

**The Usefulness of Escape Through Fairy Tales,  
Especially in the Contemporary World**

Research Project  
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Gregory John Buck  
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Escape such as that available to children and especially to adults through fairy tales should be sought after in an appropriate fashion. Good psychological health requires some sort of removal from rational thought into the world of irrational activity. There are four major topics in this paper. The recognition of the decline in escapism, the advantages of escapism, how to escape, and the replacement of fairy tales with television; an illegitimate escape from reality.

In the introduction to The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales Padraic Colum said in years past Europeans lived with a feeling for the rhythm of night and day.<sup>1</sup> Daylight was a period for the compulsive work activity. Night darkness provided a freedom for leisure in which people would leave their concerns outside the cottage door and relax. Their imaginations had the chance to become animated by the fairy tales of the story teller. These tales could be of monsters, giants, witches, thieves, devils, heroes, heriones, angels and God.

But alas, there came indoor lighting strong enough that for much of the night it brought indoors the daytime activity of the outside. The rhythm was weakened and man became subject to constant daylight activity. The happenings of congress and wars became the subject of the night. The newspapers and, it may be added, televisions replaced fairy tale tellers. There were even naive realists who considered newspaper and television facts as somehow more realistic than fairy tales (Grimm, vii-viii).

With these events it would seem that the era of the imagination came to an end. Perhaps it almost did but the great value of fairy tales makes them indispensable.

Bruno Bettelheim in The Uses of Enchantment argues that fairy tales don't have merely overt meanings that express ugliness and evil for no

explanation at all. According to Bettelheim what is more important are the ~~convert~~ meanings of fairy tales which are food for the subconscious.<sup>2</sup>

Bettelheim affirms that the messages of fairy tales are communicated to all levels of the personality at the same time. He holds that the depth penetrated into the conscious, preconscious, unconscious depends upon the degree of concentration each is operating on at a particular time.

Bettelheim also states that the common problems of a child especially need to be dealt with because ". . . these stories speak to his budding ego and encourage its development, while at the same time relieving preconscious and unconscious pressures." Bettelheim holds it necessary that the pressures be relieved no matter how old a person is (Bettelheim, 6).

Bettelheim, a Freudian child psychologist, says that through fairy tales the id pressures are made tangible, thus they can be relieved and dealt with. In other words, certain feelings are given form, which means that the requirements of the ego and superego may be met in ways that satisfy the id pressures. To sum it up, instinctual drives which are feelings of desired pleasure and irrational wishing need to be expressed (Bettelheim, 5-6).

For Bettelheim repression is very dangerous. The unconscious greatly affects much of behavior. To hide one's id beneath one's unconscious is unhealthy. One of two things might happen to a person who represses his or her id. The person may be overwhelmed by the signals of the id, or the control of his or her personality may be so strict and compulsive that it may eventually become severely crippled. However, if the same person lets his or her dark side come up and work through externally in the form of imagery, then there will be less potential of harm to others and one's self. Bettelheim also holds that there can even be positive uses of the

forces of imagination (Bettelheim, 7).

The language of the unconscious (imagery) has been considered irrational and horrifying; correct, but these facts should not disturb anyone because a cathartic reshaping of the expressed emotions takes place. Bettelheim offers the following statement from a child to his mother about "Jack-the-Giant-Killer" which is consciously both horrible and irrational but subconsciously beneficial, even to the point of helping the child to imitate the truth.

"There aren't any such things as giants are there?"  
Before the mother could give her son the reassuring reply which was on her tongue--and which would have destroyed the value of the story for him--he continued. "But there are such things as grownups, and they're like giants."

Irrational as it is, adults seem like horrible giants to a little child. But don't worry about such feelings in a child. They happen anyway regardless of a person's age. The child needs to release an anger. He has attached his anger to the story. Such a catharsis of the child's emotions worked because he escaped (Bettelheim, 27).

In order to be well-attuned to the imagery that comes to the subconscious one must allow one's self to escape. J.R.R. Tolkien makes precisely this point in his essay "On Fairy-Stories." In this essay Tolkien mentions confusion in the definition of "escape." He seems to be referring to naively realistic thinkers who lump legitimate escape together with desertion as the same categories of activity.

Evidently we are faced by a misuse of words, and also by a confusion of thought. Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if when he cannot do so he thinks about other subjects than jailers and prison walls?

