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ENG 250

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Unusual Methods of Didacticism and the View of the Child in *The Phantom Tollbooth*

Children’s literature was very close to missing out on Norton Juster’s instant classic, *The Phantom Tollbooth*. At the time, Juster had been approached by his architectural firm to write a book about architecture for children, but he wrote *The Phantom Tollbooth* instead (*Beyond Expectations*). While we will never know what the world would be like without this incredible novel, it had a tremendous effect on the children of the 1960’s as well as the generations thereafter. *The Phantom Tollbooth* is simultaneously an allegory of children’s education and social problems, as well as a remedy for education’s shortfalls. The clever didacticism and accurate depiction of its main character, Milo, as The Developing Child make *The Phantom Tollbooth* wonderfully conducive to how children learn best.

Didactic literature can generally be defined as, “a text or passage that explicitly teaches a lesson, whether moral, political, religious, social, or practical” (Hintz 553). Child psychologists Bettelheim and Zelan assert that, “learning, particularly learning to read, must give the child the feeling that through it new worlds will be opened to his mind and imagination” (50). A phenomenal example of a didactic novel that is engaging and entertaining for children to read, *The Phantom Tollbooth* is the literary equivalent of hiding nutritious cauliflower in a batch of mashed potatoes; absolutely enjoyable (almost to the point of guilty pleasure), but also enriching.

As the story begins, Milo finds himself bored and discontented with the world around him, lacking curiosity and enthusiasm. “Since no one bothered to explain otherwise, he regarded the process of seeking knowledge as the greatest waste of time of all” (Juster 9). By the end of his adventure, Milo does not regard the quest for knowledge as unnecessary, but instead faces the world with a renewed fervor and thirst for discovery.

While satire typically functions in such a way that it makes texts more serious than humorous, this is not the case in nonsense literature. Rather, “humor seems to be a necessary component; although the nonsense aspects, and the humor generated, often act as a veil or mask, saying what might be rejected or censored by society if it was expressed any other way” (Cross 104). One example of this concept in *The Phantom Tollbooth* is Officer Shrift, who changes between policeman, judge, and jailer as desired. While the exchange between Milo and Officer Shrift is humorous and engaging, it also allows young readers to infer that they are likely to face corrupt authority figures throughout their lives. Milo learns something else important from his experience with Officer Shrift: “‘You know something, Tock?’ he said as he wound up the dog. ‘You can get in a lot of trouble mixing up words or just not knowing how to spell them. If we ever get out of here, I’m going to make sure to learn all about them’” (Juster 65).

Any discussion of *The Phantom Tollbooth* is lacking without mention of Tock, the Watchdog. A literal watchdog, Tock has the head, legs and tail of a dog – but his body is an alarm clock. He is Milo’s companion on his journey through The Lands Beyond, and his wisdom is indispensable. When Tock explains to Milo how he became a watchdog, Tock mentions that, “they began to count all the time that was available, what with 60 seconds in a minute and 60 minutes in an hour and 24 hours in a day and 365 days in a year” (Juster 34). In a conversation between characters, Juster was able to smoothly communicate these facts about time to children. Tock is a particularly lovely example of Juster’s humorous didacticism through nonsense and silly characters.

Juster cleverly employs many methods of word play to enhance his story. When Milo meets the DYNNE, a character who loves awful sounds, Juster uses onomatopoeia to illustrate the character: “As she spoke, the familiar and unmistakable *squinch-squanch, quinch-squanch* of the DYNNE’s heavy footsteps could be heard plodding over the hill, and when he finally appeared he was dragging an incredibly large sack behind him” (163). Instead of describing things plainly, Juster will occasionally use contrast instead, for example the description of the package the titular tollbooth arrived in: “For, while it was not quite square, it was definitely not round, and for its size it was larger than almost any other big package of smaller dimension that he’d ever seen” (11).

Just as a discussion of *The Phantom Tollbooth* would be lacking without mention of Tock the Watchdog, we owe acknowledgement to one of the most prevalent sorts of word play and humor in *The Phantom Tollbooth*: puns. While Juster’s use of puns was almost certainly intended to be humorous, his puns are also some of the most didactic parts of the book. Some of the puns are didactic about life in general, while others provide insight into popular idioms. When Milo needs to load a cannon with a sound, he holds the word “but” literally on the tip of his tongue (Juster 160). On jumping to conclusions, Juster also has wisdom to dispense: “‘But how did we get here?’ asked Milo, who was still a bit puzzled by being there at all. ‘You jumped, of course,’ explained Canby. ‘That’s the way most everyone gets here. It’s really quite simple: every time you decide something without having a good reason, you jump to Conclusions whether you like it or not. It’s such an easy trip to make that I’ve been here hundreds of times’” (168).

Examining the text of *The Phantom Tollbooth*, specifically Milo’s character development, we can conclude that Juster used The Developing Child as the model of childhood in his story. The Developing Child can be defined as a view that is “in contrast to the child who is radically other from the adult and who possesses the potential to abruptly transform from one into the other, the developing child slowly becomes the adult over time. Recognizing the figure of the developing child prompts the reader to consider the process whereby the child is transformed and the milestones that mark those transitions” (Hintz 57). When we first meet Milo, he is listless and uninspired by life. “As he and his unhappy thoughts hurried along (for while he was never anxious to be where he was going, he liked to get there as quickly as possible) it seemed a great wonder that the world, which was so large, could sometimes feel so small and empty” (Juster 11). He was disinterested in his toys, bored with his books, and could not understand the point of seeking an education.

Milo’s quest, once he enters The Lands Beyond, is to rescue the princesses Rhyme and Reason. Their banishment has led to rising tension between King Azaz and the Mathemagician as both brothers believe that they reign over the superior kingdom. The brothers are unable to communicate – unbeknownst to them – because King Azaz writes letters with words, while the Mathemagician corresponds through numbers. “‘But maybe he doesn’t understand numbers,’ said Milo, who found it a little difficult to read himself. ‘NONSENSE!’ bellowed the Mathemagician. ‘Everyone understands numbers. No matter what language you speak, they always mean the same thing. A seven is a seven anywhere in the world’” (Juster 199). Through this conflict, Juster tackles the social problem of lack of consilience between sciences and humanities, demonstrating that they are equally important and work best when used together. Juster does acknowledge that neither science nor humanities are superior: “Words and numbers are of equal value, for, in the cloak of knowledge, one is warp and the other woof” (77). Even the locations of the two kingdoms of Dictionopolis and Digitopolis within The Lands Beyond provide a warning, for separating these two lands are the Mountains of Ignorance. Without the union of Dictionopolis and Digitopolis, all of the citizens of The Lands Beyond are in danger of invasion by the evil creatures dwelling in the Mountains of Ignorance. In their Master’s thesis, Huai-Yang Lim says that, “Milo’s use of the various items that he acquires through his journey to overcome the traps in the Mountains of Ignorance metaphorically represent Juster’s desire to deal with societal problems through a collective pooling of disciplinary talents; only through the combined use of all disciplines does Milo rescue Rhyme and Reason” (58).

Through his unusual method of didacticism, his view of The Developing Child, and Milo’s adventures, Norton Juster provides excellent commentary on childhood and education encapsulated in a clever, entertaining novel. Juster gives children age-appropriate warnings and information about struggles they may encounter throughout their lives, including less-than-trustworthy authority figures and the battle between science and the humanities. We have all been like Milo in the beginning of *The Phantom Tollbooth* at some point or other in our lives, and Milo’s adventure can remind children and adults alike of the joy and fulfillment education, whether through formal school or adventure, can bring. Readers will finish the book with a renewed zeal for their own personal education and development.

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