

Chapter Six

On the Use and Abuse of Folk and Fairy Tales with Children

Bruno Bettelheim's Moralistic Magic Wand

Bruno Bettelheim was impelled to write his book The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales ¹ out of dissatisfaction with much of the literature intended to develop the child's mind and personality, because it fails to stimulate and nurture those resources he needs most in order to cope with his difficult inner problems."² Therefore, Bettelheim explored the great potential of fairy tales as literary models for children since "more can be learned from them about the inner problems of human beings, and of the right solutions to their predicaments in any society, than from any other type of story within a child's comprehension" (5). This is, indeed, a grand statement on behalf of the fairy tale's powers. However, despite his good intentions and moral concern in the welfare of children, Bettelheim's book disseminates false notions about the original intent of Freudian psychoanalytic theory and about the literary quality of fairy tales and leaves the reader in a state of mystification. Not only is the manner in which Bettelheim would impose meaning onto child development through the therapeutic use of the fairy tale authoritarian and unscientific,³ but his stance is symptomatic of numerous humanitarian educators who perpetuate the diseases they desire to cure.

This is not to dismiss Bettelheim's book in its totality. Since folk and fairy tales have played and continue to play a significant role in the socialization process, a thorough study of Bettelheim's position is crucial for grasping whether the tales can be used more effectively in helping children (and adults) come into their own. A critical examination of his theory may ultimately lead to a fresh look at contemporary psychoanalytic views on internalization and new insights about the production and usage of folk and fairy tales.

Bettelheim's major thesis is a simple one: "the form and structure of fairy tales suggest images to the child by which he can structure his daydreams and with them give better direction to his life" (7). In other words, the fairy tale liberates the child's subconscious so that he or she can

work through conflicts and experiences which would otherwise be repressed and perhaps cause psychological disturbances. According to Bettelheim, fairy tales present existential dilemmas in a clear-cut manner so that the child can easily grasp the underlying meanings of the conflicts. Most fairy tales are an imaginative depiction of healthy human development and help children understand the motives behind their rebellion against parents and the fear of growing up. The conclusions of most fairy tales portray the achievement of psychological independence, moral maturity and sexual confidence. Obviously, as Bettelheim admits, there are other approaches to fairy tales. But, he maintains that it is primarily the psychological approach which uncovers the hidden meanings of the tales and their overwhelming importance for child development.

Given the immense volume of fairy tales, Bettelheim limits his discussion to the better known tales. The book is divided into two parts, modeled on Heuscher's book. The first, fancifully entitled "A Pocketful of Magic," focuses on a theoretical explication of his concepts, method and purpose. The second part, "In Fairy Land," consists of 14 case studies of such different tales as "Snow White," "Sleeping Beauty," "Hansel and Gretel," "Jack and the Beanstalk," "Little Red Riding Hood," "Cinderella," etc. In the first part, Bettelheim asserts that adults should not explain the tales to children since that would destroy their "magic." However, adults should tell the tales because that shows approval of children's imaginative play. Children are allegedly drawn to fairy tales because they symbolically depict the psychological problems which the children must work through by themselves. In doing this, a child supposedly attains a sense of his or her self. If we were to follow the logic of Bettelheim's argument, it is almost as though the fairy tale could be considered a psychoanalyst in the manner in which it treats and operates with a child. The tale by itself opens up unexplored realms of experience to children who learn subconsciously to order their inner worlds by following the fantastic sign posts of the tale and by identifying with the hero who becomes ruler of a kingdom, i.e. ruler of the self.

Characteristic of Bettelheim's orthodox Freudian approach is the arbitrary way in which he makes excessive claims for the therapeutic power of the fairy tale and then diagnoses the power to fit his straitjacket theory about neurosis and the family. For instance, he unabashedly asserts that

“unlike any other form of literature, they [fairy tales] direct the child to discover his identity and calling” (24). Then he narrows the psychological meaning in a reductionist manner: “the content of the chosen tale has nothing to do with the patient's external life but much to do with his inner problems, which seem incomprehensible and hence insolvable” (25). Such flat assertions, common throughout the book, rest on shaky grounds. Bettelheim provides no documentation to prove that the fairy tale is better than any other imaginative or non-fiction literature for helping children develop their character. He has no experience with children's literature, their reading habits, and working with them in this realm. Moreover, Bettelheim has a one-dimensional way of examining the relation of literature to the psyche. To suggest that the external life is isolated from the inner life and that there is a literature which primarily addresses itself to the inner problems of a reader completely eliminates the dialectical relationship between essence and appearance. Existence is divorced from the imagination, and a static realm is erected which resembles the laboratory of an orthodox Freudian mind that is bent on conducting experiments with what ought to be happening in the child's inner realm.

The categorical imperative used by Bettelheim constantly prevents him from achieving his purpose of uncovering the significance of fairy tales for child development. Fairy tales are said to personify and illustrate inner conflicts, and Bettelheim wants to demonstrate to his adult readers how a child views fairy tales and reality so that they can be more enlightened in their dealings with children. This stance is in actual contradiction to his previous argument that children must be allowed freedom to interpret the tales and that adults must not impose interpretation. It is the authority, Bettelheim, who claims to know how children subconsciously view the tales and who imposes this psychoanalytic mode of interpreting tales on adults. In turn, they ought to use his approach if they care for children. This moral argumentation has nothing to do with a scientific explanation of the tales and how they can be used to aid children in their development. Everything remains in Bettelheim's own realm of reified Freudian formulas which restrain the possibilities for a vital interaction between the tale and the child and between the adult and the child.

