

Perry M Nodelman

Professor Nodelman received his Ph.D. from Yale University in 1968 and has been teaching all aspects and every period of English literature at the University of Winnipeg ever since. He has written some hundred book reviews, several plays performed by the Cubiculo Theatre Lab in Winnipeg, and a textbook, *How to Write an Essay* (Univ. of Winnipeg Press), used in many high schools.

Joseph Jacobs
"The Well of the World's End"

J. R. R. Tolkien
"On Fairy Stories"

Bruno Bettelheim
The Uses of Enchantment

What makes a fairy tale good: The queer kindness of "The Golden Bird"

Once upon a time may have been a very good time, but as Joseph Jacobs said in "The Well of the World's End," "it wasn't in my time, nor in your time, nor anyone else's time." The difference between the magical world of fairy tales and the world we actually live in is so striking, that to some the difference is their most important quality. J. R. R. Tolkien says that the tales "open a door on Other Time, and if we pass through, though only for a moment, we stand outside our own time, outside Time itself, maybe." Even Bruno Bettelheim, who believes the main virtue of fairy tales to be their psychological usefulness, implies that the tales are beneficial simply because, on the overt level at least, they "teach little about the specific conditions of life in modern mass society; these tales were created long before it came into being."

While there is truth in these observations, it is not the whole truth about fairy tales. Fairy tales as we know them are literature, no longer part of the oral tradition that engendered them, but stories in books. They deserve the respect and the close attention we accord other works of literature. Bettelheim, for all his emphasis on the inner content of the tales, says that "the delight we experience when we allow ourselves to respond to a fairy tale, the enchantment we feel, comes not from the psychological meaning of the tale (although this contributes to it) but from its literary qualities—the tale itself as a work of art."

It is interesting that most commentators ignore the literary qualities of fairy tales; they do not seem easy to discuss. Unlike the other literature children are exposed to, they predate the literary conventions modern criticism was designed to accommodate and seem to confound contemporary techniques of analysis and evaluation.

Jacob and Wilhelm
Grimm
"The Golden Bird"

Nevertheless, those techniques are surprisingly helpful in defining the special qualities of fairy tales. It should be possible to investigate the "literary qualities" mentioned by Bettelheim and to discover what the artistry of fairy tales consists of. To do this, I have chosen to investigate a tale typical of the genre, "The Golden Bird," one of the stories collected by the Brothers Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm. It is not a tale that has seeped into the popular consciousness to the point that everybody knows it, but it is not an obscure or unusual tale either.

A literary analysis of "The Golden Bird" suggests that it has few of the virtues of good stories and most of the vices of bad ones. But the ways in which it fails to satisfy the demands of criticism turn out to be the key to its distinctiveness.

In "The Golden Bird," a king sends first one and then the other of his elder sons to find a golden bird that has been stealing his golden apples. Ignoring the good advice offered them by a fox, the elder sons give up their quest for the pleasures of a tavern. The king then sends his youngest son, who listens to the fox, avoids the tavern, and finds the bird.

But in attempting to steal the bird away, the youngest son rejects the fox's advice about not putting it in a golden cage. The bird cries out, and the son is caught. He is told that his life will be spared if he finds a golden horse. Again the fox helps him, and again he rejects the fox's advice, and puts the golden horse in a golden bridle. Captured again, the son must find a beautiful princess in order to save his life. Yet again the fox helps him, yet again he rejects the fox's advice, and yet again he is captured. This time the son is asked to move a mountain; the helpful fox does away with the mountain while the son sleeps. Joyful and obedient at last, the son now listens to the fox; as a result, he wins the princess, the horse, and the bird.

But the story is not over yet. On his way home, the youngest son discovers his brothers on the gallows and ignores the fox's advice by saving their lives. They turn against him, steal his prizes, and leave him for dead. Rescued yet once more by the fox, the youngest son regains his possessions; the older brothers are put to death, and the fox turns out to be the princess's brother, who had been under a spell. "And now there was nothing lacking to their happiness, so long as they all lived."

For all its complications, "The Golden Bird" is not much longer than my synopsis of it. That is because it is nearly all plot; the success of the story depends almost totally on our interest in the events it describes; the language it uses to communicate those events is noticeable only because it is so perfunctory.

