help him hit the high notes. The famous skin lightening, he claims, is due to a condition known as vitiligo which is characterized by an uneven loss of skin pigmentation. Various experts, however, claim to detect clear evidence of skin bleaching, botox injections, tattooed eyebrows and eyeliner, cheek and chin implants, hair straightening, and a series of skin grafts to cover numerous botched rhinoplasties. If this is true, then one is tempted, to think of Pinnocchio, another “ little boy lost ”, who in this case, lied so many times that his nose finally fell off.

The progression of an increasingly androgynous and mask-like appearance of Michael Jackson’s face is well documented on the inter net (www.anomalies-unlimited.com) These drastic changes have prompted a barrage of cruel remarks about his “ lizard-lock smile” and a comparing of his appearance to “ a space alien drag queen,” “an alcoholic housewife”, and more of the same. Reports of addiction to tranquilizers, painkillers, and alcohol, compound an alienated image of a lost and tormented soul.

Further concern is raised by various mental health experts who speculate that Michael may be suffering from a condition known as Body Dysmorphic Disorder, also known as BDD. Such cases are characterized by an intense torment by what sufferers feel it is about their appearance that makes them feel ugly to themselves and others. First described by Italian psychiatrist Enrique Morselli, over a century ago, BDD is often unrecognized and undiagnosed, and can lead to repeated, potentially disfiguring, cosmetic surgeries. These surgeries and other appearance altering procedures can become compulsive and disabling as they are also associated with other depressive disorders, compulsions, social phobias and suicidal ideation. “ To die will be an awfully big adventure ”, said the storybook icon Peter Pan.

One could argue that Michael Jackson’s preference for the company of children constitutes yet another dangerous obsession in light of mass media speculation about his sexual addiction to young boys. Yet, Michael continues to maintain that sharing his bed with children is an entirely innocent expression of affection. Having to settle a multimillion-dollar lawsuit, in 1993 where he was charged with sexual molestation of a 13 year old boy apparently had no effect upon this controversial behavior.

One of the characteristics of maturity is the ability to plan ahead, foresee consequences and accept responsibility. While American media calls the man they have dubbed “Wacko Jacko” to task in this regard, one might ask if it is only Jacko that is Wacko? What to say about our excessively litigious culture where the lure of deep pockets attracts accusers.? What about the responsibility of all those parents who allowed their children to sleep in Michael Jackson’s bed? Moreover, it seems that television viewers can’t get enough of celebrity lawyers and show trials, where “celebrity justice ” becomes prime time entertainment? A public supposedly outraged by sexual crimes involving children remains fascinated by any and all manner of pornographic details. Yes, the Jackson trial by media is about sex, and money, but it is also about our own cultural voyeurism and fascination with the myth of eternal youth.

Peter Pan is only fiction. The crude reality of Michael's humiliating, " mug shot ", at the time of his arrest , serves to remind us , and him, as well , that he is, after all, merely mortal. As an American icon, Michael Jackson, however strange, is very real. He now faces the challenge of a lifetime. Will he become a victim of his own unique reality, or emerge from his Neverland into a grown-up world and face these charges, as a man?

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