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Children need fairy tales

Bruno Bettelheim's *The uses of enchantment*

In *The uses of enchantment*, Bruno Bettelheim analyzes and discusses the emotional, symbolic and therapeutic importance of fairy tales from the Brothers Grimm for children. This article summarizes key findings, their reception and criticism.

200 years ago, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm published the first volume of their *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* ("Children's and household tales"). Generations of children grew up with these timeless stories.

In *The uses of enchantment: the meaning and importance of fairy tales*, Bruno Bettelheim investigated from a psychoanalytical perspective why these stories were so important and enthralling for children.

It became Bruno Bettelheim's most popular work, published at a time in which fairy tales were regarded with suspicion, as instruments of bourgeois oppression used to transmit false ideas and attitudes to young people. The representations of violence, particularly in the tales of the Brothers Grimm, played an important part in these discussions. Thus it was argued from a social theory perspective that fairy tales legitimized violence by modelling aggressive modes of conflict resolution. From a pedagogical point of view, it was suspected that the violence represented could provoke aggression and fear in children. Bettelheim's book stimulated widespread interest at the time and is still

influential today, on the one hand because it rehabilitates fairy tales, and on the other hand because it proves that these can contribute to the understanding of children's inner life. *The uses of enchantment* was the first comprehensive study in fairy tale research to be based on Freudian psychoanalysis.

Why do children need fairy tales?

In *The uses of enchantment*, Bettelheim demonstrates a correspondence between the fairy-tale world and the experience and thinking of children. Here he argues on various levels, and relates the structure of the fairy tale to children's thinking, the content of fairy tales to children's developmental tasks, and fairy-tale themes to children's developmental crises (cf. Hoepfel, 1994).

The first part of the book also contains theoretical reflections, in which observations from Bettelheim's child psychology practice are related to motifs and figures from the German folk tale.

The extensive second part consists of interpretations showing how fairy tales can be read and understood from a psychoanalytical viewpoint. The following article summarizes some of Bettelheim's key statements.

Fairy tales help children to project, thus fostering their development

In response to the criticism that fairy tales are not true, Bettelheim argued that the truth of the fairy tale is "the

truth of our imagination, not that of normal causality" (Bettelheim, 1989, p. 117). Following Freud, he 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. In *The uses of enchantment*, Bettelheim puts forward the thesis that fairy tales give children the opportunity to understand inner conflicts which they experience in the phases of their spiritual and intellectual development, and to act these out and resolve them in their imagination.

Fairy tales offer knowledge of life from the inside

For Bettelheim, the narratives in folktales are "life divined from the inside" (ibid., 1989, p. 24), because they give expression to inner processes and make these comprehensible. In his view, children intuitively understand that these stories represent the essential developmental steps towards independent existence. From Bettelheim's psychoanalytical perspective, many fairy tales deal – in a manner that is "unreal, but not untrue" (ibid., p. 73) – with oral and oedipal conflicts, with violent and phallic fantasies, with fear of sexuality or castration, with humiliation, self-destruction and separation anxiety (ibid., p. 73 ff.). Nonetheless these "cruel" stories help children to cope with life, as they thematize the diffi-

culties of growing up, and emphasize the hope of a better future and a happy outcome. Even today, young people appreciate that fairy tales usually end positively (see graph).

Fairy tales help to dispel fears

Fairy tales meet both the young audience’s desire for the fantastic and its fear of the horrible. And although gender roles are conventionally distributed in the stories, this, in Bettelheim’s view, does not matter when it comes to identifying with the hero or heroine, because the child sees only character polarities and strategies for action as essential: “If our fear of being devoured takes the tangible shape of a witch, it can be gotten rid of by burning her in the oven!” (ibid., 1989, p. 120). Here, according to Bettelheim, the child does not care whether Hansel or Gretel carries out this act of liberation. Bettelheim is convinced that fairy tales are superior to contemporary children’s literature precisely because of their elements of menace and cruelty, since they produce neither aggression nor fear, but help children to cope with these feelings.

Fairy tales correspond to the child’s thinking and experience

Fairy tales thus help to cope with life, not by belittling childish difficulties, but by “giving full credence to the seriousness of the child’s predicaments” and “relat[ing] to all aspects of his personality” (ibid., 1989, p. 5). The stories begin at the child’s current stage of development, and show him/her the way: just like the black-and-white characterization of the fairy tales, so too is the child’s view of the world marked by polarization. Fairy tales demonstrate that an inner development has to take place, by offering solutions which the child can understand, because they correspond to childish, animistic thinking, and express, on a symbolic/visual level, the things that motivate the child (cf. Hoepfel, 1994, p. 208).

Do you like fairy tales?	
Yes	56 %
Fairy tales are exciting.	19 %
They have happy endings.	12 %
They’re relaxing.	10 %
No	38 %
Fairy tales are silly.	15 %
They’re boring.	15 %
They’re unrealistic.	11 %
I only like some fairy tales	6 %

Graph: 9- to 19-year-old German pupils’ opinions about fairy tales (n=1,577)

Source: Eltern family, 12/2009, p. 40

The uses of enchantment: reception and criticism

From the 1990s, scholars in the German-speaking countries began to engage seriously with Bruno Bettelheim’s work. Bettelheim’s research crossed disciplinary boundaries, and left a rich academic legacy for pedagogy and related branches of scholarship, going far beyond the fairy tale studies in *The uses of enchantment*: “We may learn from Bettelheim, the Jewish teacher and former concentration-camp inmate, that an ‘education after Auschwitz’ (Theodor Adorno) is possible and, in particular, how it might be possible.” (Mai, 2007, p. 1)¹ Evaluations of *The uses of enchantment* also stress that this is an “important work for pedagogy and child psychology, and not just because it rehabilitates fairy tales, but because it is important for educational practice.” (Hoepfel, 1994, p. 211)² Scholars criticize Bettelheim, however, for failing to reflect on the historical socializing function of fairy tales, and for differentiating too little in his judgements of fairy tales and modern children’s literature. As the research has been able to show, Bettelheim’s claim that children enjoy folktales more than other children’s literature (or literary fairy tales) is untenable (cf. among others Kaufhold, 1994; Hoepfel, 1994 or Sutton, 1996). As plausible as most critics found

Bettelheim’s advocacy for fairy tales as part of child raising, their opinions were very much divided about his interpretations of fairy tales, which make up the second part of the book. Essentially 2 aspects were identified as “pitfalls” of psychoanalytical fairy-tale interpretation (cf. Hoepfel, 1994, p. 218): firstly, the fairy-tale texts were used by Bettelheim to confirm and illustrate his theory, in which process, according to his critics, important aspects of content fell by the wayside. Secondly, Bettelheim is criticized for not having sufficiently reflected on the subjectivity of his interpretation of the fairy tales. But: “This ‘weakness’ of the second part of the book could also be its ‘strength’, if it challenges readers to contradict Bettelheim and to interpret the message of the fairy tales differently, and thus also to some extent subjectively.” (ibid., 1994, p. 218)³

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NOTES

¹ Translated from German source
² Translated from German source
³ Translated from German source

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