Articles

Imagination, Reading, and Cognitive Development: Early Insights in Edith Nesbit's *The Enchanted Castle*

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In "Reading Fiction is Good for Children's Cognitive, Emotional, and Social Development," Maria Nikolajeva explains that cognitive theory can contribute much to literary studies and that a fledgling field of study exists that combines cognitive theory and cognitive science with literary criticism to create an approach known as cognitive literary criticism (4). She makes a case for the many useful insights that can be gained from using cognitive literary theory to understand how reading affects young developing minds. Specifically, she focuses on "how fiction stimulates young readers' perception, attention, imagination, memory and other cognitive activity" (1). Literary critics have long asserted that reading helps stimulate the imagination, which is an essential aspect of cognition that starts to develop in childhood. Furthermore, reading allows one to enter situations and conflicts vicariously as a kind of practice. When a situation similar to one they have read about comes up in the readers' lives, they will have some simulated experience with it gathered from reading. However, that literature can improve the cognitive abilities of readers appears to be a new insight for the scientific community. In 2013, the preeminent journal *Science* published "Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind," which was considered a provocative title (Nikolajeva 1). While brain scientists might just be coming around to these ideas, Edith Nesbit's early-twentieth-century novel anticipates much of what cognitive theory eventually hypothesized long after her time. A careful reading of her novel *The Enchanted Castle* (1907) suggests that what we might see as current cognitive insights have actually been around for much longer, specifically that children's imaginations are provoked and heightened by literature, that

they can use experiences from reading fiction to understand real life situations, that they develop a theory of mind (that other people have minds of their own) through encountering the minds of fictional protagonists, and that imagination helps children gain access to higher-order cognition. The novel comments on what children's literature should ideally be doing for child readers. This makes *The Enchanted Castle* a meta-literary and metacognitive text that shows how a child's cognition develops not through theorizing but by narrativizing the experience of cognitive development. Edith Nesbit *avant la lettre* was a kind of cognitive theorist using narrative to make her point.

Cognitive theorists and cognitive scientists alike stress the importance of imagination to complex thinking and decision making. Diane Gillespie in *The Mind's We: Contextualism in Cognitive Psychology* (1992) sees imagination as a mode that "provides opportunities for further exploration and reframing" (54). Gillespie argues that imagination itself can create concrete bodily experiences because "imagination centralizes the role of embodiment in cognition" (101). Imagination is the gateway by which many other cognitive functions start to develop, but an individual does not have access to them without having first developed the ability to implement imagination effectively. The 2013 *Science* article on how reading literary fiction improves one's understanding of other people's mental states explains that "little research has investigated what fosters this skill" (377), and after performing five different experiments testing various ways to train a person's theory of the mind,[1] reading fiction was the most effective. A 2024 cognitive study in children directly linked creative imagery (the ability to imagine) with theory of mind (imagining other people's minds), showing a positive correlation suggesting, as Joanna Smogorzewska states, "that creative imagery might serve as a factor that reduces the feeling of loneliness among children

[1] "Theory of mind" refers to an individual's cognitive ability to conceive that other people have their own minds and thoughts too.

due to their [theory of mind]" (1). Andrew Shtulman et al report that a study on children's abilities to consider the possibility or permissibility of unpredictable events concluded that a child's ability to imagine unpredictable events is connected to having more mature, more highly developed cognitive abilities (11). Dorota Zdybel reports that in a study on the degree of connection between memory and imagination, the two were found to be inextricably linked, making imagination necessary for learning as it helps children to organize metacognitive knowledge (14-15). The connection between imagination and other feats of cognition is clear, and as Nikolajeva posits, cognitive studies and literary criticism have much to gain from each other because of the connection between reading and imagination (1). In her fantasy novel *The Enchanted Castle*, Edith Nesbit demonstrates that contemporary conversations among cognitive theorists about the importance of reading to the developing imagination were already ongoing during the Edwardian period, a point that suggests Nesbit was already thinking about how imagination is central to higher-order cognition and how reading can improve imaginative ability. Her approach suggests that the divide between fiction and reality is not as large as it might seem. Nikolajeva explains the mind's ability to draw upon fictional events as useful information for real life as "text-to-life projection" when children "learn how to navigate real worlds through reading experience" (5). Nesbit emphasizes in her 1907 novel, over a century in advance of the contemporary conversation, the importance of children's ability to believe that an imagined world could relate to reality.