This can immediately be seen when he presents his theoretical explanation of how fairy tales clarify the meaning of conflicts for children and how they provide for resolution. Like many cultural censors of morality, Bettelheim believes that only literature which is harmonious and orderly should be fed to the delicate souls of children who should be sheltered from harsh reality. Thus, the fairy tale is perfect. In contrast to myths, fables and legends, fairy tales are allegedly optimistic because they allow for hope and the solution of problems. In addition, they involve a conflict between the reality and pleasure principles and show how a certain amount of pleasure can be retained while the demands of reality are respected (as in the example of the oldest pig in “The Three Little Pigs”). Indiscriminately using the discoveries of Piaget, who has demonstrated (among other things) that the child’s thinking up till the ages of nine or ten is animistic, Bettelheim explains how the magic and fantastic images in the fairy tale enable the child subjectively to come to terms with reality. The adventures in the fairy tale allow for vicarious satisfaction of unfulfilled desires and subconscious drives (56-7) and permit the child to sublimate those desires and drives at a time when conscious recognition would shatter or shake the child's character structure which is not yet secure. The fairy tale provides freedom for the child’s imagination in that it deals at first with a problematic real situation which is then imaginatively transformed. The narrative breaks down spatial and temporal limits and leads the child into the self, but it also leads him or her back into reality. Bettelheim argues against true-to-life stories for child development because they impinge upon the imagination of the child and act repressively as would the rational interference of an adult. In contrast, the fairy tale transforms reality in such a way that the child can cope with it. Like the symbols of the id, ego and superego, which Freud created as operative constructs, the fairy-tale symbols represent separate entities of the child's inner sanctum, and their representation in a fairy tale (for a child) shows how order can be made out of chaos (75). In particular, the fairy tale demonstrates how each element (ego, id, superego) must be given its due and integrated if character structure is to develop without disturbance.

Many fairy tales like “Brother and Sister” show how the animalistic (male/id) must be integrated with the spiritual component (female/ego, superego) to permit human qualities to

blossom: "Integration of the disparate aspects of our personality can be gained only after the asocial, destructive, and unjust have been done away with; and this cannot be achieved until we have reached full maturity, as symbolized by sister's giving birth to a child and developing mothering attitudes" (83). At the bottom of all the chaos and conflict which children experience are parents, leading Bettelheim to make the following claim: "Maybe if more of our adolescents had been brought up on fairy tales, they would (unconsciously) remain aware of the fact that their conflict is not with the adult world, or society, but really only with their parents" (98-9). In other words, the ambivalent attachments to one's parents are the roots of all evil and must be worked out by the child (particularly the Oedipal conflicts) if a well-integrated personality is to be achieved. Symbolically fairy tales are the most clear and distinct representations of children's anxieties and unconscious drives, and therefore they can stimulate children to explore their imaginations for resolutions to the conflicts with their parents. They are like guidebooks for achieving true identity and a true state of independence. Thus, now we know what becoming a ruler over a kingdom means, and Bettelheim can conclude his first part by advising adults again to take an active part in the telling of the tale but not to interpret it for the child. The participation will (like the psychiatrist) bring the child and parent closer together by magically restoring order to the child's mind.

This theory is fallacious on two levels, the psychoanalytic and the literary. Not only does Bettelheim misinterpret some of Freud's key notions about psychoanalysis, but he also twists the meanings of the literature to suit his peculiar theory of child development. The intended "humanitarian" goals of his study are undermined by his rigid Freudian abstractions which prop up irrational and arbitrary forms of social behavior whose norms and values children are supposed to adapt. The patterns of the fairy tales allegedly foster ideal normative behavior which children are to internalize; yet, some of these literary patterns like the forms of social behavior are repressive constructs which violate the imagination of both children and adults alike. Let me clarify both charges against Bettelheim, his betrayal of the radical essence of Freudianism and his corruption of the literary meaning of the fairy tale.

The critical task of Freud's psychoanalytic theory was to demonstrate the manifold ways in which society made it impossible for the individual to achieve autonomy. His purpose was to expose the inner forces which hinder full development of the individual and cause psychic disturbances because of external pressures and conditions. His work in theory was to destroy illusions which society creates about the possibility of achieving autonomy and a happy life so that the individual could elaborate meaning out of the antagonistic relationship between self and society. All this is made clear in Freud's brilliant study, Civilization and Its Discontents. As Russell Jacoby has demonstrated in his significant study Social Amnesia: A Critique of Contemporary Psychology from Adler to Laing, the basic radical thrust of Freudian theory has been forgotten and obfuscated. In particular, the orthodox Freudians have hampered the growth of Freudian theory by codifying the principles as absolute laws. Here it is important to make a distinction among orthodox Freudians as Jacoby does:

Once the false opposition between orthodoxy and revisionism as that between obsolete dogma and contemporary insight is avoided, the notion of orthodoxy must be reformulated. To the point that the theories of Marx and Freud were critiques of bourgeois civilization, orthodoxy entailed loyalty to these critiques; more exactly, dialectical loyalty. Not repetition is called for but articulation and development of concepts; and within Marxism – and to a degree within psychoanalysis – precisely against an Official Orthodoxy only too happy to freeze concepts into formulas. . . . Freud and his students are clear enough as to what in psychoanalysis is to be preserved – not by thoughtless repetition but by reworking: the concepts of repression, sexuality, unconscious, Oedipal complex, infantile sexuality.⁴ Unfortunately, Jacoby does not elaborate his critique of official orthodoxy. He spends most of his time defending the dialectical orthodox Freudians. Yet, as a result of his work, it becomes eminently clear that Bettelheim does not have a dialectical relationship to Freudianism but has contributed to the banalization of Freudian theory by blandly applying its tenets without rethinking and reworking them in the light of social and scientific changes. Moreover, he has also picked up one of the worst traits of the neo- and post Freudians – their moralizing. Aside from Bettelheim's

mechanical repetition of Freud's thought, his postulates read like "Sunday sermons." "The positive is promoted to drive out the negative. One strives to be cheery because it is a cheerless world. Since reflection on the latter is taboo," Bettelheim "seeks to make palatable the unswallowable: the lie that the isolated and abandoned individual can 'become,' 'love,' 'be.' Hence, the 'how to' nature"⁵ of his work. Bettelheim patches up his official orthodoxy with moral homilies about therapeutic self-help. He constantly asserts that the fairy tale contains the answers to the good, happy life, implying that there is a social realm where individual autonomy can be reached. Yet, in Civilization and Its Discontents, Freud made clear just how repressive society was and how limited and varied the possibilities were to attain freedom and happiness.

