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Give Us Wings

Lucile Klauser

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Address by Professor Lucile Klauser
on the occasion of the
Century Club Dinner
May 2, 1975
Memorial Student Center
Illinois Wesleyan University

Dr. Klauser had been chosen by the faculty,
students and administration as recipient of the
Century Club Award for 1975

GIVE US WINGS

by Lucile Klauser

The call of the wild geese in their yearly round-trip flight never ceases to arouse in me a sense of awe and wonder. Whether their greetings come to me on a late fall evening or an early spring morning, I always want to go outside and watch as, with a perfect V formation, they move gracefully and rhythmically through the clouds and across the sky. As their honking gradually dies away and they become mere specks in the distance, I am transported momentarily into a dream world; and I feel a bit lonesome, like a left-behind earthling longing to follow after. Perhaps it is the freedom of their flight that fascinates me, or possibly it is my sudden realization that a new season is about to begin and my world will be different. The thought is exhilarating! But with that thought comes the frightening awareness that the difference will be only environmental. The real change will be my responsibility.

It was the flight of the wild geese that first suggested to me the title for this speech "Give Us Wings." Let that title say to you what you want it to say. *My* thesis relates to children's literature – a special type called "modern fantasy," and whereas the points I wish to make will relate to the contributions of that type of literature to changes that can occur in the lives of children, I hope that it will also reveal part of my philosophy regarding an adult's responsibilities in the education of young people.

Currently, a major emphasis in literature for children is on realism. There are sensitively written books which present situations that children can enjoy and characters with whom they can identify; there are also books which I call "oppressive realism," for their primary stress is on negative aspects of life which can depress the reader or motivate him to perform acts detrimental, even fatal, to himself and to others. Feeling that it is a responsibility of an educator to guide children toward literature that will help them understand themselves and others and also will stimulate thinking and creativity, I have selected modern fantasy as a medium to support my beliefs. In addition to presenting situations which, in the context of the story, seem possible and plausible, books of modern fantasy contain an added dimension that I think is important: They take the reader beyond his material surroundings and let him vicariously experience another kind of life – one which, if presented artistically, can make his own world acceptable, understandable, and challenging.

Modern fantasy, or the literary fairy tale, differs from the traditional one by virtue of having an author. We accredit its

creation to Hans Christian Andersen and its arrival in the English-speaking world to Mary Howitt, who translated Andersen's *Fairy Tales* into English in 1846.

Many of Andersen's first fairy tales were his versions of some of the traditional tales that had been passed down by word of mouth and put together by collectors and philologists who had listened to many different tellings. Soon, however, Andersen discarded the oral tradition and gave to the literary world a type of literature with a reality base but primarily designed to enlarge the child's world of imagination. When one reads Andersen, the characters, no matter how humble, never fail to make an impact on the reader. Simple common things like a fir tree, a tin soldier, a candle, a teapot become live characters with unique personalities that tug at the heart strings of the reader as they show cruelty, sorrow, and death at the same time that they are introducing the many varieties of human beings and experiences that affect one's inner life.

> Fantasy is a catch-all term that encompasses everything from Homer and Swift and Kafka to Poe, Milton, and *The Turn of the Screw*. Science fiction is a part of fantasy; so is the literature of gothic horror and children's books like Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* with its forty odd sequels. Any genre so broad as to include both *Dracula* and *Utopia* needs further defining.[1]

The term *fantasy* as it will be dealt with in this paper is that kind of literature "that reflects reality through unreality, that interprets life through illusion. Its values are the values of imagination."[2] It is the kind of literature that transports its readers from their world as it is to a world as they see it or as they would like to have it or as one in which they lose themselves for a time and then emerge, somewhat changed by the experiences that they have had.

