

Role of Fantasy in Intellectual Development of Children

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Abstract

This paper discusses the concept of fantasy. There is much in the word of fiction today so that the number of writers on imagination is increasing. After people have come to realize that romance is serving as much as a sea in the intellectual development of children, most of them have started to encourage their children to like more reading fantasy books. Some parents have even made it a great deal by deciding to build a small home library of fantasy books for children.

The paper's purpose is to discuss the role of fantasy literature in children's intellectual development by including different forms of fantasy and its various advantages. The latter include creativity, entertainment, imagination and language skills improvement, the schematic knowledge, enjoyment, strategies applied for problem-solving, knowing the do's and don'ts of the society, etc. Some Critics have made assertions on children's ways of learning. This paper incorporates some of the claims and discusses them with some excerpts of illustrative stories related to fantasy.

Enhanced by the fact that fantasy is the roadmap to the child thinking ability development, the paper will finally show why parents should motivate their children to get interested in fiction, which has a lot to do with children's learning process.

Keywords: Fantasy, Children, imagination, Learning, Thinking ability, intellectual development

Introduction

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (8th Edition) by A.S Hornsby defines fantasy as a product of your imagination or the act of imagining things: a person's imagination. Moreover, Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 9th edition (app. edition, 2016) defines it as a pleasant situation that you imagine, but that is unlikely to happen. Hence, it is an activity of imagining impossible or improbable things. This plays a crucial role in the improvement of children's thinking ability to understand things about everyday life. Fantasy's a genre of children's literature emerged from Victorian era (1837-1901), where writers such as Charles Dickens (A Christmas Carol), William Makepeace Thackeray (The Rose Among the Ring), John Ruskin (The King of the Golden River), etc. contributed more to fighting against child labor and introduced compulsory education. This attracted many children by its use of illustrations which have made them not only enjoy but also able to learn morals in a more entertaining way. Intellectual development is nothing but learning. It refers to changes occurring as an effect of growth and experience in a person's capacities for thinking, reasoning, judging, etc. This is of much concern with children as they have to pass through different steps in their growth. As children enjoy more things that give them pleasure, isn't fantasy the suitable one then?

There is no doubt that we all know that most of the stories we heard in our childhood were not true. Those fairytales some related to our traditions and in which we met larger-than-life characters, wonders, and mysteries; wherein we came across talking cat, singing snakes, birds, terrifying monsters but which were defeated at the end.

Moreover, we also know some other superstitious beliefs in some societies which were in a form of folktales to help us to learn what is good and bad like “if you kill a frog or lizard, your mother’s breasts will fade away”; “if you kill a dog, you will be ill-omened forever”; etc. What were all these stories intended for? Mostly to prepare us for our future as per the wish of any parents to their children. We could not be able to think of the intention behind them at that time as any child of today cannot, due to some psychological factors which come into the game. What matters more to us now is that many of us still remember the stories’ content rather than knowing that they were fictitious. Some of us might have become great people today, embodied with creative and imaginative qualities to produce things which are useful to society in different ways. The question which everyone could wonder is, where those original qualities originated from. Answers to this question may vary from an individual to another. However, one of those answers which could be valid is that today’s thinking ability took root from those fantastic stories that we heard or which we read. They have gradually influenced our behavior so that today some of us, as a grown-up, still have some inherited qualities from them. Qualities like friendship, family importance, loyalty, etc. which a child might acquire from the famous fantastical stories, J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone.

The imagination of fairy short stories, legends, myths, folk tales, riddles, and movies in modern times have contributed a lot to the intellectual growth of children. How do children happen to learn about human values such as honesty, loyalty, love, and peace? Or acquire morals about what is right and bad to become more constructive to society? Children who are exposed to fantasy in their growing process learn much better than those who are not. This paper attempts to answer questions like why fantasy? What are the advantages of fantasy? What is the role of fantasy in the intellectual development of children? And is a fantasy as fantasy perse?

Discussion

Children have a lot of learning to do. Arguably, Fantasy is suitable for childhood to provide children with opportunities to focus on learning how to

communicate, how the world operates, about the cultural expectations, and so on. They spend a lot of their time singing songs, running around, playing childhood games – etc. Not only do they take great joy in finding out what is real or not in the plays, but mostly children are much likely attracted to unrealistic games and stories. They pretend to have magical, superhero powers and imagine interactions with impossible beings such as monsters, mermaids, and dragons. This fantasy is for most meant for fun and help children to differentiate reality from fiction. New Developmental science shows that not only are children capable of separating fact from fiction but also that an attraction to fantastical things might be helpful to their learning. For example, observations have led to the finding that children learn new facts about the fauna and flora from fantastical stories than from realistic ones.

Branches related to scientific knowledge have so far proved that the study begins with observation and description. The two, combined, lead to experience and performance. Also, when we think of intellectual development, we think of knowledge too. According to Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (1956), there are six levels with the cognitive domain. These levels, in short, include knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. For children, The Practice related to the above levels connected with mental processes of thinking can be done through fantasy. When viewing fantastic situations with enjoyment, children keep acquiring knowledge, organize the information, analyze it, and later be able to create and judge or appraise what they see in their mind.