The liberty of the individual is not a benefit of culture. It was the greatest before any culture, though indeed it had little value at that time, because the individual was hardly in a position to defend it. Liberty has undergone restrictions through the evolution of civilization, and justice demands that these restrictions shall apply to all. . . . It is impossible to ignore the extent to which civilization is built on renunciation of instinctual gratifications, the degree to which the existence of civilization presupposes the non-gratification (suppression, repression or some thing else?) of powerful instinctual urgencies. This "cultural privation" dominates the whole field of social relations between human beings; we know already that it is the cause of the antagonism against which all civilization has to fight.⁶

What is significant in Freud's work is that he located the cause for psychosis and all mental sicknesses in the historical and materialistic development of social conditions. He may have misconstrued some theories which were based on inconclusive and partial data, but the basis of his research for studying the relationship of the human psyche to civilization was dialectical and provided the fundamentals for a social science that could be altered as the social conditions changed. Bettelheim not only fails to develop Freud's far-reaching findings for application to the massive changes in society and the human psyche, but he actually eliminates the dialectic from Freud's method. He holds the family primarily responsible for the conflicts a child experiences,

thus not locating it as one of the mediating agencies through which civilization causes repression. Even worse, he employs Freudian terminology like a puritanical parson encouraging parents to have faith in the almighty power of the fairy tale which will lead children through the valley of fear into the kingdom of grace. Gone is the multi-faceted antagonistic relationship between society and the individual. If anything, it is misplaced between child and family which shifts the real cause for repression and thus obfuscates some of the concrete material causes for psychological and social conflict and their interrelationship. Bettelheim would have us believe that the child can voluntaristically work through internalized problems with the aid of a fairy tale and become a well adjusted, autonomous individual. Once familial conflicts are grasped and solved, happiness is just down the road. By assuming such a position, Bettelheim unwittingly becomes an apologist for a “civilized” society noted for its abuse of children and its proclivity toward dehumanization. These negative tendencies of our contemporary society have been recorded not only by its critics but by its very own established news media which document the violation of human rights and violence of subjectivity every minute of every day.

Essentially Bettelheim's concern in children reflects a conservative Freudian notion of internalization and does not take into consideration the dire consequences which rational adjustment to the reality principle has both for children and adults. In contrast to Freud, for Bettelheim and other neo-Freudians,

a theory of internalization is necessary which explains how the ego is formed through social interaction such that human beings come to comply with these laws rather than attempt to change them. Such a theory must recognize that internalization is a defense against unbearable reality, not a natural mode of constituting consciousness, necessitated by the opposition of the instincts. The idea of instincts has a role to play in the sense that the “libido is the actual reality,” if we understand the libido as essentially object-seeking. Denial of this striving leads not only to illness but to compliance with authority, acceptance of helplessness. The way in which the striving for recognition is denied must be understood in the context of societal interaction rather than conceived as an eternal form of the ego.⁷

Instead of recognizing the power of society to deny autonomy, Bettelheim encourages an internalization which furthers the split between mind and body. The fantasy of the child is to be given free rein only if it finally succumbs to instrumental reason. No wonder that his book is largely male-oriented and fails to make careful distinctions between the sexes, ages, ethnicity, and class backgrounds of children. Nor does he bother to consider that the theories derived from Freud have to be made more historical and scientific to account for sex, age, ethnic, and class differences. It is no longer valid to postulate theories of the imagination, penis envy, and Oedipal conflicts without reworking them and perhaps even dismissing them in the light of changing social conditions and normative behavior.⁸ Perhaps the greatest weakness of Bettelheim's book is his neglect of socio linguistic studies and his own careless use of terminology which reflects just how faulty his theory of communication is. In one of the more important studies of this problem, Class, Codes and Control, Basil Bernstein has pointed out that

as the child learns his speech or, in the terms used here, learns specific codes which regulate his verbal acts, he learns the requirements of his social structure. The experience of the child is transformed by the learning which is generated by his own apparently voluntary acts of speech. The social structure becomes the substratum of his experience essentially through the consequences of the linguistic process. From this point of view, every time the child speaks or listens the social structure of which he is a part is reinforced in him and his social identity is constrained. The social structure becomes the developing child's psychological reality by the shaping of his acts of speech. Underlying the general pattern of his speech are, it is held, critical sets of choices, preferences for some alternatives rather than others, which develop and are stabilized through time and which eventually come to play an important role in the regulation of intellectual, social and affective orientations.⁹

Bernstein discusses the ramifications of language for the psycho-social development of children, and he makes careful, empirically based distinctions between elaborated and restricted codes ¹⁰ used generally by middle-class and working-class children respectively. Since "the mode of a language structure reflects a particular form of the structuring of feeling and so the very means of

interaction and response to the environment,”¹¹ Bernstein investigates why working-class children respond differently and often negatively to the socialization process which has been developed to satisfy middle-class needs. In contrast, middle-class children adapt more readily and learn to use all sorts of codes to further their ends. The restricted code used by working-class children is not necessarily qualitatively poorer than the elaborated code of the middle-class child, but it is different and does reflect the more limited and authoritarian margins within which a working-class child is socialized. Thus, in a formal learning situation which is generally predicated on the elaborated code of the middle class, the “I” of the working-class child is threatened. “The attempt to substitute a different use of language and to change the order of communication creates critical problems for the working-class child as it is an attempt to change his basic system of perception, fundamentally the very means by which he has been socialized.”¹²

In Bettelheim's discussion of fairy tales and their use with children, there is no regard for the differences between children and their particular relationships to language that influences their receptivity to the linguistic and aesthetic codes and patterns of literature. In fact, differences are virtually leveled as if the education process were a democratizing experience and as if there were no codes, either in public or private language or in the fairy tales themselves. This brings us to Bettelheim's misuse of the fairy tale as an art form.

Though aware of the historical origins of the fairy tale, Bettelheim fails to take into account that the symbols and patterns of the tales reflect specific forms of social behavior and activity which often can be traced back as far as the Ice and Megalithic Ages. As August Nitschke has documented in his book Soziale Ordnungen im Spiegel der Märchen,¹³ the contemporary psychological labels attached to the symbols and patterns of the tales are contradicted by the actual historical and archaeological findings. According to the data, the normative behavior and labor processes of primitive peoples as depicted in the tales which they themselves cultivated cannot be explained by modern psychoanalytical theory. Properly speaking, any psychological approach to the fairy tales would first have to investigate the socialization processes of primitive societies in a given historical era and how the tales and processes have evolved in order to provide an appropriate

