

## Half an Hour

### —An Aspect of J. M. Barrie's View of Womankind—

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J. M. Barrie is known to have never treated women, either in his real life or in his works, unkindly or bitterly. One of the greatest charms of his works is his loving and admiring presentation of his female characters. Once, just once, however, he seems to have lost his affectionate touch and to have presented a heroine as a detestable woman. This study is to look into the background of this rare exception.

#### Barrie's Activity as Playwright

J. M. Barrie's career as playwright began in 1891 when his first full-length play *Richard Savage*, written in collaboration with H. B. Marriott Watson, was produced at the Criterion Theatre in London. Though it was rather a failure, Barrie continued to write plays and, by the year 1897, when the dramatic version of *The Little Minister* enjoyed a riotous triumph, he had achieved a firm position among the leading playwrights of the day.

The following two decades was the most fruitful period of Barrie's literary activity, during which time he wrote such masterpieces as *Quality Street* (1901), *The Admirable Crichton* (1902), *Peter Pan* (1904), *What Every Woman Knows* (1908), *Dear Brutus* (1917) and *Mary Rose* (1920).

The dramatic frame of his theatrical career was completed with the writing of *The Boy David*. It was finished in 1934, but, owing to some unlucky incidents, including the repeated illness of its intended leading actress, its production was delayed until the end of 1936. It was, just as had been the case with his first play, rather a failure. Its comparatively short run terminated a few months before its author's death in 1937.

During these forty-five years of active playwriting, Barrie wrote more than seventy plays, including some thirty playlets for his own amusements, for the entertainment of his friends and for charity performances. Of those seventy-odd plays and playlets, thirty-seven were produced publicly and, of the thirty-seven, twenty were selected by the author himself to be printed in one volume entitled 'The Definite Edition of The Plays of J. M. Barrie'. This book was published in 1928, and was revised in 1942, by A. E. Wilson, who added seven more plays to the original edition. Barrie's last play *The Boy David* was, of course, included in

the seven. All the plays dealt with in this study are in these twenty-seven.

### Barrie's General View of Womankind

A play may be studied and criticized from various points of view; some critics may praise a play for the up-to-dateness of its theme or the problem it offers, some may denounce it for lacking in skillful construction or the absurdity of its plot, while yet others may admire it for its well-calculated stage effects or its smart dialogue. This study, however, is not going to take any of such standpoints, the main theme being Barrie's view of womankind shown in his plays.

What is Barrie's view of womankind? The answer is not hard to get. We can easily discern, just by looking over his main works, that he loved and admired womankind. He seems to have treated them with deepest kindness and greatest respect. Though he once confessed that<sup>(1)</sup> he had never been able to handle his female characters as he wished, his fundamental attitude towards womankind is undeniably obvious in his plays.

(1) I am not bringing any charge against women in general—it is at most a charge against 70 of them, the 70 women—coming into my works absolutely uninvited and giving themselves qualities the very opposite of those with which I had labelled them.

(A Speech delivered at the 140th anniversary dinner of the Royal Literary Fund. May 9, 1930)

Let's look into this point more closely. The most conspicuous of his attitudes towards womankind is shown in the fact that there are hardly any villainous parts for them in his plays; unintelligent or silly girls—yes, coquettish ladies—yes, greedy wives—yes, but not a single female character can we find who is ill-natured or unforgiveably selfish.

Before checking some of his female characters in this light, it would be helpful to listen to Barrie himself again.

### Seven Women

In his one-act play *Seven Women*, he artfully classified women into seven categories. The play itself is a minor work of light comedy and is not to be taken too seriously. But his classification is made so deftly that it will give us an adequate clue to further checking.

First, the outline of the play:

A naval officer, who is a middle-aged bachelor, arrives at an old friend's house where he is to dine. He finds that his hostess has asked him half an hour too early. His host tells him that seven ladies are expected to the dinner. Begged by the sailor, the host pictures the seven ladies by their respective personality, and disappears to get dressed. Then Leonora, a charming widow with a fourteen-year-old son, arrives. She, too, has been asked too early.

The sailor tries to find out which of the seven ladies she is, only to find in the end that she is herself all seven. The last scene implies that the widow and the bachelor will soon make a happy couple.