The world outside has not become less real because the prisoner cannot see it. In using escape in this way the critics have chosen the wrong word, and what is more, they are confusing, not always by sincere error, the Escape of the Prisoners with the Flight of the Deserter just as a Party-spokesman might have labelled departure from the misery of the Führer's or any other Reich and even criticism of it as treachery.<sup>3</sup>

Notice that Tolkien, like Bettelheim, rejects the burden of an artificially heavy yolk, which is on the shoulders of many. One source of its imposition are naive realists. Tolkien and Bettelheim are both saying that without escape from the harsh realities of experience one is stripped of one's sanity. They both agree that without the relief of escape into the land of fantasy there could be confusion of reality with the unconscious pressures that reside in the subconscious (Tolkien, 84).

Escape is always from a certain perspective. Until now, only escape in general has been mentioned. There is more to escape though than the abstract idea of moving from one place (real) to another (the land of fantastic). As Eric S. Rabkin states in The Fantastic in Literature.

It is not easy to know the world from which a reader, or writer, comes. That world is made up of a vast number of perspectives, angles of vision, modes of apprehending. To one person, the exact opposite of man may be woman. To another, the opposite of man may be boy. The difference is one of perspective.<sup>4</sup>

A child lacks perspective to some extent due to their lack of pertinent information which is filled in with imagined notions. This situation of children allows for the following two escapes (explained by Bettelheim) for their particular level of maturity. As a child listens to the Grimm brothers' "Cinderella" that child may identify one's self with the rejection by parents,

brothers and sisters. The child escapes a world of real or imagined rejection into one of independence. The story of "The Frog King" easily goes beyond rivalries in the family. This is the story of a frog who helped a princess in distress. After the princess was helped she refused to keep her promises of kindness toward the frog (including sharing her bed). When her anger (at the frog) got the best of her she threw him against the wall. It was after this event that the frog turned out to be a man--a king's son. After these events they went to bed. This story can help children to deal with their sexual anxieties. Perhaps it is the story of one escaping from one's world of disgust with sexuality into a world of comfort with one's sexuality in preparation for adulthood (Bettelheim, 61, 242, 288; Grimm, 17-21).

Adults can also receive much from escape into fairy-tale land. Tolkien writes that adults can actually gain more than children. He thinks that the critical, close-to-reality, experienced adult has more opportunity for the potency of fairy tales to effect him or her than would a child (due to the child's more illusory notions of reality). Because adults are clearer about their understanding of reality, they have more advanced perspectives than those of the child (Tolkien, 62).

But it has been said that one needs the heart of a child in order to enter the forest of a fairy tale. To a point, the heart of a child is needed, but in the mature fashion of adults. Critical tenderness and critical wonder are the qualities for an adult fairy tale enthusiast (Tolkien, 66).

Chesterton once remarked that the children in whose company he saw Maeterlinck's Blue Bird were dissatisfied "because it did not end with a Day of Judgment, and it was not revealed to the hero and heroine that the Dog had been faithful and the Cat faithless."  
"For children," he says, "are innocent and love

justice; while most of us are wicked and naturally prefer mercy." (Tolkien, p. 66).

Bettelheim disagrees with Chesterton's assesment of children's innocence (in fact that is why fairy tales are so significant to them--they need a release of their harsh and cruel ideas), but he is right about their love of justice (Bettelheim, 144).

Now it is known how an adult should have critical tenderness (by acceptance of tenderness, and by criticism of harsh treatment), but how should an adult have critical wonder? Peter Panism is not the way. According to Tolkien "Children are meant to grow up, and not become Peter Pans." The journey to and of adulthood is one which we must travel with hope, a hope that shines so bright that the distinction between deluded Desertion and beneficial Escape is obvious. So, the escape of an adult has two special characteristics which distinguish it from that of a child: a realistic tenderness and an appreciation of the journey of maturation (Tolkien, 67).

As mentioned earlier, the type of escape depends upon the perspective of the person. The escape which is needed by many adults of our particular time and culture is the escape from naive realism--a view which is subjectivistic, thus not able to see that there is truth outside of one's self or one's culture.

According to Rabkin in Lewis Carroll's tales Through the Looking Glass (from which comes "Alice in Wonderland") one can witness many shifts in functioning reality or perspective. Carroll was a scientist of the Victorian era, when work in mechanistic Darwinian evolution was popular. Carroll concentrated on the mathematics appropriate to Darwinian evolution. In this time of Scientism it was thought that all the problems of the world could be resolved if they could be stated in the proper terms. The change

of perspective which Carroll needed was from the functioning reality of Scientism. The following quote is from his book.

"Oh Tiger-lilly!" said Alice, addressing herself to one that was moving gracefully about in the wind. "I wish you could talk!"

"We can talk," said the Tiger-lilly, "when there's anybody worth talking to."

Alice was so astonished that she couldn't talk for a minute: it quite seemed to take her breath away.