interpretation. Leaving aside the questionable methodology of the orthodox Freudians, who see penis envy and castration complexes everywhere in folk and fairy tales, and assuming that there is some validity to using fairy tales therapeutically in educating children, one must still question the manner in which Bettelheim imposes meaning on the tales as well as his indiscriminate application of their meaning to children of all ages, sexes, and class backgrounds. As Nitschke makes clear, the creative purpose and major themes of the fairy tales did not concern harmony, but the depiction of changing social structures and alternative forms of behavior so that new developments and connections between humans and things could be better grasped by the people. Central to most tales is the concept of power. Where does it reside? Who wields it? Why? How can it be better wielded? Many of the tales bespeak a primitive or feudal ideology of "might makes right." In addition, they reflect social and sexual rituals concerned with initiation into a tribe, group, or community. Depending on the historical epoch the tales portray either the possibilities for social participation or the reasons for social conflict. The immanent meaning of the tales has little to do with providing suitable direction for a contemporary child's life. From a contemporary perspective, the tales are filled with incidents of inexplicable abuse, maltreatment of women, negative images of minority groups, questionable sacrifices, and the exaltation of power.¹⁴ Here I am only mentioning some of the more negative aspects of the tales which also contain positive features which will be discussed later. The point which I should like to make right now is that the psychological components and meanings can best be understood when first related to the contradictory developments of the historical period in which they originated, just as the reception and use of Bettelheim's work can best be grasped when placed in a socio-historical context.

To use the tales with children today as a means for therapeutic education demands first a historical understanding and secondly a careful delineation of the progressive and regressive ideological and psychological meanings of the tales. Here we are dealing with the entire question of reception. How does a child receive and perceive a given tale? It is necessary to ask whether a child actually knows what a king is. What does a king mean to a five-year-old, to an eight-year-old, to a girl or boy, to girls and boys of different races and class backgrounds? A prince who uses magical

gifts which sometimes involve killing to become a king of a particular realm does not necessarily imply, as Bettelheim would have us believe, that the child (which child?) will psychologically comprehend this as a story about self-mastery. Could it not also serve to reinforce the aggressive instincts of a middle-class child to become more ego-centered, competitive and achievement-oriented? Couldn't the code be understood by a lower-class child so as to reinforce the arbitrary power of authoritarian figures and to accept a strict hierarchical world? What is obviously necessary in working with the impact of the tales on children is a method which takes into consideration the aesthetics of reception and reader-response theory. Such a method would have to investigate the possibilities for comprehension by children in the light of the relationship of a specific audience to the tale at a given moment in history.

The ultimate weakness of Bettelheim's methodology can be seen in the second part of his book which contains his case studies of popular fairy tales. Let us look at his exhaustive treatment of "Cinderella" as an example of his approach. Unfortunately, he did not have the advantage of perusing the superb casebook on "Cinderella," edited by Alan Dundes,¹⁵ although I am not certain that the essays and versions in that book would have altered his perspective.

Bettelheim first discusses the various versions and cycles of the Cinderella story, in particular those of Basile and Perrault, and he diagnoses their major themes as those of sibling rivalry and the Oedipal complex. He then uses the basic plot of the Grimm version as the paradigmatic model for comprehending all the Cinderella stories. Actually, no matter what tale is touched by Bettelheim's orthodox Freudian wand, it is always transformed into a symbolic parable of self-realization and healthy sexuality. Here, as usual, Bettelheim is concerned with the hidden meanings which work wonders on children. "Cinderella" teaches children about sibling rivalry and a young girl's endeavors to prove her worth. It is significant that Cinderella is given "dirty" work to do since that reflects her own low self-esteem as well as the guilt she feels for desiring her father. Her thwarted Oedipal desires must be overcome if she is to prove her real worth and achieve complete sexuality. The hardships which Cinderella must endure are tests that involve the development of personality.

Using Erik Erikson's model of the human life cycle, Bettelheim talks about the "phase-specific psychosocial crises," which an individual must go through in order to become the "ideal human being." In the case of Cinderella, she goes through five phases of the human life cycle to develop basic trust (the relationship with her original good mother), autonomy (acceptance of her role in the family), initiative (the planting of the twig), industry (her hard labors), and identity (her insistence that the prince see both her dirty and her beautiful side). Bettelheim is particularly penetrating on this last point.

In the slipper ceremony, which signifies the betrothal of Cinderella and the prince, he selects her because in symbolic fashion she is the uncastrated woman who relieves him of his castration anxiety which would interfere with a happy marital relationship. She selects him because he appreciates her in her "dirty" sexual aspects, lovingly accepts her vagina in the form of the slipper, and approves of her desire for a penis, symbolized by her tiny foot fitting within the slipper-vagina. . . . But as she slips her foot into the slipper, she asserts that she, too, will be active in their sexual relationship; she will do things, too. And she also gives the assurance that she is not and never was lacking in anything (271).

It is quite clear that the virginal Cinderella is the most suitable for Prince Charming because her stepsisters in their act of self-mutilation reveal through the blood (menstrual bleeding) that they are sexually too aggressive and cause the prince anxiety. In sum, Cinderella as story "guides the child from his greatest disappointments – oedipal disillusionment, castration anxiety, low opinion of others – toward developing his autonomy, becoming industrious, and gaining a positive identity of his own" (p. 276). After reading Bettelheim's concluding remarks, one wonders why such books as Dale Carnegie's How to Win Friends and Influence People and How to Succeed a Business are necessary when we have fairy tales.

In contrast to Bettelheim's moral primer about fairy tales, Nitschke has demonstrated that "Cinderella" may have originated toward the end of the Ice Age. The norms of behavior and social activity depicted in "Cinderella" indicate that the tale concerns a female who receives help and gifts from her dead mother, who continues living in the form of a tree or a bird, and from nurturing

animals. Nitschke explains in some detail that the society which produced tales similar to Cinderella was one of hunting and grazing in which the woman was accorded the place of honor. Death was not feared, and women were sacrificed so that they could return to life in the form of a plant or animal to help their children develop. Life was seen in sequences and as eternal. Thus, a human being participated in his or her own time and, through transformation after death, there was a renewal of time. Most important is the function of the female. She was at the center of this society and maintained it as nurturing element. Cinderella does not reflect society undergoing great changes in production but a maintenance of the hunting and grazing society. However, when compared to tales of the early Ice Age, it does show how human beings have taken over center stage from animals, and the growing importance attached to the woman. Love and mutual self respect are accomplished through the intercession of the mother.