Now, the seven female personalities, as described by Barrie in this play, are as follows :

- a. having no sense of humour
- b. having too much sense of humour
- c. being a politician
- d. being of the good old-fashioned, obedient clinging kind—a *very* woman
- e. being a mother and nothing else
- f. being an audacious flirt—a coquette
- g. being determined to have her own way at any risk—a murderess

By putting these seven different personalities in one person, and also by presenting the person quite charming and loveable, Barrie almost unreservedly made clear his view of woman-kind. Any woman is a complicated being. Some of her personalities, such as a, c, and g, may seem horrible or detestable, but as a whole being, a woman is inevitably loveable and charming. This is Barrie's fundamental view of womankind, and he had such a skillful craftsmanship on stage that he never failed to bring his audience to the same view by the end of his play.

### Barrie's Female Characters

Let's see some of Barrie's female characters who may have been detestable unless he had treated them with love and admiration.

Maggie Wylie in *What Every Woman Knows*

She is too practical to have any sense of humour. She is also a politician and is determined to make her husband a success at any risk. She even sends him to a cottage together with his might-be lover. So far she is horrible. But above all she is a mother. Her motherly love for her husband accounts for everything she does, and presents her all the more loveable to the audience.

Lady Sybil in *What Every Woman Knows*

She is a coquette. She tries to allure Maggie's husband. But, since she is so full of humour and retires so innocently when she finds herself defeated, none of the audience holds resentment against her.

Phoebe Throssel in *Quality Street*

She is, in a sense, a politician. She tries to conceal her aged self by pretending to be her own young niece. But the audience know that, unlike many women who wish to keep young

merely to be the center of admiration, she wishes to remain young because she has never really had the pleasure of youth. Her true self is a very woman, clinging desperately to her long-separated sweetheart and to her own youth.

Lady Mary Loam in *The Admirable Crichton*

She is typically an English peer's daughter. She despises her inferior without mercy. She has no sense of humour. She is always determined to have her own way. But when she comes to love and admire her father's butler on the island, she all at once changes into an obedient, clinging kind of woman. She tries to persuade the butler to remain on the island with her. When she comes back to England, rescued against her wish from the island, and the situation forces her to give up her intended marriage with the butler, she still clings to him. Just before the curtain falls, she whispers to him, "Do you despise me, Crichton?" Thus the audience forget to blame her and sympathize with her for the change of situations.

Tinker Bell in *Peter Pan*

She is a jealous creature. She is so jealous of Wendy that she even tries to kill her. She has no sense of humour and is determined to keep Peter Pan to herself at any risk. But she loves Peter so affectionately and shows so deep a motherly love to him that every child in the theatre enthusiastically answers Peter's imploration, when he asks the audience to save her life by clapping their hands. She is, in her true self, a *very* woman and a mother.

Kate in *The Twelve-Pound Look*

She is a 'New Woman'. She leaves her wealthy husband because of his incessant success. In the eye of this suffering woman, he is nothing but an inhuman monster of money. She leaves him in order to live, all by herself, a more humane life. So far she is determined to have her own way and not a bit an obedient and clinging wife. What makes her loveable, with all such unwomanly personalities, is her sense of humour. She is also a kind of mother to her husband. She, telling him the true motive of her flight, smiles at his obstinacy and, at the same time, tries to console him with motherly affection. By doing so she herself gains the affection of the audience.

### Half an Hour

Now we have looked over some of Barrie's female characters who might have been unloveable if presented by other authors. Barrie, because of his love and respect for womankind, changed them into loveable and charming dears.

Was Barrie, then, a mere feminist? Did he not possess the ability for discerning in womankind that most horrible of human personalities—selfishness? Yes, he did know that a woman can sometimes be cruel and selfish. This knowledge he acquired through his own

bitter experience, and the experience expresses itself in his one-act play *Half an Hour*. This is the only exception in Barrie's plays in which the heroine is not treated kindly.

The little melodrama was produced in September, 1913. In this, as in *The Twelve-Pound Look*, the wife runs away from her wealthy husband. The audience is rather sympathetic so far, since they are aware that the wife has long been suffering under the tyranny of her husband, a successful businessman.

Unlike Kate in *The Twelve-Pound Look*, however, this wife, Lillian Garson, has a lover. She runs to this lover just half an hour before the dinner at which she is to be the hostess and to which some of her husband's successful friends are invited. Before her flight, she writes a letter to her husband, and leaves it in a drawer of his desk, together with a costly ring he had given her.