In an easay entitled "World beyond World," Pamela Travers, the author of *Mary Poppins,* suggests that it is a mark of a great writer of fantasy to lead his reader into the unknown without the reader's being aware of its unreality, its strangeness; for being so absorbed in this world beyond the visible world, the reader surrenders himself to the particular data being revealed to him. He feels secure in his fantasy world. "In order to fly," Travers says, "[we] need firm ground to take off from. In airiness [then] we lose all sense of air, let alone earth. . . . It is solidity that gives us wings."[3]

Children are born with that kind of solidity. "Making believe is not only one of their earliest pleasures; it is . . . the token of

their liberty. Reason does not curb them, for they have not yet learned their restraints."[4]

Recall, if you will, Dr. Seuss's first and still very popular contribution to modern fantasy, *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street.* In this book, the author shows us through lively pictures and rhythmic verse the fantastic imagination of young Marco, whose father had told him to be observing on his way to and from school. On his way home, Marco says to himself:

All the long way to school
And all the way back,
I've looked and I've looked
And I've kept careful track.
But all that I've noticed,
Except my own feet,
Was a plain horse and wagon
on Mulberry Street.[5]

But at that point Marco's imagination takes over: the horse and wagon begin to go through a series of transformations until they become a circus wagon complete with band and calliope, drawn by an elephant and two giraffes, escorted by three policemen, hailed by the mayor and the alderman, covered by confetti from a low-flying plane, accompanied by

A Chinaman who eats with sticks
A big Magician doing tricks,
A ten-foot beard that needs a comb . . .

By then our Marco's almost home. Knowing that his father has no taste for outlandish tales nor any understanding of the magical powers that can turn minnows into whales, when Marco reaches home and is asked what he saw, he is forced to return to reality and say what is expected of him: "I just saw a plain horse and wagon on Mulberry Street." We adults smile at the situation and children may laugh at it. But the children find reality in it. Such stories are play for the child, for they take him away from the familiarity of his everyday world and quickly put him into an imaginary one where he must find his own way. Most children accept the fact that they are alone in their world of imagination, even though they may at the same time be playing with other children. They like to be alone in that world, for they can see for themselves things that no one else can see; *they* and *only they* know *exactly* what's happening on Mulberry Street.

Children's powers of intuition have not been repressed by the confining powers of the intellect. Fortunately, children can allow their imaginations to roam freely because, unlike the adult, they are not prisoners of the *known* world. "It is the allure of the

unknown which captures [their] fancy and makes of them explorers, seekers, characters in stories of [their] own great adventures."[6] They can have those experiences in modern fantasy or the literary fairy tale. They can, that is, if adults will allow them to. Paul Hazard, in his book, *Books, Children, and Men,* reminds us that grownups have never completely understood children and that the history of their relations with children contains misunderstandings along with good intentions that seldom achieve their purpose. To quote from Hazard:

> [Adults] do not act from unkindness, but the fact remains that, hearing childhood ask for their help, grownups refuse to give it what it needs, and offer it instead what it detests . . . some useful bit of massive and indigestible knowledge, some bit of authoritative ethics to be applied externally without any internal consent.
>
> We can hear those voices in turn, children and men, talking together without understanding each other:
>
> "Give us books," say the children. "Give us wings. You who are powerful and strong, help us to escape into the faraway. . . . We are willing to learn everything that we are taught at school, but, please, let us *keep* our dreams."[7]

Children need that land of make-believe which has a logic all its own and is supported by the rearrangement of the realities experienced in their everyday world. What adult could read Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*[8] without recognizing reality in unreality? With an obvious understanding of children, the author shows us Max, a little boy who is sent to his room for cavorting around in his wolf suit and acting like a wild thing. While confined to his room, Max imagines himself traveling "through night and day and in and out of weeks and almost over a year to where the wild things are,"[9] and becoming their ruler while at the same time sharing in their rumpus. In keeping with childhood's brief flight into an imaginary world, the story soon returns Max, lonely for home and food, to the warm comforts of reality – his own room where supper is waiting for him and it is still hot.

That book offers the momentary escape that children ask for and need when they say, "Give us wings" – a moment of wild adventure followed by a refreshed return to a relatively calmer reality. This need for escape is common to everyone and particularly to children, who are continually being pressured to conform.