Nitschke's explanation of the historical origins and meaning of "Cinderella" obviously cannot be grasped by children. But it does set the framework for a psychoanalytical approach which must first consider the tellers of the tale, their social behavior and customs, and the evolution of the tale in different cultures if it wants to establish the psychological essence of a tale. The same thing holds true for the retelling of the tale today, but in a slightly different manner. And here the implications of the tale are remarkably different from what they were in the Ice Age. Instead of having a tale which does homage to women, we have a tale that many critics consider an insult to women. Here I want to concentrate on just one aspect of "Cinderella" to question the relevance Bettelheim bestows upon it. In the American society today where women have been in the vanguard of the equal rights movement, where female sexuality has undergone great changes, where the central agency of socialization of boys and girls has shifted from the family to the mass media, schools and the bureaucratic state,¹⁶ a tale like "Cinderella" cannot (neither explicitly nor implicitly) guide children to order their inner worlds and to lead fuller, happier sexual lives. Though it is difficult to speculate how an individual child might react to "Cinderella," certainly the adult reader and interpreter must ask the following questions: Why is the stepmother shown to be wicked and not the father, who abandons and neglects his daughter? How difficult is it for a young

girl to accept the role of step-daughter or to accept a “new” stepmother? Conversely, how difficult is it for a stepmother to accept her new husband’s daughter when she has two daughters of her own? Why is Cinderella essentially passive? (How Bettelheim twists the meaning to see Cinderella as active is actually another one of his Freudian magic tricks.) Why do girls have to quarrel over a man? What are they really quarreling about? How do children react to a Cinderella who is industrious, dutiful, virginal and passive? Are all men handsome? Is marriage the end goal of life? Is it important to marry rich men? This small list of questions suggests that the ideological and psychological pattern and message of either Perrault’s or the Grimms’ “Cinderella” do nothing more than reinforce sexist values and a Puritan ethos that serves a society which fosters competition and achievement for survival. Admittedly this is a harsh indictment of “Cinderella” as a tale. Certainly I do not want to make it responsible for the upkeep of the entire capitalist system. However, the critique of “Cinderella” is meant to show how suspect Bettelheim’s theory and methodology are. There is something ultimately pathetic and insidious about Bettelheim’s approach to fairy tales. It is pathetic because he apparently wants to make a sincere contribution in fighting the dehumanization of life. It is insidious because his banal theory covers up the processes and social mediations which contribute most to the dehumanization. Fundamentally, his instructions on how to use the fairy tales can only lead to their abuse. Our task is to explore the possibilities for their positive utilization with children.

There is no doubt but that fairy tales are alluring, not only to children but to adults. Their imaginative conception of other worlds in which repressed dreams, needs and wishes might be fulfilled has long since motivated the common people to transmit and cultivate the tales in an oral tradition. As Johannes Merkel and Dieter Richter have demonstrated in their important study Märchen, Phantasie and soziales Lernen,¹⁷ the fairy tales were often censored and outlawed during the early phase of the rise of the middle classes to power because their fantastic components which encouraged imaginative play and free exploration were contrary to the precepts of capitalist rationalization and the Protestant ethos. Once the bourgeoisie’s power was firmly established, the tales were no longer considered immoral and dangerous, but their publication and distribution for

children were actually encouraged toward the end of the nineteenth century. The tales took on a compensatory function for children and adults alike who experienced nothing but the frustration of their imaginations in society. Within the framework of a capitalist socio-economic system the tales became a safety valve for adults and children and acted to pacify the discontents. Like other forms of fantastic literature – and it is significant that science fiction rises also at the end of the nineteenth century – the tales no longer served their original purpose of clarifying social and natural phenomena but became forms of refuge and escape in that they made up for what people could not realize in society. This does not mean that the radical content of the imaginative symbols in fairy tales and other forms of fantastic literature have been completely distilled. As Herbert Marcuse has suggested, “the truth value of imagination relates not only to the past but also to the future: the forms of freedom and happiness which it invokes claim to deliver the historical reality. In its refusal to accept as final the limitations imposed upon freedom and happiness by the reality principle, in its refusal to forget what can be, lies the critical function of phantasy.”¹⁸ Still, the question remains as to how to make the artistic forms conceived by the imagination operative in society. In other words, how can the imagination and imaginative literature surmount compensation?

In essence, Bettelheim's book discusses the use of the fairy tale to compensate for social repression. But fairy tales and other fantastic literature can be used to suggest ways to realize greater pleasure and freedom in society. Let us take Oscar Wilde's literary fairy tale “The Selfish Giant” as an example. The plot is simple. It involves a giant who chases children out of his garden, erects a wall, and puts up a sign “Trespassers will be Prosecuted!” Because he does this, spring and summer refuse to come to his garden, and he suffers from cold and loneliness. One day he notices through his window that the children had crept through a hole in the wall and had climbed up a tree. In that part of the garden inhabited by the children it suddenly turns spring, and the giant realizes how selfish he has been. After that he opens up his garden to all the children and learns to share in their happiness. Because of this he attains heaven upon his death.

I do not want to explore the different meanings of this tale in depth, for this would involve a consideration of Wilde's behavior, socialist perspective, and personal philosophy in light of the repression of Victorian society. My main concern is to touch upon the general meaning which, on both a literary and a psychological level, might have an impact on children today. The language and symbols of the tale are such that it is probably comprehensible to all children regardless of sex, race and background. The major theme involves community versus individualism and the struggle over private property. The children band together and represent a principle of social interaction, sharing and joy while the giant obviously represents arbitrary power and greed. It is interesting that the tale depicts the alienation of the persecutor and how joy can only come through communal sharing. Naturally it is possible to talk about the story in psychoanalytic terms; the fear of sexuality and parents, the id learning that there is a deeper pleasure to be attained by curbing its drive and participating in reality according to strictures of the superego, or even the desire for the Other, in this case, the desire for a forbidden homosexual relationship. However, the message amounts to the same on an ideological and psychological level: the necessity for collective action and autonomous participation to attain pleasure, love and recognition. What is even more important is that we are dealing with a literary fairy tale which illustrates through the imagination an alternative manner of behavior which can be realized in society. Wilde's tale is a valid critique of a society based on private property, a society which shuns children and eroticism, and it provides hope that, if children stick together and use their initiative ("Hansel and Gretel" says this, too), they can convince their oppressors to change their ways. The children find a way into the giant's garden and show him the light, so to speak, and the process of overcoming his greed is depicted not as annihilation but a movement toward collective action. The focus is on intersubjective action which can nurture individual development.