The Enchanted Castle is a children's fantasy novel that focuses on the adventures of four curious and well-read children. Siblings Gerald, Kathleen, and Jimmy happen upon a castle and its garden, where they meet a girl named Mabel and discover a magic ring that grants the wishes of its wearer. The comedic adventures start with Mabel accidentally turning herself invisible, which is the start of the many challenges created by the wish-granting power of the ring. Over the

course of the novel, the children learn to better command the ring to suit their needs. To do so, their wishes must become more specific and they have to think through the situation they are in as well as the careful expression of their wishes. The children's adventures with the ring rely on their imagination and their use of it in various situations. Gerald, for instance, proves especially adept because he can more readily imagine what to do to please adults. The small amount of literary scholarship on *The Enchanted Castle* primarily focuses on how Nesbit's portrayal of magic challenges the standard traditions of fantasy. Although imagination takes a prominent place in Nesbit's novel, an analysis of what Nesbit suggests about imagination has yet to be produced.[2]

Nesbit depicts children learning to think in more complex ways through reading. Significantly, then, *The Enchanted Castle* is full of children who are very well-read. Gerald considers himself a kind of protagonist and hero and often goes into soliloquies about his role in the group. Kathleen seemingly knows the plotlines and narratives of any story that comes her way. Jimmy is often inquisitive and always questions everything, as if reading has stimulated his curiosity. Mabel's interest in fairy tales is immediately clear from her reenactment of "Sleeping Beauty" and from the magical qualities that she assigns to the various items in the treasure room of the enchanted castle; later she explains that she "'read[s] the big books in the library'" (61). They each have spent time reading and honing their ability to imagine, allowing them access to higher cognition as a result. Indeed, *The Enchanted Castle* often depicts the children as lightyears beyond the cognition of the adults in the novel—from the children's perspective, anyway. Nesbit makes a similar argument in her children's novel that Radu Bogdan posits about young minds in

[2] Nikolajeva and Sarah Gilead, for instance, address Nesbit's use of magic in her novels and the question of what her use of and stipulations for magic imply, while critic U. C. Knoepflmacher argues that Nesbit's fantasy novels change the paradigm of the fantasy genre. For still other approaches, see Susan Anderson and Helen Lansner on Nesbit's contributions modernism, Gloria G. Fromm on moralism in Nesbit's work, and Mervyn Nicholson for a comparison of imagination as a theme running through the work of Nesbit, C. S. Lewis, and Rider Haggard.

Mindvaults: Sociocultural Grounds for Pretending and Imagining (2013)—that children can imagine to a much greater degree than adults and that imagination is the gateway to more complex mental feats. Nesbit puts the characters in a multitude of situations to show how their cognitive ability coincides with the novel's emphasis on the imaginative aspects of cognition.

Both in *The Enchanted Castle* and in today's cognitive theory, imagination is a foundational building block for many mental processes. In *Mindvaults* Bogdan argues that imagination is the key to unlocking more complex mental processes, including "mental playfulness, projective thoughts, metacognitive analysis, coordinating different inputs and representations (images, abstractions, gestures, word meanings), memory recall, thematic connectivity, and an understanding of a possible past or future self" (7-8). He situates imagination as the means by which the mind "vaults" (like pole-vaulting) to higher order cognition (8). People must have imagination as their foundation so they can pursue higher-order levels of cognition. Similarly, in *The Enchanted Castle* Nesbit shows the children's exercising of imagination leading to stronger mental abilities such as empathy, critical thinking, and strategizing. Reading causes one to consider imaginary situations and people and to empathize with what they are reading about. During this process, the reader is involved with not just empathy but also critical thinking about the characters and their situations. By engaging deeply with the text, the child reader involves their imagination as they read by considering an internal world created by their mind in tandem with the linguistic world of the text.

Bogdan argues that the first step to using imagination is through pretending (3), and in *The Enchanted Castle*, Mabel's introduction to the group of children is an excellent portrayal of the difference between pretending and imagining, as well as their capacity to be useful cognitive tools. The difference between the two can sometimes become blurry. Alan R. White makes a clear

distinction in "Imagining and Pretending" by explaining that "One can pretend, but not imagine, to V or be Ving; whereas one can imagine, but not pretend, Ving or someone's, including oneself, Ving. For example, one can imagine, but not pretend, riding a horse, being in an aeroplane, or oneself or another working on a farm or living in Buckingham Palace" (300-01). In short, pretending is external and imagining is internal. Pretending is always a kind of performing but one does not perform imagining. Nesbit shows in *The Enchanted Castle* though that pretending is a necessary means of developing the imagination, but pretending is insufficient at convincing others as well as dealing with issues when they arise. One can use their imagination to think of potential solutions to a problem but one cannot solve issues by pretending. In fact, pretending can sometimes lead one astray, as happens to Mabel in the novel.