Critical analysis thrives on linguistic subtlety; we like writing that is complex enough to require explanation. But even in the graceful version of "The Golden Bird" by Randall Jarrell, the only noticeable descriptive word is "golden"; the few other adjectives in the story merely communicate factual information. In fact, the specific words in which fairy tales are told do not seem to have much effect on our enjoyment of them. We experience the tales in translation, and at that, a translation of something that was once not written at all. And the tales seem to survive the inadequacies of all but the worst of their translators.

Furthermore, and contrary to the prejudices of criticism, the lack of stylistic ornamentation in "The Golden Bird" may be one of the sources of our enjoyment. Our delight in the mysterious otherworldliness of "once upon a time" would be spoiled if we knew that the hero's hair was auburn or that the princess's dress was an Empire-line tufted organza with a fichu and raglan sleeves. By drawing so little attention to itself, the language of "The Golden Bird" focuses our interest on the events it describes.

But those events do not seem to warrant much attention. While wonderful things happen in "The Golden Bird," anyone with even a minimal knowledge of fairy tales must admit that none of the events it describes is particularly unusual; they are clichés of the genre and not particularly entertaining in themselves. They might, however, become entertaining because of the way they are related to each other; perhaps it is the plot of the story that interests us.

Criticism asserts that a well-constructed plot is suspenseful; the way it joins events together creates interest in how they will turn out. But a perceptive reader knows soon after beginning "The Golden Bird" how the story will end. The only real question is how long it will take. After the hero has made his first wrong choice and placed the golden bird in the golden cage, the story could finish at the end of any of its episodes, without damage to its meaning or our interest in it. The story establishes a pattern, one that could be repeated indefinitely; and there is no suspense unless a pattern is broken. If "The Golden Bird" is entertaining it is not because of the excellence of its plot; that the story is little more than a plot and that it still entertains us only frustrates the manipulations of criticism.

An analysis of character as the story presents it is just as frustrating. We believe that good fiction describes complex personalities in a subtle way, and the characters in "The Golden Bird" are not complicated. The king is kingly, his sons stupid; but we learn nothing of their inner lives. In fact, the little personality the youngest son displays turns out to be a liability. The only decisions he makes for himself are bad ones, and his luck improves only when he stops acting for himself and trusts the fox.

Our critical assumptions also tell us that well-drawn characters grow and change in response to their experiences. The characters in "The Golden Bird" are static. They cannot grow because they do not change. In fact, they find it hard to respond to experience at all. At the beginning of the story, the king is convinced that his youngest son is worthless, and he does not want to send him into the garden to discover who has been stealing apples. But when the youngest son betters his brothers by discovering the thief, the king refuses to respond to experience—he sends first one, and then the other of the two brothers who have already shown their incompetence to find the golden bird.

The hero himself is just as inflexible as his father. It takes him a long time to learn his lesson and do what the fox tells him to do. And the fox, who appears to be the only wise being in the story, is just as inflexible in his unchanging evaluation of and commitment to the hero, who disappoints him continually.

Analysis suggests that the characters in "The Golden Bird" are too simple and too static to engage our interest. But that may be a virtue; since we do not have to worry about motivation or development, we can simply enjoy what happens.

In fact some commentators suggest that the simplicity of fairy tales is their main virtue, particularly because it allows the tales to make uncomplicated moral statements. Joan E. Cass says that "many of the old folk- and fairy tales provide simple, clear-cut patterns, where wrongdoing is punished and goodness justified." But investigation of "The Golden Bird" shows that its apparently clear-cut morality is not so clear-cut after all.

While "The Golden Bird" appears to be a story in which virtue triumphs, a closer look reveals that it praises vice; in particular, thievery. The hero is a successful thief, and is rewarded not only with his booty, but also with a kingdom. His brothers, who are unsuccessful thieves, are punished with death. Success seems to be more important than adherence to the Ten Commandments.

Furthermore, the story provides no evidence to justify our faith that the hero is good enough to deserve his rewards; in fact, it does the opposite. The elder brothers lose our trust when they are too proud to listen to the fox; the youngest does listen to the fox, and gains our respect. But he does so only once. On four consecutive occasions he is just as obtuse and as self-confident as his brothers were. Nevertheless, he is young, he is helped by a supernatural figure, and he does win out in the end; these things demand our faith in his goodness, and no matter what he actually does, we continue to think of him as good. In "The Golden Bird" good and evil are static, unchanging categories, quite separate from the evidence of actual behavior.