There are numerous fairy tales ("The Bremen Town Musicians," "How Six Made Their Way in the World") which suggest means by which children can implement their imagination to promote collective action. I am not suggesting that it is only fantastic literature of this sort which should be used with children. In contrast to Bettelheim, I would argue that it is culturally repressive

to dictate what forms of literature and types of tales are best suited for aiding a child's development. Fairy tales, after all, were never conceived as tales for children, nor were they always common. There was never a special children's literature or culture until the late Middle Ages. Even now this distinction is somewhat arbitrary since children are exposed to all forms of art through the mass media, commercial outlets and institutions of socialization. Bettelheim's argument for the fairy tale is apparently an argument for fantastic literature over realistic literature as the best mode for solving a child's inner problems. But, once we realize that literature in and by itself does not work automatically to solve psychological problems, that realistic literature is not inherently repressive, and that the evaluation of literature cannot be discussed without considering its production and reception, we draw nearer to a more sober approach to the use of folk and fairy tales for and with children.

One could perhaps talk about certain interesting experiments that were undertaken in West Germany during the late 1960s and 1970s:¹⁹ the rewriting of fairy tales from a socialist perspective, the conceiving of contemporary fairy tales written by adults and children which expose social contradictions and oppression, the active telling of folk and fairy tales which allow for a critical dialectical relationship between adults and children as the tale is told and interpreted.²⁰ Much of this experimentation spread throughout Europe and North America in the 1970s and continues in different forms today. Perhaps the most important writer and theoretician of this movement was the great Italian writer Gianni Rodari, whose book Grammar of Fantasy (1973),²¹ translated into several languages, has had a profound influence in Europe and North America. Such radical use of folk and fairy tales is significant in that it demonstrates ways in which the imagination can be used to operate in society so that children and adults gain a greater sense of forces acting upon them and begin relating to one another in non-repressive ways in their cultural work.²²

The specific use of folk and fairy tales ultimately depends on the production and reception of the literature which is closely bound to the needs of the commodity market. Obviously, in American society it is near to impossible to control the Walt Disney industry and other conglomerates which mainly aim at making profit from the fantasy of children and adults.

Educators sincerely interested in using fantastic or realistic literature to aid children in developing critical and imaginative capacities must first seek to alter the social organization of culture and work that is presently hindering self-realization and causing the disintegration of the individual. One cannot talk about the wounded child's psyche without talking about a social praxis geared toward ending the unfair speculation with lives that our socio-economic system endorses. Cultural work with children must begin from a critical perspective of the production and market conditions of literature, and this involves using fantastic and realistic literature to make children aware of their potentialities and also aware of the social contradictions which will frustrate their full development. Any other approach will lead to illusions and lies. Of course, there is nothing wrong with a little forward-looking illusion, but there is a great deal wrong with lies. Thus, a concrete humanitarian engagement on behalf of children means utilizing the existing literature of all kinds while also creating new, more emancipatory forms so that the deficiencies and merits of the literature become apparent as well as the deficiencies and merits of society. Positive and negative values are relative, and they can be appropriately developed in each situation that calls for judgment and evaluation. There is no need to resort to methods of censorship or enchantment as Bettelheim does. But there is a need to develop effective means of enlightenment so that the repressed dreams, wishes, and needs of children and adults alike can be realized in a mutually beneficial way in the fight against what Freud called "cultural privation."

Folk and fairy tales remain an essential force in our cultural heritage, but they are not static literary models to be internalized for therapeutic consumption. Their value depends on how we actively produce and receive them in forms of social interaction which lead toward the creation of greater individual autonomy. Only by grasping and changing the forms of social interaction and work shall we be able to make full use of the utopian and fantastic projections of folk and fairy tales. "Rumpelstiltskin" long ago demonstrated how we must seek the power to name the forces acting upon us if we want to be free and autonomous. But the many folk and fairy-tale versions did not and do not answer all the questions for us. They pose a predicament which we must continually confront and try to resolve anew. Storytellers and writers of fairy tales have realized this, and at

various times they have imagined alternatives to “Rumpelstiltskin” which point in the direction of a new humanism. Though it may seem far-fetched to make this argument, the humanity of our culture does indeed depend on what we concretely make out of the following fairy-tale versions of “Rumpelstiltskin.” The question still concerns breaking the magic spell.

Once upon a time there was a miller who was poor, but he had a beautiful daughter. Now it so happened that he came to speak with the king, and in order to make himself seem important, he said to the king: “I have a daughter who can spin straw into gold.”

The king replied: “That is an art which pleases me! If your daughter is as talented as you say, then bring her to my castle tomorrow, and I’ll put her to a test.”

When the girl was brought to him, he led her into a room which was filled with straw. There he gave her a spinning-wheel and reel and said: “Now get to work, and, if you do not spin this straw into gold by morning, then you must die.” Thereupon he locked the door himself, and she remained inside.

The poor miller’s daughter sat there and was close to her wits’ end: she knew nothing about spinning straw into gold, and her fear grew greater and greater. She began to cry, and then suddenly the door opened and a little man entered and said:

“Good evening, miss, why are you crying so much?”

“Alas,” answered the girl, “I’m supposed to spin straw into gold, and I don’t know how.”

The little man then asked: “What will you give me if I spin it for you?”

“My necklace,” the girl said.

The little man took the necklace and sat himself down at the wheel and “whizz, whizz, whizz,” three times round, the spool was full. Then he inserted another one, anti “whizz, whizz, whizz,” the second one was full. And so it went until morning. All the straw was spun and all the spools were filled with gold. The king showed up right at sunrise, and,

when he saw the gold, he was surprised and pleased, but his heart grew even greedier. He locked the miller's daughter in another room which was even larger than the first one and ordered her to spin all the straw into gold if she valued her life. The girl did not know what to do and began to cry. Once again the door opened, and the little man appeared and asked: 'What will you give me if I spin the straw into gold for you?'

"The ring from my finger," answered the girl.

The little man took the ring, began to work away at the wheel again, and by morning he had spun all the straw into shining gold. The king was extremely pleased by the sight, but his lust for gold was still not satisfied. So he had the miller's daughter brought into an even larger room filled with straw and said to her: "You must spin all this into gold tonight. If you succeed, you shall become my wife."