Gerald, Kathleen, and Jimmy all stumble upon Mabel, the niece of a maid in town, dressed as a princess and lying in the garden as though asleep. Naturally, the group assumes (or affects to assume for the purposes of the day's entertainment) that she is a princess in need of a kiss to wake her up. However, Jimmy is immediately doubtful of Mabel and notes that she does not properly fit into her dress: "'But look what a little way down her frock her feet come. She wouldn't be any taller than Jerry if she was to stand up'" (22). Thus, Jimmy makes the first observation that the girl pretending to be a sleeping princess is no princess at all, but a child like them. However, Gerald (Jerry) and Kathleen continue to go along with the usual fairy-tale script that a hero must kiss the princess to wake her up. Eventually, Mabel does wake up and she appears unprincesslike despite her claims to royal status (24-6). Nesbit sets up a situation in which everything seems to be playing to fantasy's well-known expectations about sleeping princesses, then she juxtaposes them with the mundane in a subversion through Mabel's behavior versus the figure she insists she is. Mabel is no princess; she pretends to be a princess and gives the other children all the appropriate cues that

she is a princess based on what they know from the books they have read. However, when the princess wakes up, she is not what she seems. In breaking with the romance of the usual fantasy script, Nesbit puts her fantasy world in the context of the real world. What one reads and conceptualizes may be one thing, but the reality of a situation is another. The story's subversion, at Mabel's expense, both mimics and interrogates the process of how reading stirs children's imaginations and causes them to project thoughts from books into reality. Here, the children read about situations and experiences in which fictional characters are involved, then take this information with them into real-life situations. They discover that fiction both holds and does not hold their own world: the princess turns out to be merely a housekeeper's niece. In Nesbit's novel, the real world and the fantasy world have a very thin veil between them so that one can easily move into the other.

Similarly, the difference between pretending and imagining is also shown in Nesbit's description of Mabel's cognitive abilities when she is first introduced. Still pretending to be a princess, Mabel leads the group to a dining hall to eat bread and cheese while claiming this meal is whatever anyone asks for—green beans, chicken, roast beef, cabbage, and peacock are all covered by the bread and cheese she slaps down on everyone's plates. Jimmy asks Mabel whether they are actually playing a game, but Mabel insists that there is no game going on: "'A game? But it is beef. Look at it,' said the Princess, opening her eyes very wide" (30). Mabel continues with this façade of being a princess and pretending the bread and cheese is something else and then moves on to the treasure room for her last bit of pretending before giving up the charade. As Jimmy's questioning indicates, Mabel demonstrates the game of pretending quite transparently in this scene. Pretending is "taking some artificial or feigned object or action to symbolize, represent, or stand for the real thing" (Bogdan 97), which is what Mabel does with the bread and cheese as

well as by donning an elegant dress and playing out the part of the sleeping princess. Bogdan goes on to explain that pretending is the first cognitive step a child takes toward developing their imagining but that it is separate from imagination (98). The difference is that Mabel does not actually believe in what she pretends, which is the divide between pretending and imagination.

Understanding the divide between imagination and pretending is critical because it takes greater mastery of one's imagination beyond the ability to pretend if one is going to tackle adverse experiences. At the beginning of the novel, Mabel has not progressed to harnessing her imagination and is still stuck in the pretending phase. The limit of her cognitive abilities is best exemplified in Mabel's last moment of pretending in the novel. Mabel leads the children to the treasure room where there is an array of accessories and jewels, including a bracelet that she claims makes one tell only the truth, a chain that enhances strength, a spur to increase the speed of one's horse, and finally, a magic ring that supposedly turns the wearer invisible. Mabel is met with derision and told to prove that the ring can turn her invisible, which then begins a game in which she has the rest of the group turn around and count before turning back around to see that she is indeed nowhere to be found, or invisible. Mabel hides behind a wall while they are counting, but she is unaware that she is actually invisible. The children balk at panels moving by themselves and at her disembodied voice as Mabel moves around. Mabel, who believed none of the items to actually be magical and was only pretending for the sake of a game, concludes that the rest of the group is trying to turn her own game against her by pretending that she is invisible. She becomes irate with them, admitting that she did not believe the ring could really turn anyone invisible (40). This confession reveals that all along Mabel never really believed in anything she was proclaiming to be true. She was cognitively aware of her own pretending while trying to deceive everyone else. This moment shows the cognitive difference between pretending and imagining. Pretending is

when the mind is fully aware that the thing they are projecting their imagination onto is not the actual object but a kind of stand-in, and this is the mental rehearsal one has to practice in order to move on to the more complex skill of using imagination. That Nesbit positions pretending as the central cognitive activity of the beginning of the narrative suggests that she understands its role as foundational but lacking in the complexity of the functions that the novel goes on to explore.

