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Mary Ansell was an actress whom J.M. Barrie met in the course of their respective professions. A beautiful young woman, Mary soon had a part in one of Barrie's plays. This photo was taken by Alexander Bassano (1829-1913), sometime between 1891-2. Online via National Portrait Gallery, London. License: [CC BY-NC-ND 3.0](#)

In 1892, [Mary Ansell](#) was an actress who had her own touring company. Looking for a leading lady to fill an important role in his second play (*Walker, London*), James Barrie was introduced to Ansell. He was smitten by her beauty and charm.

Two years later, while visiting his family in Scotland, Barrie fell ill with pleurisy and pneumonia. Mary traveled north to nurse him back to health, although the illness left him with a lifelong cough. Nico (the youngest of the five Llewelyn Davies boys) later [described](#) it as "ceaseless coughing," especially when Barrie was writing. (It is clearly audible at the very beginning of this audio clip which is a [1931 speech](#) Barrie made at the dedication of a statue of Thomas Hardy.)

As the storytelling writer grew into manhood, the real Peter Pan seemingly emerged from Barrie himself. Likely not realizing the complexities of Barrie's personality, Mary Ansell married James Matthew Barrie in 1894. Although they did not divorce until 1909, their union was childless.

Writing his most autobiographical novel (*Tommy and Grizel*) while his marriage to Mary Ansell was falling apart, Barrie seemed to transport dialogue and story line from his own life into the lives of his characters:

If we could love by trying, no one would ever have been more loved than Grizel...He knew it was tragic that such love as hers should be given to him, but what more could he do than he was doing? Ah, if only it could have been a world of boys and girls! (Page 62.)

But the world of men and women is different from the world of boys and girls. Barrie, through the words of his character Tommy, expressed frustration with his personal life:

Grizel, I seem to be different from all other men. There seems to be some curse upon me that makes me unable to love as they do. I want to love you, dear one; you are the only woman I ever wanted to love; but apparently I can't. I have decided to go on with this thing [engagement and marriage] because it seems best for you; but is it? ... I think I love you in my own way, but I thought I loved you in their way, and it is the only way that counts in this world of theirs. It does not seem to be my world. (Page 66 of Tommy and Grizel.)

Sometimes Barrie worked on the book while sitting, and reflecting, on a bench at Round Pond (in London's Kensington Gardens). Perhaps the quiet of his reflections led him to a measure of truth:

...(H)e could not make himself anew. They say we can do it, so I suppose he did not try hard enough; but God knows how hard he tried.

He went on trying. In those first days [of marriage] she sometimes asked him, "Did you do it out of love, or was it pity only?" And he always said it was love. He said it adoringly. He told her all that love meant to him, and it meant everything that he thought Grizel would like it to mean. When she ceased to ask this question he thought it was because he had convinced her.

They had a honeymoon by the sea...And it was just the same when they returned to Double Dykes, which they added to and turned into a comfortable home--Tommy trying to become a lover by taking thought, and Grizel not letting on that it could not be done in that way...He was a boy only. She knew that, despite all he had gone through, he was still a boy. And boys cannot love. Oh, who would be so cruel as to ask a boy to love? (Pages 146 and 147.)

Mary ultimately fell in love with another man - Gabriel Cannon. She married him after her divorce from Barrie was final. Before that, however, she endured Barrie's considerable attentions to their neighbor, Sylvia Llewelyn Davies, and her five children.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/MARY-ANSELL-BARRIE-Finding-Neverland>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/MARY-ANSELL-BARRIE-Finding-Neverland>

Media Stream

Mary Ansell Barrie as an Actress

Somewhere, along the path of her life, it appears that Mary Ansell began to “fudge” about her actual age. She worked at a time when actresses were often “finished” by the time they reached the age of 30.

Mary, apparently, didn’t want that to happen, so she began to “extend” life in her twenties.

How do we know this? Because Robert Greenham, a British author, had a hunch. He then went digging for records, in old archives, and found the evidence. Mary’s birth certificate identifies her exact date of birth. It was different—by many years—than her representations to others.



First the discrepancy was six years, then eight and, finally, ten.

When Ansell married Barrie—on the 9th of July, in 1894—she was actually 33 years old. Her marriage certificate, however, says she was 27.

After her divorce from Barrie, Ansell married 25-year-old Gilbert Cannon on the 28th of April, 1910. That marriage certificate lists Mary’s age as 41. Based on her birth certificate, she was actually 49.

In the 1911 census, Mary’s age is listed as 40. By that time, she was actually 50.

Greenham gives a possible reason for the age changes:

From this information we can see that, in common with many actresses, at some time during her twenties or early thirties Mary Ansell had decided to “reduce” her age so as to remain in her twenties for as long as possible in order to prolong her prospects of securing acting roles on the stage.

Further, we may conclude that, having possibly deceived Barrie from the time of their meeting in 1892 to the time of their marriage - and presumably having successfully deceived Barrie's minister uncle, David Ogilvy, who officiated at the marriage - Mary chose to maintain the 6-year difference throughout their marriage. The photo of Mary Ansell, at the top of this page, was taken by Alexander Bassano (1829-1913) sometime between 1891-1892. Click on it for a better view.

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Mary Ansell

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