Even though she's just a miller's daughter, he thought, I'll never find a richer woman in the world.

When the girl was alone, the little man came again for a third time and asked:

"What will you give me if I spin the gold for you once more?"

"I have nothing left to give," answered the girl.

"Then promise me your first child when you become queen."

Who knows whether it will ever come to that, thought the miller's daughter. And, since she knew of no other way out of her predicament, she promised the little man what he demanded. In return the little man spun the straw into gold once again. And when the king came in the morning and found everything as he had wished, he called for a wedding, and the beautiful miller's daughter became a queen.

After a year she gave birth to a beautiful child. The little man had disappeared from her mind, but then suddenly he appeared in her room and said: "Now give me what you promised."

The queen was horrified and offered the little man all the treasures of the kingdom if he would let her keep her child, but the little man responded: “No, something lining is more important to me than all the treasures of the world.”

Then the queen began to grieve and weep so much that the little man felt sorry for her. “I’ll give you three days’ time,” he said. “If you can guess my name by the third day, you shall keep your child.”

The queen spent the entire night trying to recall all the names she had ever heard. She also sent a messenger out into the country to inquire high and low what other names there were. On the following day when the little man appeared, she began with Kaspar, Melchior, Balzer, and then repeated all the names she knew, one after the other. But to all of them the little man said: “That’s not my name.”

The second day she had her servants ask around in the neighboring area what names people used, and she came up with the most unusual and strangest names when the little man appeared: “Is your name Ribsofbeef or Muttonchops or Lacedleg?”

But he always answered: “That’s not my name.”

On the third day the messenger returned and reported: “I couldn’t find a single new name, but as I was climbing a high mountain at the edge of the forest where the fox and hare say good night to each other, I saw a small house and in front of the house was a fire and around the fire danced a ridiculous little man who was hopping on one leg and screeching:

Today I’ll brew, tomorrow I’ll bake.

Soon I’ll have the queen’s namesake.

Oh how hard it is to play my game,

for Rumpelstiltskin is my name!”

You can imagine how happy the queen was when she heard the name. And as soon as the little man entered and asked “What's my name, your highness?” she responded first by guessing: “Is your name Kunz?”

“No.”

“Is your name Heinz?”

“No.”

“Can your name be Rumpelstiltskin?”

“The devil told you, the devil told you!” the little man screamed and stamped with his right foot so ferociously that it went deep into the ground. Then he grabbed the other foot angrily with both hands to pry himself from the ground, and he ripped himself in two.

— Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm²³

After the miller has boasted that his daughter could spin straw into gold, the king led the girl into a room filled with straw and said: “If you don't spin this straw into gold by tomorrow morning, you must die.” Then he locked the door behind him. The poor miller's daughter was scared and began to cry. Suddenly a little man appeared and asked: “What will you give me if I spin the straw into gold for you?” The girl gave him her necklace. The little man sat down at the spinning-wheel and “whizz, whizz, whizz,” three times the wheel went round, and soon the spool was full and had to be replaced. And so it went until morning. By then all the straw had been spun into gold.

When the king saw this, he was pleased. He immediately brought the miller's daughter to a larger room also filled with straw and ordered her again to spin the straw into gold by morning if she valued her life. And again the miller's daughter cried until the little man appeared. This time she gave him the ring from her finger. The little man began to make the wheel whizz, and by morning all the straw was spun into gold.

When the king saw the gold, he was overjoyed. But he was still not satisfied. He led the miller's daughter into an even larger room and said: “If you spin this straw onto gold

by tomorrow, you shall become my wife.” When the girl was alone, the little man appeared for the third time and asked: ‘What will you give me if I help you?’ But the miller’s daughter had nothing to give away.

“Then promise to give me your first child when you become queen.”

This jolted her and finally made her open her eyes.

“You’re crazy!” the miller’s daughter yelled. “I’d never marry this horrible king. I’d never give my child away.”

“I’m not going to spin. I’ll never spin again!” the little man screamed in rage. I’ve spun in vain!” The little man stamped with his right foot so ferociously that it went deep into the ground and jarred the door to the room open. Then the miller’s daughter ran out into the great wide world and was saved.

□ □ □

– Rosemarie Künzler²⁴

In fairy tales, so people say, good always triumphs over evil, and in the end everything turns out well. But you don’t have to believe what people say. You’ve got to think about things for yourself. For instance, about Rumpelstiltskin. I always felt sorry for him.

Just think about what happened to him. He helped the miller’s daughter who was locked up in a room filled with straw and was supposed to spin the straw into gold only because her father was a liar and claimed that she could do this. Actually she couldn’t do anything except cry and complain and glue Rumpelstiltskin first a necklace and then a ring to thank him for having spun the straw into gold. Can you imagine – Rumpelstiltskin spins a whole room filled with straw into gold, and for this he receives a tiny ring. He could have spun himself a ring in ten minutes without any trouble!

And when the miller’s daughter had nothing more to give away and still wanted Rumpelstiltskin to continue working for her because she wanted to become queen, she promised him her first child. A promise is a promise and almost as good as a gift – isn’t

that true? Well, not for a miller's daughter who then becomes queen. When the time came, she wanted to break the promise, and the nice Rumpelstiltskin even gave her a chance – she was supposed to guess his name. Then she could keep the child. Yet, the former miller's daughter and present queen didn't even make an honest effort to do this. She didn't go to a library and look up various names, nor did she even ask around – she sent out messengers who were supposed to find out Rumpelstiltskin's name. And this worked, too – but it has nothing to do with justice. She asked rather insidiously: "Can your name be Rumpelstiltskin?" and the pegged Rumpelstiltskin became so furious that he ripped himself in two.

It is easy to imagine that all of this could have ended in a much better and much fairer way. This Rumpelstiltskin was a lonely wretch – the fairy tale refers to him as a "ridiculous little man," but when he spun gold, he wasn't ridiculous. For he was needed. What this little man accomplished in his work was worth' a kingdom, and one can assume that Rumpelstiltskin knew that. But he wasn't happy because of this. He wanted to have some thing living, a friend, a human being, who laughed with him and was sad with him, who wished him a hearty appetite before each meal and asked him afterwards whether he enjoyed the meal. This is why Rumpelstiltskin wanted the royal child – so that he would not have to be alone.