Mabel shows that she has not quite developed cognitively from pretending to more developed uses of imagining. Her underdeveloped ability to imagine makes her ill-equipped to handle the wish-granting powers of the ring. To be fair, she is at the disadvantage of being the first person to put on the ring and activate its powers. Everyone else gets the benefit of her blunder, a move that also highlights the difference between imagination and pretending. When Mabel pretends, she is admitting internally that she does not believe in what she says. She is the first to get the magic ring to discover that magic could be real, but she also discovers that her thoughts can become reality. In doing so, the ring spurs Mabel to advance from pretending to using her imagination for the purpose of envisioning. The function of imagination is to propel cognition to where it can, as Bogdan says, "vault itself into fantasized, anticipated, past, future, or possible worlds" (8)—possibilities that Mabel has not, at the point of her blunder, yet figured out. Over the course of the novel, she does learn that skill, and it starts with the discovery of the wish-granting ring.

A foil to Mabel, Gerald displays a greater use of his imagination throughout the novel. For instance, early on in the story, the children ponder how Gerald is so good with adults. He manages to win the affection of the governess by getting up in the morning and gathering pink carnations, which he ties up and lays on her plate (7). Gerald is able to imagine what the governess might appreciate because he considers the world as others experience it. As Kathleen explains, "'if you

want grown-ups to be nice to you the least you can do is be nice to them and think of little things to please them. I never think of any myself. Jerry does; that's why all the old ladies like him'" (7). What Kathleen picks up on is that Gerald's ability to imagine nice things to do for adults betokens empathy, a skill Kathleen has not yet mastered. In other words, Nesbit argues that by developing imagination a child can also develop empathetic knowledge. Today's cognitive theories, indeed, agree that imagination and empathy are bound up together. Gerald is also the most avid reader out of the group, the child with the most experience putting himself in fictional situations as a kind of rehearsal. Nikolajeva, in *Reading for Learning* (2014), argues that cognitive development and children's literature go together because "children's fiction challenges its audience cognitively and effectively, stimulating attention, imagination, memory, inference-making, empathy and all other elements of mental processes" (227). The children in Nesbit's novel show what reading children's literature can accomplish. They are starting to learn empathy and its uses, as well as imagination, and to discover that learning to use one's imagination to understand complex concepts has many real-world applications. That Gerald has read more than his peers means he has had more time to be challenged by his readings and is more advanced in his cognitive abilities.

Having harnessed the power of imagination and learned empathy, Gerald is also able to tackle complex problems when he is invisible and encounters burglars. Initially unsure about how to handle the problem, he contemplates rousing the sleeping household but decides that a disembodied voice would not produce the ideal result because they would be more worried about where the voice is coming from and miss the burglars (90-92). Gerald is able to imagine a future in which his actions affect others, and this is a combination of imagination and empathy. Gerald realizes that trying to reason with people while invisible will likely do more harm than good in this critical moment. He opts to write a letter to inform the homeowners about the burglary going on

because that allows them to deal with something they can better understand than an invisible boy yelling at them. As with Gerald's understanding of how to deal adeptly with adults, the burglary episode poses another example of using what one learns from imagination in the real world. Nikolajeva explains this phenomenon as it occurs with children learning about empathy through reading. She argues in *Reading for Learning* that children learn to connect with characters in what they read, and that connection causes them to feel empathy for the characters (101), which helps young readers with their ability to empathize with people in the real world, a skill shown by Gerald and his ability to connect with others and imagine what to do to gain their support.