Tradition has instilled into each generation of children and adults the idea that *only* when they are consciously applying their intellect to books in the pursuit of knowledge will they become

truly educated. Such terms as *love, humaneness, empathy, compassion,* and *imagination* are too infrequently given any consideration in the process of education. Yet they are the intangibles that contribute to the establishment of human relationships and the development of creativity. Consider creativity the rearrangement of known elements into new combinations. Then consider what fantasy can do to stimulate creativity. An interesting statement on this point is found in Kornei Chukovsky's book entitled *From Two to Five:*

> Without imaginative fantasy [Chukovsky says] there would be complete stagnation in both physics and chemistry because the formulation of new hypotheses, the invention of new implements, the discovery of new methods of experimental research, the conjecturing of new chemical fusions – all these are products of imagination and fantasy.[10]

Tolkien calls fantasy "a natural human activity," one that neither blunts the appetite *for* nor obscures the perception *of* scientific verity. The keener and the clearer the reason, the better the fantasy.

> If men were ever in the state in which they did not want to know or could not perceive truth . . . , then fantasy would languish until they were cured. . . . For creative fantasy is founded on the hard recognition that things *are so* in the world as it appears under the sun; on a *recognition* of fact but surely not as slavery to it.[11]

So upon logic was founded the fantasy that displays itself in such stories as Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass,* Kenneth Grahame's *Wind in the Willows,* Mary Norton's *The Borrowers,* E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web,* Carlo Lorenzini's *Pinocchio* – each a representative of a fantasy based on logic, of a fantasy that gives its reader reality in unreality.

James F. Higgins, in his book *Beyond Words,* expresses my feeling concerning the demands placed upon the reader by that kind of literature. He says:

> They ask [the reader] to do more than read. They ask him to grow angry and to be sad, to laugh and to cry, to remember and to project, to feel the softness and sometimes the harshness of the elements, to judge and to show compassion, to imagine and to wonder. These are the books which recognize the inner [person] and so reach out to him, leading him forth to share experiences beyond his immediate, tangible horizons.[12]

Because all works of fantasy in some way attempt to make the intangible concrete, they stimulate the imagination and the intuition at the same time that they challenge the intellect. Sensitively written, they make an important difference in the lives of their readers — whether those readers are children or adults.

Fantasy prompts the reader to *follow* Alice down the rabbit hole and through the looking glass, to *ride* with Ase under the magic of Peer Gynt's spell; and to *come in* on the East Wind and *leave* on the West Wind with Mary Poppins. Part of the appeal of fantasy is the introduction of characters who have the privilege of moving magically back and forth from the possible to the impossible or from the serious to the absurd.

My definition of fantasy, you will remember, is "that kind of literature that reflects reality through unreality, that interprets life through illusion." To this point, my references to that kind of fantasy have been stories with appeal mainly for pre-adolescents; but there are also for the older reader books that portray a fanciful realism. Books on this level need to be judged not by "how far out the imagination of the writer [takes] his readers but rather by the degree to which he can make the reader believe in the world he has created. And after they have believed, finally returning them to their own world,"[13] which, as a result of their experiences, will be different from the one they left.

One such book, awarded the Newbery medal as the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children in 1965, is Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time,* a science-based fantasy.[14] Adults as well as adolescents will enjoy that book, and adults can appreciate the overtones.

When the story opens, a storm is raging outside, while, within the cozy kitchen, twelve-year-old Meg Murray and her brother Charles Wallace, a precocious five-year-old, are having a midnight snack of cocoa and sandwiches with their mother — a very realistic setting. But suddenly into this family group comes a strange old woman named Mrs. Whatsit, apparently known only to Charles Wallace. She explains that she was "caught in a down draft and blown off course" and, realizing that she was at Charles Wallace's house, decided to come in and rest a bit. The family welcome her and invite her to share their snack with them. After a short visit, Mrs. Whatsit departs with one final word to Mrs. Murray: "There *is* such a thing as a tesseract," says Mrs. Whatsit. Mrs. Murray becomes very pale and says nothing. A tesseract, described as a "wrinkle in time," is what the children's father had been working on when he disappeared. All that the family have been told about his disappearance is that he is on a secret and dangerous mission

