

Learning from the Underground

Courtney Worthy

Course: English 102

Instructor: Andree Cosby

Essay Type: Argument

Fairy tales have been delighting the minds of children for centuries. What is it about these tales that children find so captivating? Is it possible for a story to touch children in a way that will shape their lives? It is obvious that fairy tales are written on a level to which children can relate. Children have vivid imaginations: they play house, cowboys and Indians; some have invisible friends. Children's ability to make believe and play in fantasy worlds allows them to be able to become entirely immersed in fairy tales. Children's ability to completely believe in the story gives it the capacity to teach them something about life. Children use fairy tales as reference books for growing up. These stories present some sort of dilemma that a child can relate to and may be trying to deal with. The story *Alice in Wonderland* is a good example of a fairy tale that is helpful to children because it teaches them about growing up and the confusing and unpredictable way that the world works.

Children often struggle with the question of who they want to be when they grow up. Their identity is confusing to them, as it is to some adults. A child can read *Alice in Wonderland* and relate to Alice's situation of often not knowing who she is:

"Who are YOU?" said the Caterpillar.

This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, "I- I hardly know, sir, just at present - at least I know who was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then."

"What do you mean by that?" said the Caterpillar sternly.

"Explain yourself!"

"I cannot explain myself, I'm afraid sir," said Alice, "because I'm not myself you see." (Carroll 25)

A child can understand this feeling of changing and not knowing who they are anymore. Children are constantly growing and maturing, and this is something that is very confusing to them. For a child, it is easier to read a story that relates to his situation since he probably does not have the correct words to explain himself. The tale acts as a child psychologist. As Bettelheim says, "Fairy tales, unlike any other form of literature, direct the child to discover his identity and calling, and they also suggest what experience are needed to develop his character further" (24).

Furthermore, children look to fairy tales to be their guides. Children form deep emotional connections with the characters of these stories. Children often act as characters in their favorite tales. Through this, a child is able to determine what traits the character possesses that he likes, and then he can incorporate those into his personality.

Fairy tales give children the opportunity to imagine possibilities. Through this imagining, children can think where it is they want to go in life:

"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the cat.

"I don't care much where-" said Alice.

"Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat. (Carroll 36)

This makes a very important point that extends far past childhood. The question that is asked here is where does the child want to go? Does the child want to learn to draw or play an instrument? If one does not care to achieve anything, then it is logical to think that it does not matter which path he chooses to take. It is important for children to understand that certain paths

will lead them to different destinations. According to Reif, "Alice prides herself on being logical. She looks at the evidence directly in front of her and confronts it head on; she then follows the road of logical assumptions, making twists and turns and getting lost along the way, to an ultimate conclusion."

Also, Alice teaches children to be self-governing. She is lost in a world alone; she has no one to turn to but herself; "She is the free and independent mind" (Empson 262). Too many of today's children are followers and not leaders. Alice stuns the Queen with her ability to think independently:

The Queen turned crimson red with fury, and, after glaring at her for a moment like a wild beast, screamed, "Off with her head! Off!"

"Nonsense!" said Alice, very loudly and decidedly, and the Queen was silent.

(Carroll 50)

Alice decides her own fate. If it was up to the Queen, she would be dead. She stands up for herself to an illogical woman. All children can benefit from learning to take a stand for what they believe to be fair and just. It is easy for children to go along with the crowd, but it takes an exceptional child to go against the crowd when they believe that something is not right.

Some people think that *Alice in Wonderland* is nothing more than an illogical tale that teaches children to be trusting of strangers. There have been many who dislike the tale because they feel that it contains drug use and related issues throughout the story. This fairy tale has had people loving it or hating it for a long time. To deny a child this tale because an adult finds it illogical seems silly when there is so much good to be learned from it.

Fairy tales are great entertainment for children, but they also provide them with much more than just a story. Fairy tales allow children a refuge when they think no one understands

what they are going through. These stories teach children about the realities of the world. It would be foolish to not let children read fairy tales.

Works Cited

Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. New York: Knopf, 1976.

Carroll, Lewis. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1985.

Empson, William. "*Alice in Wonderland*." *Some Versions of Pastoral*. New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1974.

Reif, Rita. "Following the Wonderful Logic of 'Wonderland.'" *The New York Times* 15 Nov. 1998, sec. 2.

Courtney Worthy is a Business Management major.

Ms. Cosby's Comments: *This English 101 assignment was to write an argument that addressed the issue of whether fairy tales play a negative or positive role in the lives of children. Courtney chose the story Alice in Wonderland, which is much like a classic fairy tale. She argues that reading the adventures of Alice helps children in their quest for a clear identity and serves as a guide to decision-making.*