



Ancient Religious Big Book, Museo Dominicano de Arte, Quito, Ecuador
Picture taken by Jonathan Acuña in 2018

Book Critique:

"The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales"

by Bruno Bettelheim



Abstract

Bruno Bettelheim's "The Uses of Enchantment" explores the profound psychological importance of fairy tales in child development. Bettelheim argues that fairy tales are symbolic narratives that help children deal with complex emotions and navigate their inner lives. He emphasizes their role in psychological development, symbolism, moral education, and therapeutic function. Despite

criticisms of his Freudian approach, the book remains influential, offering a deep understanding of fairy tales' significance. Bettelheim's insights have inspired further research and appreciation of fairy tales' enduring power in modern child-rearing and education.

Resumen

"Los usos de la encantación" de Bruno Bettelheim explora la profunda importancia psicológica de los cuentos de hadas en el desarrollo infantil. Bettelheim argumenta que los cuentos de hadas son narrativas simbólicas que ayudan a los niños a lidiar con emociones complejas y a navegar sus vidas internas. Enfatiza su papel en el desarrollo psicológico, el simbolismo, la educación moral y la función terapéutica. A pesar de las críticas a su enfoque freudiano, el libro sigue siendo influyente, ofreciendo una comprensión profunda del significado de los cuentos de hadas. Las ideas de Bettelheim han inspirado más investigaciones y aprecio por el poder perdurable de los cuentos de hadas en la crianza y educación infantil moderna.

Resumo

"O Mundo Encantado: A Importância e o Significado dos Contos de Fadas" de Bruno Bettelheim explora a profunda importância psicológica dos contos de fadas no desenvolvimento infantil. Bettelheim argumenta que os contos de fadas são narrativas simbólicas que ajudam as crianças a lidar com emoções complexas e a navegar suas vidas internas. Ele enfatiza seu papel no desenvolvimento psicológico, simbolismo, educação moral e função terapêutica. Apesar das críticas ao seu enfoque freudiano, o livro continua a ser influente, oferecendo uma compreensão profunda do significado dos contos de fadas. As ideias de Bettelheim inspiraram mais pesquisas e apreciação pelo poder duradouro dos contos de fadas na educação e criação de filhos moderna.

A short book overview

Bruno Bettelheim's "The Uses of Enchantment" is a seminal work that delves into the profound psychological importance of fairy tales in child development. It is also the cornerstone of people's attempts to explore the psychological (Freudian) components in fairy tales. Bettelheim, a renowned child psychologist, argues that fairy tales are much more than simple stories for children; they are rich, symbolic narratives that help children deal with complex emotions and navigate their inner lives (Bettelheim, 1973). Fairy tales framed within "a rich and vivid world filled with engaging characters can transport readers and listeners to a place that feels real and alive, even if it is entirely fantastical" (Acuña-Solano, 2024) and free of danger when compared to the real world. No one, i.e., enjoying this type of stories is then thunderstruck by fear because a witch cast a spell on them.

Main Points A: Psychological Development

Bettelheim posits that fairy tales play a crucial role in helping children understand and cope with their feelings. As we humans need to go to town to obtain victuals at times with our kids, fairy tales present existential dilemmas and moral conflicts we all face when going to a supermarket or elsewhere in town. But

these daily-confronted problems are presented in a way that is accessible to a child's mind, aiding in their psychological maturation (Bettelheim, 1973). By confronting characters who deal with loss, fear, jealousy, and other intense emotions, children learn to process these feelings within a safe narrative framework. Roan (1990) also points out that "Bettelheim left his mark by ... explaining the role of fairy tales in child development," and that is why Bettelheim insists on his book that kids can be helped to overcome oedipal emotional problems through the use of fairy tales.

Main Points B: Symbolism and Meaning

Bettelheim (1973) emphasizes the importance of the symbolic nature of fairy tales. He argues that the characters and events in these stories are not to be taken literally but are instead representations of internal struggles and developmental challenges very young children are facing. For instance, the wicked stepmother grumbling against the hero or heroine or the big bad wolf chasing the story's champion(s) often symbolizes internal fears or obstacles for the kids, allowing children to externalize and confront their anxieties on a safe ground. Based on vom Orde's (2013) work, "following Freud, [Bettelheim] sees fairy-tale figures as symbolizing the elements of the personality, the "ego", "id" and "super-ego". The aspect of the stories he is most interested in is their effect, that is, to what extent fairy tales offer aids to projection which can foster children's development" through the symbolism and meaning each nefarious character embodies.