The basic ground rules of the above narration of who talks and what does not talk have been reversed. This quote is exemplary of Carroll's systematic rejection of the rules of logic. Carroll sought an escape from the immanently bounded worldview of his time period (Rabkin, 109-110, 3).

Escape may plunge deeper than the mere contemporary escape from an era of Scientism. Tolkien writes:

But there are also other and more profound "escapisms" that have always appeared in fairy-tale and legend. There are other things more terrible to fly from than the noise, stench, ruthlessness, and extravagance of the internal-combustion engine. There are hunger, thirst, poverty, pain, sorrow, injustice, death. And even when men are not facing hard things such as these, there are ancient limitations from which fairy-stories offer a sort of escape, and old ambitions and desires (touching the very roots of fantasy) to which they offer a kind of satisfaction and consolation. Some are pardonable weaknesses or curiosities: such as the desire to visit, free as a fish, the deep sea; or the longing for the noiseless, gracious, economical flight of a bird, that longing which the aeroplane cheats, except in rare moments, seen high and by the wind and distant noiseless, turning in the sun: that is, precisely when imagined and not used. There are profounder wishes: such as the desire to converse with other living things. On this desire, as ancient as the Fall, is largely founded the talking of beasts and creatures in fairy-tales, and especially the magical understanding of their speech (Tolkien, 83-84).



It may seem that Tolkien is willing to encourage a person to escape with his or her deepest desires. To a point all are encouraged to escape into their deepest desires. There are however fugitive types of escape among which is death (Tolkien, 85).

"Far more important than escape is the Consolation of the Happy Ending. Almost I would venture to assert that all complete fairy-stories must have it," according to Tolkien. The sudden joyous "turn" of events from sorrow, pain and failure is like being lost in the dark of the forest when amazingly a torch (not a powerful electrical lamp) is found which is used to guide the person through the enchanting forest. The messages which one may receive from fairy tales are a beautiful way for a person to see that they can, indeed, be delivered from the harshness of reality to a joyous hope (Tolkien, 85-86)!

By now the reader may be thinking the joyous turn of events is great, but how can an adult escape? There are many things that can be written on how to escape, such as, how to tell a fairy tale, and how to tell a child a fairy tale, but these ideas won't be elucidated in this paper. Put in the simplest terms, it seems that there are two human needs that naive realists reject which need to be provided for. The needs of the imagination must be provided for as well as the need for a sense of rhythm of night and day.

In order to let the imagination work its magic, the escapist must not argue with the rules of the fairy tale (reading Through the Looking Glass, for example). Like Tolkien wrote use ". . . the power of giving ideal creations the inner consistency of reality." Be free ". . . from domination of observed fact." Leave the rational judgement of the irrational imagery outside the room.

Notice the very good seeds of imagery that come from fairy tales according to Tolkien. There are more progeny from words than there are from pictorial art. When a person sees a picture of a rock, a flower or a tree, the mind is filled with thoughts of that specific picture. The images of words, however, conjure thoughts of the brawniest boulder, the most beautiful blossom, and the lushest tree which can be called to mind because of the many and varied experiences of the reader (Tolkien, 68, 95).

Notice the hybrids of imagery that come from the use of adjectives. Tolkien held that they can create a powerful sense of transformation and transference. Heavy rocks may become a swift stream, gray lead could with little trouble become yellow gold, a brown bunch of petals could become a white carnation. The transformation and transference of such qualities contain fruitful messages for all (Tolkien, 48).

The images used are not simply stagnant, constipated representations on paper written in ink. Images fertilize with lively implications about their useful meaning according to Tolkien. The implications need to be grasped if the message communicated is to sprout, take root and blossom. Don't walk quickly away from the seed, thus failing to let it expand and burst forth! Look at the seed in awe. Contemplate its nuances for a time. In a while, it will become a big blossoming carnation (Tolkien, 68).

Regardless of whether a person reads, tells or listens to fairy tales, a revival of day and night rhythm would greatly facilitate escape. People need a removal from the work and worry awareness of the day--leaving all of their concerns outside the door.

What better time to sow the seeds of fairy tales than at night. In the dark of the night, shapes and colors begin to blend into the shadows. Reality seems to blend with mystique. Actually reality should become over-

shadowed by the mystique of the night. This absence of concerns and presence of shadows should help the mind to delight in the imagery. (Remember, arguments of the day should be replaced by the delight of entering a forest full of the fantastic).