The lover, welcoming Lillian with seeming rapture, runs out to hail a cab.

Presently an unexpected news of the lover having been run over by an omnibus and killed is brought to Lillian by a doctor who happened to witness the accident. The doctor easily grasps the whole situation and advises her to leave the place at once. There is nothing left for her but to return home, where she is lucky enough to find that her husband had not yet found the letter.

When she changes her frock and rejoins her husband, however, the guests arrive and she finds, among the guests, that very doctor who knows everything. The doctor once more realizes the true situation, but keeps silent. Lillian nonchalantly restores the fatal letter and the ring. When the curtain finally falls upon her, the audience perceive that, throwing the letter into the fire, she goes into the dining room on the doctor's arm.

### Lillian and Kate Compared

Lillian in *Half an Hour* and Kate in *The Twelve-Pound Look* are, though in similar situations, quite different in their personalities. They both run away from wealthy husbands, but while Kate gallantly supports herself as a typist, Lillian runs to her lover. When Kate meets her ex-husband by chance, she tells him the truth about her flight and, though somewhat cynically, advises him to be careful, with a touch of motherly affection towards a naughty child; when Lillian is told that her lover was killed, she immediately returns to her husband and conceals everything.

Kate is, in many ways, loveable and respectable, but who can admire Lillian, let alone love her? It is quite natural that the audience of *Half an Hour* should feel somewhat disgusted. We have no words to take side with Lillian.

Why, then, did Barrie make such an exception in his long career of playwriting?

### Truth about the Exception

#### (A) When was the play written?

*Half an Hour* was first produced in September, 1913, but there is reason enough to suspect that it had been written much earlier than that.

In those days, a full-length play—especially when it was Barrie's—was very easy to find a producer. But when it was a one-act play—even Barrie's one-act play—it had to wait for a long time before it found a chance to be staged.<sup>(2)</sup>

(2) The steady retreat of dinner-hour later and later into the evening had shortened the theatre programmes. In mid-victorian days playgoers would have felt defrauded if they had been offered an evening's entertainment consisting of one play only, but in the late Edwardian times one play a night had already come to be the rule, staged at an hour to suit the late dinners. Now and then, when a play was shorter than usual, managers would remember the old tradition and put on a 'curtain raiser'. But when Barrie began to write his one-act plays, even the 'curtain raiser' was beginning to drop out of fashion.

It is not surprising, if Barrie allowed his one-act plays to accumulate in his desk. He wrote them on impulse, while an idea was hot in his mind, without worrying his head about chances of production. (W. A. Darlington: J. M. Barrie……Chapter ten)

So we know that, in spite of the date of its production, there is possibility of the play having been written much earlier.

There is much more positive material for guessing the date it was written. When he selected his own plays for the publication of one-volume edition in 1928, Barrie arranged them in the following way.

First came his full-length plays\* in the order of their productions. This order eventually coincides with that of their writing, since managers were always standing at Barrie's elbow while he finished them.

\* (the present writer's note)

*Peter Pan* was placed at the top of the book, regardless of its chronological order. This was a necessary measure because it had a long dedication 'To The Five' which also served as preface to the book.

Next came the short plays, but they did not stand in the order of production. They were arranged like this (the figures in parenthesis indicate the year of production): *Pantaloon* (1905), *Half an Hour* (1913), *Seven Women* (1917), *Old Friends* (1910), *Rosalind* (1912), *The Will* (1913), *The Twelve-Pound Look* (1910).

There is no other explanation for this seemingly random order except that Barrie arranged them in the chronological order in which he wrote them. Thus we can with some certainty place the date of birth of *Half an Hour* in 1910 or a little earlier.

**(B) Divorce**

Then, what does the period '1910 or a little earlier' mean to Barrie? Did anything happen to him that might have changed his view of womankind? The answer is, yes.

Barrie married Mary Ansell, a beauty and an actress, in 1894. But their married life was not a happy one. There may have been many reasons—Barrie's incessant devotion to writing, for instance, and the inevitable neglect of social life—but the most shocking to both of them was Barrie's physical impotence.<sup>(3)</sup>

(3) Many of Mary's friends knew and has long known the basic cause of the break-up of a marriage which had been unhappy from the beginning. She now frankly told them what they had long suspected: that Barrie was impotent and the marriage has never been consummated.—When her friends asked her why she had not left Barrie earlier, she had replied that after the shock of the honeymoon, she had hoped that her husband would take medical advice and that something could be done.