Main Points C: Moral Education

According to Bettelheim (1973), fairy tales are instrumental in moral education. For some, these stories are the kneading bowls of moral education for children. None of these fables is then a scourging ground for the mind of children, but quite the opposite. Fairy tales present clear distinctions between good and evil, right and wrong, which help children develop a moral compass, and parents won't see their offspring taking advantage of their reprieves to continue in a wrong behavioral pathway. The often straightforward, albeit fantastical, resolutions in fairy tales offer a sense of justice and moral order, reinforcing ethical behavior and values. For Zehetner (2013) who also analyzed Bruno Bettelheim's book, "fables demand the reader to choose a moral outcome. Fairy tales allow the reader to explore each virtue and path of action through the different characters' fates. The child decides their own personal stance after deliberating each consequence."

Main Points D: Therapeutic Function

Bettelheim (1973) also argues that fairy tales serve a therapeutic function. Based on this, we don't need to plead with the Lord and ask fairy tales to allow

children to grapple with problems vicariously; kids will experience catharsis through the characters' journeys and eventual triumphs in their favorite or new stories. This vicarious experience can be empowering, offering children the hope and resilience needed to face their own real-life challenges. As mentioned by Roan (1990), "downplaying children's fascination with wicked characters and violence, Bettelheim explained that fairy tales deal with themes of normal development and provide children with an escape from basic problems," a way out that is not going to affect anyone around them including the kids themselves.

Main Points E: Cultural and Historical Significance

Bettelheim (1973) discusses the cultural and historical contexts of fairy tales, noting that while the specifics of the stories may change, their core messages remain relevant across generations and cultures. Bettelheim stoutly insisted that this universality underscores the fundamental human truths and psychological insights that fairy tales convey. In his writings, especially in "The Uses of Enchantment," Bettelheim highlighted the therapeutic value of fairy tales in child psychology. He contended that fairy tales assist children in managing their emotions and difficulties, providing a secure environment for them to address internal oedipal complexes, conflicts, and fears. His methodology integrated Freudian psychoanalytic theories with a fresh perspective on children's literature as a crucial instrument for emotional education and development. For the literary studies and criticism, his book is key in delving into the psychological world of fairy tales.

Critique – Part 1: Strengths

Bettelheim's deep psychological insight provides a compelling argument for the importance of fairy tales in child development. His analysis is thorough and thought-provoking, offering a new lens through which to view these familiar stories. The book is well-researched, drawing on a wide range of examples from different cultures and historical periods to support his arguments. That is, the screech owl of evil fortune could have come to us from Asia or a remote location in Europe that underwent changes through the storytelling of the ages. In the end, "the screech owl" continues being the evil character that needs to be defeated and chastised.

Critique – Part 2: Weaknesses

Some critics argue that Bettelheim's interpretations can be overly deterministic, suggesting that every element of a fairy tale has a specific, fixed psychological meaning. It is not that we must see Bettelheim's interpretations as if flagged with a fagot, but it needs to be admitted that they can sometimes feel reductive and dismissive of other potential interpretations when it comes to

psychological treatment for kids. On the other hand, his perspectives are quite appealing to people in literary criticism and literature analysis. Additionally, Bettelheim's psychoanalytic approach, heavily influenced by Freudian theory, may not resonate with all readers, particularly those skeptical of Freudian psychology and its scope.

Critique – Part 3: Impact and Legacy

Despite these criticisms, "The Uses of Enchantment" remains a highly influential work in the fields of psychology, literature, and education. It has sparked considerable discussion and further research into the psychological and educational value of fairy tales. Bettelheim's book has encouraged a deeper appreciation of the complexities and profound impact of fairy tales, ensuring their continued relevance in modern child-rearing and educational practices. As pointed out by Nair (2019), Bettelheim's "book definitely dissects the existing fairy tales. It explains child psychology and the impact stories have on them. One learns about characterization in stories for children, simple plots and employing clarity in terms of good versus evil."

Conclusion

Hitherto regarded as mere entertainment, fairy tales have been shown by Bruno Bettelheim in "The Uses of Enchantment" to play a critical role in the psychological development and moral education of children. While some aspects of his analysis may be contentious, Bettelheim's insights remain invaluable, offering a rich, interpretative framework for understanding the enduring power and significance of these timeless stories. As stated by Zehetner (2013), "forty years later, his work maintains its importance. Through a Freudian lens, Bettelheim examines the emotional and symbolic facets of traditional children's fairy tales alongside contemporary developmental child psychology." In literary criticism analysis this book is a jewel to have literature students walk beyond the surface of fairy tales.

References

- Acuña-Solano, J. (2024, July 3). *Beyond the Surface: Uncovering the Richness of Fairy Tales through Tolkien's Lens*. Retrieved from Reflective Online Teaching: <https://reflective-online-teaching.blogspot.com/2024/07/beyond-surface-uncovering-richness-of.html>
- Bettelheim, B. (1973). *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. New York: Vintage Books.