Naturally no mother wants to give away her child. In this regard the queen's actions are understandable. But, if she had been a bit more sensible, a bit more just, and a bit more considerate to those who deserved this, then she would have said: "I can't give you my child, for he belongs only to himself. But why don't you come live with us – with my child, with me and the king? We could do a lot of things together. You'll see how much fun we can have." Then Rumpelstiltskin would have first turned pale and then blushed for joy. He would have climbed on a chair and would have given the queen a kiss on her cheek and the king a kiss on the crown – honor those who deserve to be honored – and he would have

sung a lullaby for the royal child to help him fall asleep, and a song to rouse him in the morning. And they would have been happy with each other until the end of their days.

But as the fairy tale now stands, that is not what I call justice.

Irmela Brender²⁵

Notes

¹ 4. (New York: Knopf, 1976). Throughout his book, Bettelheim uses the term fairy tale to indicate fairy tale or Volksmärchen. Occasionally he will make a distinction between a folk fairy tale and a literary fairy tale (Kunstmärchen), but more often than not he uses the term fairy tale indiscriminately. In the original publication of this essay I employed the term fairy tale when referring to the literature he discusses because, I believed, that the tales that he discusses are largely of this variety. This is not to say that he deals mainly with “authentic” oral tales, but most of his samples stem from an international oral tradition. In re-reading my essay, I think I was quibbling too much, especially since Bettelheim knew very little if nothing about the field of folklore. Therefore, I shall make distinctions when necessary, but I shall use the term “fairy tale,” more or less as he does.

5. The Uses of Enchantment, 4. Hereafter the page references to this book will be cited in the text.

6. Cf. the excellent critique of Bettelheim’s book in this regard, James W. Heisig, “Bruno Bettelheim and the Fairy Tales,” Children’s Literature 6 (1977): 93-115.

7. Social Amnesia: A Critique of Contemporary Psychology from Adler to Laing (Boston: Beacon, 1975): 12-13.

8. Ibid., 50.

9. Civilization and Its Discontents, trans. Joan Riviere, 5th ed. (London: Tavistock, 1951): 60, 63.

10. Jessica Benjamin, “The End of Internalization: Adorno’s Social Psychology,” Telos 32 (1977): 63.

11. Cf. the excellent discussion of the debates around these topics in Patrick C. Lee and Robert Sussman Stewart, eds. Sex Differences: Cultural Developmental Dimensions (New York: Urizen, 1976). See especially, William H. Gillespie’s article “Woman and Her Discontents: A Reassessment of Freud’s view on Female Sexuality,” 133-5. See also Ulrike Propp, Weiblicher Zusammenhang. Von der Strategie und der Unangemessenheit der Wünsche. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1976). With the rise of French critical theory, Lacan, and revisions of many Freudian categories, there has been an immense debate about psychoanalysis and psychology in America and Europe and revisions of many categories. See François Roustang, Dire Mastery: Discipleship from Freud to Lacan, trans. Ned Lukacher. (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press, 1983);

Samuel Weber, "Psychoanalysis, Literary Criticism, and the Problem of Authority" in Psychoanalysis and. . ., ed. Richard Feldstein and Henry Sussman (New York: Routledge, 1990): 21-32.

Frederick Crews, ed. Unauthorized Freud: Doubters Confront a Legend. (New York: Penguin, 1999); Jean-Michel Rabaté, ed., Lacan in America (New York: The Other Press, 2000).

12. Class Codes and Control: Theoretical Studies Towards a Sociology of Language (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971): 124.

13. Ibid., 76-94.

14. Ibid., 26.

15. Ibid., 35.

16. Band I: Das frühe Europa. (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1976).

17. The question of how harmful fairy tales might be for children has been the subject of debate for the past two centuries, often bringing together conservative and progressive critics. This can be seen today in the debates about violence in movies and in television programs. Cf. Robert Moore, "From Rags to Witches: Stereotypes and Anti-Humanism in Fairy Tales," Interracial Books for Children Bulletin 7 (1975): 1-3. Moore's major thesis is that fairy tales are dangerous material for children since they present stereotypes which are based on racist and sexist ideologies. The only positive way to relate fairy tales to children is to expose the destructive nature of the tales. Moore goes to the opposite extreme of Bettelheim, and this, like Bettelheim, he distorts the meaning of the tales and their possibilities for positive use with children.

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4 18. Eros and Civilization (New York: Vintage, 1955).

5 19.. See Cinderella: A Casebook (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1988).

20. Cf. my article "Down wit Heidi, Down with Struwwelpeter, Three Cheers for the Revolution: Towards a New Socialist Children's Literature in West Germany," Children's Literature 5 (1976): 162-79.

21. Aside from the radical reutilization of fairy tales, there were other interesting experiments in West Germany along the lines of Bettelheim's work. However, the educators do not make the extraordinary claims Bettelheim makes. See Felicitas Betz, Märchen als Schlüssel zur Welt (Munich: Kösel, 1977) and Gisela Erberlein, Autogenes Training mit Märchen – Ein Ratgeber für Eltern und Kinder (Berlin: Springer 1985).

22. See Lena Foelbach, Es war einmal kein König: Spiele für Kinder nach Märchen aus aller Welt (Berlin: 1977). While Foelbach's experiments are far from being radical, they indicate a way in

which one can rewrite fair tales as plays with children and activate their consciousness of social interaction. Such work has been conducted in East Germany and in the West as well and provides the basis for the reinvigoration of the folk and fairy-tale tradition.

23. See Rodari, The Grammar of Fantasy: An Introduction to the Art of Inventing Stories, trans. Jack Zipes (New York: Teachers and Writers Collaborative, 1996). This book was originally published as La Grammatica della fantasia (Turin: Einaudi, 1973). It has also been translated into French, German, and Russian.

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10 24.. This version of “Rumpelstiltskin” was taken from Kinder- und Hausmärchen gesammelt durch die Brüder Grimm, vol. 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1974): 318-21.

11 25. Rosemarie Künzler, “Rumpelstilzchen,” in Neues vom Rumpelstilzchen, ed. Hans-Joachim Gelberg (Weinheim: Beltz & Gelberg, 1976): 26-8.

12 23. Irmela Brender, “Das Rumpelstilzchen hat mir immer leid getan” in Neues vom Rumpelstilzchen, 198-200.

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