Many things which come to be real start with fantasy. It may sound funny as fantasy itself, but there is no wonder that there is a similarity between the shape of a flying bird and an airplane. From this deep observation, it could be argued that the Wright Brothers, Orville, and Wilbur who invented the world’s the first successful airplane must have got inspiration from watching how birds fly from one place to another, and therefore, thought of an object form which could fly as birds can do. Such an idea, generated by fantasy, has given light to the world from December 17, 1903 till today. Similarly, Charles Darwin’s theory that human beings evolved from apes

in *The Descent of Man* (1871) could also be viewed as having started with fantasy. As Albert Einstein (1879-1955) stated, “when I examine myself and my methods of thought, I came to conclusion that the gift of fantasy has meant more to me than my talent for absorbing positive knowledge”, fantasy is not only meant for pleasure, but also it is a source of thinking ability, analysis, and may even help children in some adult situations. It builds up their experience and become both thinkers and doers. Through fantasy, children meet cultural practices, happiness, strange things, problems, etc. as a rehearsal for exploration of the world to which they are exposed. As they grow up, children inevitably face challenges and problems whose solution involves logical thinking ability.

Children’s minds are too flexible to easily remember whatever they come across or what they hear. Thus, childhood stage is a due time to offer basic education for children to prepare them for their future life whereby they are much likely to face challenges or problems which they are obliged to overcome by themselves. Overcoming such challenges involves having the ability to think in a logical way, the skills to which children have to be trained — moreover, children like more things that give pleasure rather than those of serious subject. If you want children to learn more, fantasy is the most suitable way of impacting such learning because it is pleasant. Despite the mystery or unreality of fiction, the later still plays a vital role in changing the learning process for children. As Lloyd Alexander stated, “fantasy is hardly an escape from reality. It is a way to understand it.”, fantasy depicts reality to some extent since it results from real people’s imagination about the world. It prompts children into learning. They listen, see, and as a consequence, they subsequently understand the reality about the world. Indeed, what highlights the *raison d’être* of fantasy is that, even though children unconsciously like it, it has a double purpose. First, fiction is meant for humor, pleasure, leisure, etc. Second, it helps children learn about different attitudes, behavior, manners, and actions of fantastic characters. This, as a result, will enable them to shape how to understand the world around them.

In the tortoise tale from *Things Fall Apart* (1958) by Chinua Achebe, birds were invited to the feast. As

Mr. Tortoise was full of cunning, he tried to trick and cheat the birds by nicknaming himself “all of you,” as everyone was doing by their agreement. Later the feast, he ate all the food which was served to all of them as guests. Distraught, the birds decided to collect back all their feathers which they had given Mr. Tortoise to be able to fly with them. In the end, Mr. Tortoise’s shell was broken when he landed down from the sky. Mr. Tortoise’s tragic flaw in the story is like retribution for having deceived his friends. It is also a consequence of being greedy. So, any child listening to this fairy tale, like Ezinma to her mother, could not only burst into laughter but also learn a moral lesson such as, it is not good to deceive friends who love your cunning is mostly rewarded negatively. Such fairy stories as the above that give pleasure are suitable for children’s intellectual development. They make them think about what they are experiencing and not desire to imitate the behavior of the fantastic antagonist who is punished in the end. The reason why they don’t wish to follow the villain is that many of them are fearful at that psychologically, they want to keep themselves safe from sorrow and pain.

As stated earlier, the behavior or attitude acquired by children from fairy stories has a prolonged effect on them until when they are grown up. In the same view, Plato in *The Republic* (380BC) said, “a young thing can’t judge what is hidden sense and what is not but what he takes into his opinions at that age tends to become hard to eradicate and unchangeable” (378d). From this, it could be argued that children’s brain acquires quickly and hardly forget about childhood memories when they are grown up. The more a child hears or observes things about different situations in a fantastic way, the more intellectual he grows by this analysis at his little age. Despite the fantasy in what he watches or hears, the real world in which he is living is potential for him to compare real people’s comportment to those of fantastic characters which may or may not be similar in one way or another.

Through fantastic characters, children can learn different strategies like those applied to overcome difficult situations in life. In most tales, fictitious characters such as the Hare or the Lion are used. The former is used to represent intelligence and the latter to represent power. In many of their stories, there is

a kind of rivalry between them. As to everyone, the Lion is powerful enough to be the expected winner in different situations. However, the Hare uses his cleverness and finally becomes a winner. The fact of making the hare a winner and the lion a loser helps children to learn that not only convincing people become successful, but also ordinary ones as well. Thus, the powerful also have some limit in terms of achievement; that is, in other situations, they may become weak. Other characters like tortoise, cat, mouse, etc. are personified for the allegorical purpose of creating opportunities for children to meet different styles with different behavior and learn more.

In Nigerian folk tale *Why the Sun and Moon Live in the Sky* (1910) by Elphinstone Dayrell, the sun insistently demanded the water to come to visit them despite the warning of the water to the Sun about what would consequently happen. However, both the sun and the moon were driven up into the sky when the rain came into their house with all his belongings. Such a story is suitable for the intellectual development of a child since it teaches him that strong desire or ambition may lead to self-destruction.