At night it is close to bed-time, the imagination will soon play an especially significant role in the activity of the mind; soon dreams will begin. Dreams also work in the language of imagery. Perhaps the joyous twist of sad events that happens so frequently in fairy tales is good food for dreams. Erich Fromm in The Forgotten Language wrote:

The Talmud says, "Dreams which are not interpreted are like letters which have not been opened." Indeed both dreams and myths are important communications from ourselves to ourselves. If we do not understand the language in which they are written, we miss a great deal of what we know and tell ourselves in those hours when we are not busy manipulating the outside world.<sup>5</sup>

The reader may want to investigate how to properly interpret dreams.

Rest assured, reader. Evil is only one meaning of darkness. Darkness also means fruitfulness.

Escape through fairy tales has been found to be fruitful. Unfortunately the indoor lighting has done more than get in the way of fairy tale delight. The light of the television tube's communication guides one into a manipulative escape. The hold television has upon much of American society is such that many viewers are not at all threatened by the anti-fiction ideology which comes to the viewer through television. The life styles shown on situation comedies are considered to be a homogenous imitation of reality.

The assumption of the television media's ideological homogeny is allowed to work in the public's minds due to the lack of self control, a quality which is required in order for one to concentrate. The earlier

concentration skills are developed the better according to Elizabeth Childe in The Power of Concentration by Walter G. Oleksy. Television is a frequent entertainment for children. The medium of television initiates a child to poor concentration and thinking habits which can possibly be kept with a person for the rest of one's life. Concentration habits can be poor from television viewing due to little demand put upon the imagination to generate mental images. The viewer passively takes in the atmosphere, the pace, the color, the sound, all action and absence of action. All mental images and motifs are as explicit as possible. Television imagery leaves little opportunity for guided creative imagining especially if the viewer is a child.

An important usage of the imagination is catharsis. In order to gain from catharsis it is required that the mind reach beyond immediate explicit sensations of the local surroundings. The demands put upon the mind for a cathartic affect require that the mind be raised to a level which seeks the implicit meaning behind the imagery. Through this catharsis one seeks to imitate reality.

What can one imitate through television? One can imitate the appealing half-truths and lies which manipulate the public. An escape of a fugitive can happen through many contemporary television programs. According to Philip G. Zimbardo, author of the text book Psychology and Life, reputable research has generally shown that the watching of television and movie presentations of violence leads to more violence from children.<sup>7</sup> Some have used such research reports as evidence against the possibility of catharsis. Actually all the reports reveal is that there is no purification of emotions through violent television shows due to the way the programs deal with people's unconsciousness. Many are aware of the materialistic (consumeristic) ideology which is advocated by the television commercials. But, how many

people suspect that they may be a prisoner of this ideology, but not even be aware of the possibility. What is most basic to many television shows is an attempt at lulling the viewer into a trance-like state which simply responds to any suggestion so that when the advertisements start the viewer will buy the product. Most television commercials open by trying to make the viewers feel falsely inadequate about their life. At some point the commercial shows that it has the answer to the so-called problem. Even the answer is given in a way which is irrational. The product is not sold on any solid proof of its worth, instead motifs are dressed up as proof-- some popular motifs are sexual appeal, having many friends, or success at the business. The motifs are speaking the language of the subconscious. Not only does television media often prevent a functioning imagination but it also can facilitate the disfunction of the imagination. It is childish (in the worst sense of its meaning) to fantasize that if one buys the product one will have the popularity, or success, which is weakly promised.

A child should not watch television by one's self. Critical and creative tools need to be developed, the parents need to help children to a proper escape. Instead of initiating kids to television in their earliest years, introduce them to fairy tales. Fairy tale escape is a catharsis which is urgently needed in these days when television is considered the answer to people's difficulties and questions. Fairy tales can provide the critical and creative tools to judge modern television programming and contemporary society.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales: Introduction by Padraic Colum. Commentary by Joseph Campbell, trans.: Margaret Hunt. Eds.: Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. (New York: Random House, Inc., 1980), p. xi. Further references to this work will be given parenthetically in my text.

<sup>2</sup>Bruno Bettelheim, The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), pp. 5-6. Further references to this work will be given parenthetically in my text.

<sup>3</sup>J.R.R. Tolkien, The Tolkien Reader (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), p. 79. Further references to this work will be given parenthetically in my text.

<sup>4</sup>Eric S. Rabkin, The Fantastic in Literature (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 74. Further references to this work will be given parenthetically in my text.

<sup>5</sup>Erich Fromm, The Forgotten Language (New York, Chicago, San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), p. 10.

<sup>6</sup>Walter G. Oleksy, The Power of Concentration, (Allen, Texas: Argus Communications, 1981), p. 51.

<sup>7</sup>Philip G. Zimbardo, Psychology and Life: Brief Ninth Edition, in consultation with Floyd L. Ruck. (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1977), pp. 424 and 457.

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