and won't be able to communicate with them for awhile. The day after Mrs. Whatsit's visit, Meg, Charles Wallace, and their friend Calvin O'Keefe are quite mysteriously transported from earth into space by what seemed like a faint gust of wind. They travel by tesseracting (using a fifth dimension) to the planet of Camasotz, where all persons are under the influence of IT, an oversized brain. IT controls all thought and behavior in Camasotz; thus there is no chance for individuality. Meg fights IT by using independent thought. When recognizing Meg's strategy, IT says, "But what we have on Camasotz is complete equality – everyone exactly alike." It is Meg's answer, then, that gives a major theme of the story: "No," she says. "Like and equal are not the same thing at all." The author's message – that each individual should have an equal opportunity to pursue his separate goals – is clear to the discerning reader. Mr. Murray, who is, of course, a prisoner in Camasotz, is rescued, as is also Charles Wallace, who in the flight had also come under the spell of IT. It is Meg's love as opposed to the powerful evil force of IT that saves her father and her brother. With the conquering of IT, everyone tesseracts back to earth where their lives continue from where they had been, except for their new-found knowledge about good and evil as well as the recognition of the power of love. The author suggests love as a means of "breaking down our modern impersonal society, since one has to rely on the love of others to build inner strength and security."[15]

In that book, the fantasy reinforces realism – the realism represented by hope and fear, doubt and reassurance, need and the fulfillment of need. It is in the encounter with these facts that people develop uniquely human values – the values that adults want to develop in children and share with them.

A book should be judged not by the number of readers attracted to it but by the quality of experience enjoyed by those readers who are attracted to it, however small that number might be. In the high pressure world of today, bounded on all sides by the pedestrianism of radio, television, and harsh reality, it is quite possible that young readers may not have the opportunity to become attracted to certain fantasy worlds. And even possessing windborne tendencies, these young people may be given no chance to use them.

The fantasy worlds of Middle Earth in the Tolkien books, Narnia in C. S. Lewis's seven chronicles, and Prydain in Lloyd Alexander's five Chronicles of Prydain are rich in adventure and enchantment. They also contain another element rarely found in today's literature – a hero.

In Tolkien's book for children, *The Hobbit,*[16] Bilbo Baggins is the hero. One of the many little people called "hobbits," who love peace and quiet and the comforts of home, Bilbo sets out with thirteen dwarfs and the Wizard Gandolf in search of a treasure which had been stolen by a dragon centuries before. Frightened and insecure as Bilbo is at the beginning of this adventure, it is he who, after battling the powerful dragon and coping with many other perils in Middle Earth, returns to his home with the magic Ring of Power—the power being, as Bilbo understands it, to make the wearer invisible — a useful gift if one is trying to avoid dragons.

Is it logical to say that the journey which Bilbo made is comparable to that in the legends that tell of the knight's search for the Holy Grail? May we not say that the little hobbit is much like Galahad and that, in essence, his quest is a spiritual journey? Obviously, Bilbo himself is not aware of any spiritual discovery; at least, so far as the reader knows, he isn't. Yet, at the end of his dangerous pilgrimage, he finds something much more valuable to him than the Ring of Power; we are sure of that when we hear the Wizard say "My dear Bilbo! Something is the matter with you! You are not the hobbit that you were." Even though Bilbo may not know it, he has found himself.[17]

I called Bilbo Baggins the hero of *The Hobbit;* but, in reality, he can't be called a true hero. He *is* virtuous — a creature with a conscience and a sense of dedication — but the reader is never allowed to think that Bilbo is really brave. He just manages to summon up enough courage to do the things that he thinks must be done if he is to maintain his own self respect. Children recognize and need that kind of courage. Significant to all readers is the comment of Gandolf, the Wizard, to Bilbo years after the quest:

> You don't really suppose, do you, that all your adventures and escapes were managed by mere luck just for your sole benefit? You are a very fine person, Mr. Baggins, and I am very fond of you; but you are only quite a little fellow in a wide world after all.[18]