Schematic knowledge can also be improved through fantasy. That is the prior knowledge which helps us to understand something else which we come across. Schematic education, as a step of intellectual development, prepares children for their future life. It helps them to meet things which they would not fit in their surrounds but which they are much more likely to experience along with their life development. A story, despite being fantastic, may be set in a real place or depict real things. This can be illustrated by the contemporary children's movies where a child may be in one place, but he is taken to another through the film. That being the case, he can learn about the geographical situation of the country and other aspects of life there. Consistently, if a person in the movie is sick or hurt, the child sees that he is taken to the hospital; if it is time to travel, a passenger pays transport fee; if the traffic light is red, cars will stop; if there is a thief, he is caught by the police; if it is in winter, people wear winter clothes or stay in their houses; to mention but a few.

For pupils of primary school, reading fairy tales engenders not only pleasure or amusement, but also improvement of language vocabulary spelling and meaning, use of language expressions, and use of grammar. For those who get opportunities of watching children's movies, they improve their reasoning skills by meeting language used in different situations. Next, they may begin imitating the actors' voices. By doing so, they improve their speaking skills being unconscious of the fact. Thus, all this will even affect their writing process skills to which we are all exposed as students.

Some fantastic dramatic scenes also develop in children quick logical thinking ability to deal with specific instances. For example, if a child has been so far exposed to views about tricksters, he will be able to escape from such an example if he falls into it in the future. Hence, fantasy in its broadness offers children an occasion to explore the world, which is too extensive, useful, dangerous, and which is getting closer and more real to them every day. Ernest Dimnet emphasizes the need for fantasy when he claims that, "children have to be educated, but have also to be left to educate themselves." The real way of letting children learn on their own is providing them with fantastic genres. At such an age, children find no interest in things that involve deep thinking, rather they enjoy much humorous, hilarious, and fantastic ones.

Knowing the do's and don'ts of the society can also be reached. Children learn to differentiate between good qualities admired by the majority of the organization through common sense and adverse conditions which are not appreciated by the community. In such a case, they end up discovering the truth that there are norms and regulations in society to establish justice. People with bad qualities are mostly punished, but those of good ones are rewarded. In the same way, fantasy takes them into extraordinary cases, wonders, etc. They can see the magic in characters' actions but no matter what is real or unreal provided that it stimulates a kind of little thinking and questioning about the mystery which is in what they come across.

The advantage of fantasy is that it makes children love and grow a passion for reading. It can alleviate stresses in their life. After finishing one story about

imagination, they feel thirsty for reading more stories, and they find pleasure in them. Furthermore, a romance builds children up with emotional intelligence and creativity. It helps them to develop their imagination, curiosity as well as a positive attitude to be able to cooperate well with others in society. Children's personality and problem-solving are also produced.

Conclusion

All in all, fantasy is not a fantasy per se. Instead, it has a double role. First, as in its strict sense, it is meant for entertaining children as per their interests and motivation. Second, it helps them to develop their thinking ability by viewing things which they may not happen to know or see in their surroundings, by meeting characters with a range of behavior, etc. This helps them to understand the world complexity and be able to cope with it in different ways. However, some parents don't encourage children to get interested in fantasy for some reasons. Some take it for granted because they feel it is highly imaginative. Others, influenced by religious beliefs, think that fantasy could spoil their children's mind by changing them into bad, immoral, and unethical human beings. However, not only do children need to know good, moral or virtuous things but also they need to know bad ones. This will help them to understand the two perspectives of life: positive and negative, and their consequences. They will consequently opt for what is better for them. As Max Muller mentioned, "soon the child learns that there are strangers, and ceases to be a child," letting children view good things and strange as well is vital to their intellectual development.

The latter is conditioned by the opportunities they get to see, hear, and read various fantastic things related to different aspects of life. The best choice of making this happen is fantasy. It is so because when we think of what can help children to learn, we also have to think of their psyche (the human soul, mind, or spirit, etc.). It has been proved from the beginning that children like things which provoke pleasure. Fantasy is then an umbrella for all of these. Thus, it is an invitation to all parents to exciting their children about romance as it has been shown that it plays a fundamental role in children's intellectual

development. It helps them to improve reasoning power, schematic knowledge, and language skills and acquire morals of what is right and evil in society.

In the theory of memorization, it has been argued that a person remembers more something of his interest, related to fun or amusing events, etc. If you want children to learn, it is better to find something fantastic because most of them find interesting that. Through fantasy, children view different attitudes, which influence their ways of thinking. They will learn to be happy in happy circumstances (e.g., birthday, marriage, going out, etc.), to be sad or sympathetic in dire situations (e.g. sickness, accidents, death, etc.) and dangerous in severe or formal moments (e.g., class, talking to his superior, problems, etc.). Therefore, fantasy for children means a prediction of a long-life experience underlying different circumstances happening in the world. It is like a roundabout with genuine problems. Without such speculation of life experience, young children can't be able to understand what they come across in their growth physical, psychological, or intellectual.

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