Ironically, however, its refusal to consider the implications of conduct seems to allow "The Golden Bird" to give us one of the things we want from it—a

happy ending. As any student of moral philosophy knows, attempts to investigate the nature of goodness only lead to confusion. Better to ignore the subtleties, take goodness for granted, and let it triumph. "The Golden Bird" does that; but we certainly cannot admire either the clear-cut simplicity or the consistency of its morality.

The theme of the story, which seems just as simple and clear-cut as its morality, is just as inconsistent. The main idea of "The Golden Bird" is easy to discern: things are not what they seem. The king assumes his youngest son is less capable than his older brothers; but things are not what they seem. The older brothers choose a pleasant-looking inn over an unpleasant one; but things are not what they seem. The youngest brother assumes that a golden bird deserves a golden cage, and a golden horse a golden bridle; that beheading a fox is wrong; and that his brothers can be trusted. In each case, things are not what they seem.

But things are not what they seem in "The Golden Bird" as a whole either. The fox insists that the hero not trust appearances, against all the demands of logic. But he *must* trust the fox, which is the most illogical thing of all. And the story itself demands our trust as readers; if we stopped to question the existence of a golden bird or the disappearance of a mountain, the story would lose its power over us. It works only if we refuse to act on the idea it expresses.

In sum, then, critical analysis suggests that "The Golden Bird" is inadequate, its language unsubtle, its plot without suspense, its characters static, its morality and theme inconsistent. None of its literary components withstands the close attention of criticism.

But continuing the analysis does make one thing clear; the apparent failure of each of its components results from the story's refusal to engage the intelligence of its readers. The bias of criticism is that reading literature is an act of understanding – understanding events by responding to a writer's ability to describe them (style), understanding how events are tied together (plot), understanding personality (character), understanding what goodness consists of (morality), understanding ideas (theme). "The Golden Bird" does not require its readers to understand anything more than that some wonderful things happened.

Even if we have heard of similar occurrences in other fairy tales, the events described in "The Golden Bird" are beyond the pale of ordinary experience, and their magical otherworldliness is their most important quality. But the story itself expresses no excitement about the events it describes. When the fox talks to the oldest son, his reaction is, "How can a foolish animal possibly give me reasonable advice?" He might well have asked how the foolish animal could talk to him at all. But he doesn't. The story asks none of the obvious questions about the wondrous events it describes, and makes no attempt to explain them.

This lack of astonishment at the astonishing, the most surprising thing about "The Golden Bird" seems to be the key to its effect on us. If unusual occurrences are not explained, if they are not even worth getting excited about, then they seem inevitable. Things merely happen. If the story does not question them, we must accept them also.

But "The Golden Bird" does not simply suggest that unblinking acceptance is the proper attitude to the astonishing irrationality of the world it describes; it also implies that, seen properly, that world is not so irrational after all. There is a pattern, even if the logic of its operations is unfathomable. One will get the bird if one can get the horse. One can get the horse if one can get the princess; and so on. Once having accepted what appears to be frighteningly illogical, one learns to discern the logic in it, and to trust its operations.

In fact, that seems to be what "The Golden Bird" is all about. The hero has his happy ending when he stops thinking for himself and simply lets things happen to him. Up to that point he has only worked himself deeper into trouble. But like the characters in many fairy tales, he is rewarded as soon as he becomes passive. Just as Snow White and Sleeping Beauty triumph by going to sleep, the hero of "The Golden Bird" triumphs by sleeping while the fox removes the mountain, and by thereafter doing what he is told to do.

Furthermore, the story creates in us an urgent need for the hero to be passive. As he continues to make the same mistake again and again, the pressure builds to have him stop trying to act independently, to give in to the pattern of the mystery and accept it. Our interest in his character is created by our desire to have him be without character. Suspense is created, not by the events themselves or by their relationship to each other, but by our need to have them end the right way, and by the numerous times the story thwarts us by not yet ending the right way. Our satisfaction reaches its height when they do end that way. And our moral awareness is aroused by our understanding that it is not a rule we are dealing with, but an attitude; the point is not whether or not one is a thief, but whether or not one can be sensible enough to take the world for granted. The person who takes it most for granted is granted most of its gifts.