When C. S. Lewis began his seven chronicles of Narnia, he wrote specifically for children. The seven books tell the story of that other world, Narnia, which is protected by the mystical lion Aslan. In the first book, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe,*[19] four children merely by walking through the door of the wardrobe, reach Narnia, a strange and other-worldly place in which there is continuous winter without any Christmas, for Narnia is under the spell of a Wicked White Witch. The children have many thrilling experiences as they meet the friendly animals, the giants, the

satyrs, and the noble lion Aslan. They help Aslan free Narnia from the spell of the White Witch and thus bring back spring. The children become kings and queens of Narnia and reign for many years; to their great surprise, when they return home, they find that they have never been missed.

A summary of all of the chronicles of Narnia would in itself be a long paper; yet a discussion of fantasy could not be complete without at least some mention of them. C. S. Lewis has the unique ability to put into his stories symbolic meaning which may or may not be recognized, depending much on the maturity of the reader. Never at any time does he talk down to children; but always in the Narnia books his essential aim is to give children exciting experiences that they can enjoy, appreciate, and understand at their own level. When at the end of the third book of the series, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader,* Aslan tells the children that they will not be summoned to Narnia again, the mature reader will understand why. I consider the following quote significant to my reality-unreality emphasis:

> "You are too old, children," said Aslan, "and you must begin to come close to your own world now."
>
> "It isn't Narnia, you know," said Lucy. "It's *you.* We shan't meet *you* there. And how can we live, never meeting you?"
>
> "But you shall meet me, dear one," said Aslan.
>
> "Are . . . you there too, Sir?" said Edmund.
>
> "I am," said Aslan. "But there I have another name. You must learn to know me by that name. This was the very reason why you were brought to Narnia, that by knowing me here for a little while, you may know me better there."[20]

If there are readers who object to Christian symbolism in stories, perhaps they won't find it in the Narnia books. Lewis puts no pressure on them to do so. They cannot help seeing, though, an exciting mixture of children's desires and imaginings, myths and legends of the past, and conflicts of good and evil. Lewis sees the story of man on earth as being little different from the events that occur in Narnia —

> . . . a world peopled by creatures who are free to choose, [but one that must also be] a world of preferences. The story of Earth, as Lewis narrates it, is a battle between the forces of love and the forces of hate, with the prize being the hearts of men. Even young readers suspect from very early in the chronicles that Aslan is something more than a lion.[21]

It is quite possible that the Prydain Chronicles of Lloyd Alexander do not appeal to every reader, but I know of no other series of fantasy books that present reality through unreality as skillfully as they do. The five books are *The Book of Three; The Black Caldron; The Castle of Lyr; Taran, the Wanderer;* and *The High King.* A primary source of these books is the central text of Welsh mythology, *The Mabinogian.* The five books present Taran, the hero, in numerous exciting and dangerous experiences as he attempts to find out who he is. In the first of this five-book cycle, *The Book of Three,* Taran does not have status, for he is just an Assistant Pig Keeper, but the pig that he keeps, Hen Wen, has unusual powers of prophecy. It is the escape of Hen Wen that starts Taran on his many adventures, which in reality are his search for his own identity.

All of the characters in these five books cross an imagined, early medieval world. They encounter monsters, dwarfs, bandits, magicians, outlaws, enchantresses, and hags. They search for treasures, venture into faerie realms, and deal with many curious beings. It is a long adventure for Taran and for the reader, but an adventure which once started has to be completed. I consider the books unique in their inventiveness, with the uniqueness residing not in objects or persons but in *feelings for* persons. The pace, the strength of characterizations, and the humor of the dialogue are sustained throughout the five books, but not until the reader completes the last book, *The High King* [22] (also a Newbery award book), does he see the theme emerge: when Taran sees the victory of good over evil and also realizes that his worth, whatever it is, depends upon his ability and his accomplishments, not upon his position. From an Assistant Pig Keeper, he has ascended to that of High King of Prydain, but with much humility he listens to and accepts the words of his lifetime guardian and wise man, Dallben, when Dallben explains the Book of Three, the book of prophecy, and, in a way, summarizes the emphasis in the cycle:

> The book is thus called because it tells all three parts of our lives: the past, the present, and the future. But it could well be called the book of *if. If* you had failed at your tasks; *if* you had followed an evil path; *if* you had been slain; *if* you had not chosen as you did – a thousand *if's,* my boy, and many times a thousand. *The Book of Three* can say no more than *If* until at the end, of all things that might have been, one alone becomes what really is. For the deeds of a man, not the words of a prophecy, are to shape his destiny.[23]

At the end of the long journey from childhood to adulthood and

through numerous perils, Taran shows that many things had to *happen* to him before certain things could actually *occur* to him, and we hear him saying:

> Long ago I yearned to be a hero without knowing in truth what a hero was. Now perhaps I understand it a little better. A grower of turnips or a shaper of clay, a Commot farmer or a king – every man is a hero if he strives more for others than for himself alone. Once you told me that the seeking counts more than the finding. So too must the striving count more than the gain.[24]

Children need heroes – real ones – but in our age of space travel and instant communication, as well as the attention given to anti-heroes, suspicion, irrational use of weapons, there have been too few heroes created for children. When children say, "Give us wings . . . let us keep our dreams," I want to believe that they are asking us for books that present the world as it *should be,* but "should be," as Lloyd Alexander reminds us

> . . . does not mean that the realms of fantasy are Lands of Cockaigne where roasted chickens fly into mouths effortlessly opened. Sometimes heartbreaking, but never hopeless, the fantasy world as it "should be" is one in which good is ultimately stronger than evil, where courage, justice, love, and mercy actually function. Thus it may often appear quite different from our own. In the long run, perhaps not. Fantasy does not promise Utopia. But if we listen carefully, it may tell us what we some day may be capable of achieving.[25]

Since the beginning of time, fantasy has delighted young and old, has symbolically revealed deep meanings of life, has given wings to the mind, and has refreshed humankind for the tasks of reality.

END NOTES

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3. P. L. Travers, "World beyond World," cited in Virginia Haviland, *Children and Literature: Views and Reviews* (Scott, Foresman and Company, Glenview, IL, 1973), p. 246.

4. Paul Hazard, *Books, Children, and Men* (Horn Book, 1944) p. 1.

5. Dr. Seuss, *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street* (The Vanguard Press, NY, 1937) p. 5.

6. James E. Higgins, *Beyond Words* (Teachers College Press, Columbia University, NY, 1970) p. 55.

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10. Cited in Susan C. Poskanzer, "A Case for Fantasy," *Elementary English,* (v. 52, April, 1975) p. 474.

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18. Tolkien, *The Hobbit,* pp. 286-287.

19. C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (Macmillan Co., NY, 1950).

20. C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (Macmillan Co., NY, 1952) p. 209.

21. Higgins, p. 40.

22. Lloyd Alexander, *The High King* (Holt, Rinehart, Winston, NY, 1968).

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 275-276.

24. *Ibid,* p. 274.

25. Lloyd Alexander, "The Flat-Heeled Muse," *Horn Book* (v. 41, April, 1965) p. 141.

This lecture is the sixteenth in a series prepared by Illinois Wesleyan University faculty members for presentation at the annual Century Club dinner. R. Mack Brown, president of the club, was Master of Ceremonies.

PAST CENTURY CLUB HONOREES

1960 William T. Beadles, Insurance
1961 Wayne W. Wantland, Biology
1962 R. Dwight Drexler, Piano
1963 Elizabeth H. Oggel, English
1964 Rupert Kilgore, Art
1965 Dorothea S. Franzen, Biology
1966 Joseph H. Meyers, English
1967 Marie J. Robinson, Speech
1968 Bunyan H. Andrew, History
1969 Wendell W. Hess, Chemistry
1970 Jerry Stone, Religion
1971 Doris C. Meyers, Philosophy
1972 John Ficca, Drama
1973 Robert W. Burda, English
1974 Max A. Pape, Sociology
1975 Lucile Klauser, Education