(Janet Dunbar: J. M. Barrie, *The Man Behind The Image*, Chapter 14)

So, the main cause of his unhappy married life was in Barrie himself. There is some trace of his self-reproach even as early as in 1900. It is found in his novel *Tommy and Grizel*.<sup>(4)</sup>

(4) Barrie continued as the novelist of Thrums in *Sentimental Tommy* (1896), a penetrating study of the boyhood of a literary genius; and in the curiously bitter sequel *Tommy and Grizel* (1900), in which the adult Tommy fails to achieve maturity or sincerity, wrecks Grizel's life and wastes his own. The bitterness perhaps reflects Barrie's own married life, which was beginning to break up.

(Roger Lancelyn Green: Introduction to J. M. Barrie's Plays and Stories, Everyman's Library)

If that was true (and we suspect it was), Barrie should have had nothing to complain of. He said nothing about his unhappy married life. He knew it was he, not his wife, that was to blame.

The final blow came to him in 1909. He found that his wife has long been in love with a young man.

The lover was a Mr. Gilbert Cannan, then the secretary to the campaign for the abolition of the office of censor.

It may seem implausible and almost ridiculous today, but in those days there did exist an office called 'The Lord Chamberlain's Examiner of Plays', and any play which wanted to be staged had to get a licence from the office.

The campaign against censorship was supported by many a leading writer of the time such as G. Meredith, W. S. Gilbert, T. Hardy, B. Shaw, and H. James. Barrie also was the campaign's leading supporter and offered his country house for its activity.

Mr. Gilbert Cannan was the secretary to this campaign and Barrie's wife Mary, too often neglected by her husband, would often stay alone in that very country house. It seems so natural that the beautiful but neglected wife should have fallen in love with the young man

but we cannot but wonder why Barrie did not feel any danger in the situation.

The fact is, the news that his wife had a lover was a complete surprise and a terrible shock to Barrie. He did everything to persuade her to stay with him. But she refused either to let him forgive her or to agree to a separation, and on October 13, 1909, he was forced to bring an action and to obtain a divorce.

### After the Divorce

This catastrophe of his married life seems to have deprived him of his zest for writing. He was, for a long period afterwards, unable to face the effort of planning anything on a big scale. For six or seven years he produced nothing but one-act plays. Worse than this, there began to appear a note of disillusion and sense of failure in his works. In *Half an Hour*, as we have already seen, this tendency is most apparent. But other one-act plays which were written in his 'after the divorce period' all show, more or less, this tendency to bitterness.

The first two plays that were produced after his divorce were *The Twelve-Pound Look* and *Old Friends*. *Half an Hour* was produced three years later. But, as we have already examined, the order of production does not correspond with that of writing, and we have good reason to believe that it was the first work of Barrie's that was written after his divorce.

Barrie may have written this one-act play pretty soon after the divorce, but he may also have shrunk from putting it on stage because of its too naked a theme. This is, admittedly, a guess; but not a wild one.

### Conclusion

Throughout his long career as playwright, Barrie always was an admirer of womankind. He especially admired in women the motherly love which he believed the best of female personalities. Even when his plot required him to present a female character in unfavourable situation, he never failed in persuading his audience to love her. His skill in doing so sometimes made the critics of the time call him a magician of stage.

But, just after his divorce from his wife because of her adultery, his magic wand seems to have lost its occult power. In *Half an Hour*, the heroine is sketched, without mercy, as a selfish opportunist. There is not a trace of Barrie's characteristic touch of kindness or mild satire.

Barrie, even Barrie, could not stand the disillusion of real life. It is rather a pathetic irony that he himself proved his own favourite theme: Situation changes the man.

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## Summary

The object of this study is to show that J. M. Barrie just once presented his heroine unfavourably in his plays, and to check the background of this exception.

First, Barrie's career as playwright is outlined, and his general attitude towards female characters is discussed.

Next, the play in question, *Half an Hour* is introduced and the detestableness of its heroine is pointed out.

Finally, the study finds out that the play was written soon after Barrie's divorce from his wife, and comes up to the conclusion that the disillusion in real life badly affected Barrie in his literary attitude towards women.