- Nair, N. (2019, April 2). *The Uses of Enchantment by Bruno Bettelheim: Book Review*. Retrieved from Booksihloom: <https://bookishloom.wordpress.com/2019/04/02/the-uses-of-enchantment-by-bruno-bettelheim-my-read/>
- Roan, S. (1990, March 16). *A Quiet Advocate for the Child: Psychology: The late Bruno Bettelheim rewrote the code of treatment for emotionally disturbed children*. Retrieved from Los Angeles Times: <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-03-16-vw-241-story.html>
- vom Orde, H. (2013). *Children need fairy tales*. Retrieved from Bayerischer Rundfunk: https://izi.br.de/english/publication/televizion/26-2013-E/vomOrde_bettelheim_engl.pdf
- Zehetner, A. (2013, January 18). *Why fairy tales are still relevant to today's children*. Retrieved from Wiley Online Library: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/jpc.12080>

Reading Comprehension Exercise

Instructions: Answer the following questions based on your understanding of the text.

01. What is the main argument of Bruno Bettelheim's "The Uses of Enchantment"?
02. How do fairy tales aid in children's psychological development according to Bettelheim?
03. What role does symbolism play in fairy tales, based on Bettelheim's analysis?
04. How do fairy tales contribute to moral education in children?
05. What therapeutic function do fairy tales serve for children?
06. Why does Bettelheim believe the core messages of fairy tales remain relevant across generations and cultures?
07. What is a key strength of Bettelheim's analysis as mentioned in the critique?
08. What are some criticisms of Bettelheim's interpretations of fairy tales?
09. Despite criticisms, why is "The Uses of Enchantment" still considered influential?
10. How has Bettelheim's work changed the perception of fairy tales in relation to child development and education?

Reading Comprehension Exercise - Answers

Questions:

1. What is the main argument of Bruno Bettelheim's "The Uses of Enchantment"?
 - Fairy tales are much more than simple stories for children; they are rich, symbolic narratives that help children deal with complex emotions and navigate their inner lives.
2. How do fairy tales aid in children's psychological development according to Bettelheim?
 - Fairy tales present existential dilemmas and moral conflicts in an accessible way, helping children process intense emotions within a safe narrative framework.
3. What role does symbolism play in fairy tales, based on Bettelheim's analysis?
 - Characters and events in fairy tales symbolize internal struggles and developmental challenges, allowing children to externalize and confront their anxieties safely.
4. How do fairy tales contribute to moral education in children?
 - Fairy tales teach children about good and evil, helping them develop a moral compass and reinforcing ethical behavior and values.
5. What therapeutic function do fairy tales serve for children?
 - Fairy tales provide a therapeutic outlet, allowing children to experience catharsis and gain hope and resilience through characters' journeys and triumphs.
6. Why does Bettelheim believe the core messages of fairy tales remain relevant across generations and cultures?
 - The core messages convey fundamental human truths and psychological insights, making them relevant across different cultures and generations.
7. What is a key strength of Bettelheim's analysis as mentioned in the critique?
 - Bettelheim's deep psychological insight and well-researched analysis, drawing on examples from different cultures and historical periods, provide a compelling argument for the importance of fairy tales in child development.
8. What are some criticisms of Bettelheim's interpretations of fairy tales?
 - Critics argue that Bettelheim's interpretations can be overly deterministic and reductive, feeling dismissive of other potential interpretations. His Freudian approach may also not resonate with all readers.
9. Despite criticisms, why is "The Uses of Enchantment" still considered influential?

- The work has sparked considerable discussion and research into the psychological and educational value of fairy tales, encouraging a deeper appreciation of their complexities and profound impact.

10. How has Bettelheim's work changed the perception of fairy tales in relation to child development and education?

- Bettelheim's work has shown that fairy tales play a critical role in psychological development and moral education, offering a rich framework for understanding the enduring power and significance of these timeless stories.

BOOK CRITIQUE:
**"THE USES OF ENCHANTMENT:
THE MEANING AND IMPORTANCE OF FAIRY
TALES"**
BY BRUNO BETTELHEIM

01

Psychological Development:

Fairy tales help children understand and cope with their feelings by presenting dilemmas and conflicts in an accessible way, aiding their psychological growth.

02

Symbolism and Meaning:

The characters and events in fairy tales symbolize internal struggles and developmental challenges, allowing children to externalize and confront their anxieties.

03

Moral Education:

Fairy tales teach children about good and evil, helping them develop a moral compass and reinforcing ethical behavior and values.

04

Therapeutic Function:

Fairy tales provide a therapeutic outlet, allowing children to experience catharsis and gain hope and resilience through characters' journeys and triumphs.

05

Cultural and Historical Significance:

The core messages of fairy tales remain relevant across cultures and generations, conveying fundamental human truths and psychological insights.

06

Impact and Legacy:

Bettelheim's work has sparked discussion and research into the psychological and educational value of fairy tales, maintaining their relevance in modern child-rearing and education.