This profound praise of placidity runs counter to our most deeply held contemporary convictions about existence. It is no wonder that the world of fairy tales seems strikingly different from "the specific conditions of life in modern mass society."

G. K. Chesterton
"The Ethics of
Elfland"

But it may not be so different after all. Speaking of his own childhood, G. K. Chesterton once said that "the fairy tales founded in me two convictions; first that this world is a wild and startling place, which might have been quite different, but which is quite delightful; second, that before this wildness and delight one may well be modest and submit to the queerest limitations of so queer a kindness." Chesterton believed that the "wild and startling place" described in fairy tales was actually the world he lived in. He may have been right.

Rebecca J. Lukens
*A Critical Handbook
of Children's
Literature*

The world we inhabit is mysterious to us. If it were not, we would have no interest in reading about it. The common assumption that "literature . . . gives order and form to experience and shows life's unity and meaning" is undeniably true; but its corollary is that we spend much of our lives not understanding life's meaning. Trying to understand it is one way of coping with the mystery. In describing its own wondrous world so matter of factly, "The Golden Bird" may in fact imply another, equally satisfying response to the wonders of the real world: "before this wildness and delight one may well be modest and submit." I suspect our pleasure in fairy tales like "The Golden Bird" stems from our enjoyment of their placid acceptance of existence.

For children, the "wild and startling place" described in "The Golden Bird" may seem no more unusual than it did to Chesterton. All of us must cope with the mysterious inexplicability of the world we live in, but as any parent knows who has tried to explain to a child why the grass is green or why Cleveland isn't called Chicago, children confront it in an especially intense way. As neophytes in a complex world, children are constantly exposed to new facts and new mysteries; their cheerful willingness to broaden their horizons in order to accommodate whatever new information comes along is admirably echoed by the matter-of-fact attitude of "The Golden Bird." If a child's view of the world is always shifting in response to new, strange things, then he will find the world described in fairy tales very satisfying indeed; particularly when fairy tales insist by their very lack of astonishment that acceptance is possible, and that being shocked by experience and not understanding it can be enjoyable. Paul Hazard once said that fairy tales "date from the primeval ages of humanity . . . in listening to them, we link ourselves to the most remote members of our race." If we do, then the theories of the psychologist Jean Piaget, who thought his investigations suggested "possible resemblances between the thought of the child and that of primitive man," are especially relevant. For children, the world of fairy tales may be an accurate image of their real world.

Paul Hazard
*Books, Children
and Men*

Jean Piaget
*"The Mental
Development
of the Child"*

If this is so, then tales like "The Golden Bird" ought to be particularly entertaining for children. In fact, a calm acceptance of what ought to be astonishing, so profoundly expressed by fairy tales, may be a quality of all good literature for children; perhaps of all good literature. For if literature "gives form and order to experience," its content is the unwieldy and bewildering substance of life itself; and the order literature imposes on that bewildering substance allows us to accept and delight in it. Perhaps fairy tales accept bewildering events more complacently than most literature does; but the order any work of literature imposes on existence is more significant for the satisfaction it offers than for what it specifically consists of. The queer kindness of "The Golden Bird" is only a little queerer than the queer kindness of all good literature.

References

- Bettelheim, Bruno (1976) *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* New York: Knopf
- Cass, Joan E. (1967) *Literature and the Young Child* London: Longmans
- Chesterton, G. K. (rpr. 1970) "The Ethics of Elfland" *G. K. Chesterton: A Selection from his Non-Fictional Prose* (ed. W. H. Auden). London: Faber and Faber
- Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm (1973) "The Golden Bird" in *The Juniper Tree and Other Tales From Grimm* (Lore Segal and Randall Jarrell, trans.) New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux
- Hazard, Paul (1944) *Books, Children and Men* (Marguerite Mitchell, trans.), Boston: The Horn Book
- Jacobs, Joseph (1890, 1894, rpr. 1968) "The Well of the World's End" *English Fairy Tales* Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Puffin; New York: Schocken
- Lukens, Rebecca J. (1976) *A Critical Handbook of Children's Literature* Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman
- Piaget, Jean (1967) "The Mental Development of the Child" *Six Psychological Studies* (Anita Tenzer, trans.) New York: Vintage
- Tolkien, J. R. R. (1964) "On Fairy Stories" *Tree and Leaf* London: Unwin; Boston: Houghton Mifflin