Gerald's extensive reading has doubled as cognitive practice for real situations. He often announces himself as a hero while also providing self-aggrandizing motivation to accompany the action of the story: "The deserted hero of our tale, alone and unsupported, urged on his brave followers to pursue the commissariat wagons, he himself remaining at the post of danger and difficulty, because he was born to stand on burning decks whence all but he had fled and to lead forlorn hopes when despaired of by the human race" (255). Gerald reads a lot, as the derivativeness of the comment about standing on the burning deck (a reference to a poem by Felicia Hemans)[3] shows, and he identifies with the heroes of what he reads. Mabel's less-developed imagination causes her to pretend to be a princess, but she is unable to convincingly act like one because she cannot envision what she would need to do to *be* a princess. Put another way, Mabel does not yet realize that it is not enough to don a dress and call herself a princess. She also has to act noble and play the part of a princess to fully embody the role. While no amount of imagination will change Mabel from a housekeeper's daughter to a princess, higher-order cognition would allow Mabel to get as close as what is within her power. She cannot be a princess, but she can be noble if she

[3] Gerald is quoting the opening line of Hermans's "Casabianca" (1862): "The boy stood on the burning deck".

imagines what qualities make someone noble. Gerald, in contrast, believes himself to be a hero and acts accordingly. His ability to act is based on the many times he has experienced situations simulated by fiction and has absorbed how the heroes in those stories behave. Gerald needs no symbol to become a hero because he believes that he embodies one through his actions. Gerald is more advanced cognitively than the other children and is already able to think in more complicated ways. He has graduated from pretending to becoming a hero. Reading heavily has allowed him to rehearse actions and ideas in advance so that when he does encounter a similar situation in life, he already has experience to draw on.

In Nesbit's novel, this quality of children who read often equips them to be the heroic protagonists of the story because only they are able to solve conflicts in both the fantasy world and the real world. Bogdan argues that children have a higher ability to imagine than adults because children's developing minds have more "neural plasticity [that] is selected for learning" (25), meaning that children's minds are better able to absorb and consider new information than adult minds are. In *The Intellectual Lives of Children* (2021), Susan Engel concurs with Bogdan when she references a number of cognition studies dealing with children where, as they get older, a lack of open-mindedness results in "intellectual loss" (92). As children grow into adulthood the neural plasticity that Bogdan notes and Engel relates to open-mindedness decreases. Adults have more real-life experiences to draw on for solving real-life issues, but this accumulation of knowledge and experience comes with a loss of mental flexibility. The children's imagination is often juxtaposed with responses from adults who cannot believe what they are saying. Nesbit shows that adults have a strict sense of the difference between what is imagined and what is reality. The novel's unnamed narrator explains, "When you are young so many things are difficult to believe, and yet the dullest people will tell you that they are true . . . that the earth goes round the sun, and

that it is not flat but round. But the things that seem really likely, like fairy-tales and magic, are, so say the grown-ups, not true at all" (27). Anything that goes beyond the adult understanding of reality is dismissed as untrue, while the children do not know where this difference lies and are thus still open to real and imagined worlds intersecting. In a playful way, Nesbit shows that the accepted belief that the earth goes around the sun, or that Earth is round rather than flat, are themselves notions that sound just as fantastic as the so-called fantasies children believe in. The difference assumed between children and adults is that children do not know the liminal point where reality and fiction split apart, but what Nesbit argues in this narrative section is that there are elements of fantasy and imagination that are necessary for adult understandings of reality.

Nesbit capitalizes on this difference between child and adult beliefs related to the threshold separating fiction and reality in her novel by creating a situation in which the real world is penetrated by magical elements. The two realms are so closely juxtaposed that they affect one another, and the children stand at that intersection. Nesbit writes of this liminality, saying, "There is a curtain, thin as gossamer, clear as glass, strong as iron, that hangs for ever between the world of magic and the world that seems to us to be real. And when once people have found one of the weak spots in that curtain . . . almost anything may happen" (201). Throughout Nesbit's novel, the children seem well-equipped to deal with the differences between the real and magical worlds. When they step into what they believe to be a magical kingdom, they are not at all taken aback by seeing an enchanted castle, they immediately know what to do when they see a sleeping princess (kiss her, obviously), and they are not overly put off by a ring that turns someone invisible or brings inanimate objects to life. In contrast, throughout the novel when the question comes up of confiding in adults such as Jimmy, Gerald, and Kathleen's governess or Mabel's aunt, the children always fear that the adults will go "mad" or at least become "vexed" if they are made to confront

magic, implying—echoed by cognitive theorists Bogdan and Engels—that children are more readily able to adapt and accept what requires imagination than many adults are. Cognitive theory suggests that because children are still learning how to use and harness their imaginations, childhood imaginative experiences are more powerful than those in adulthood. As children are still understanding imagination and as they learn to get comfortable with it, they have to deal with the potential of what imagination gains them access to. Nesbit's depiction of even sympathetic adults as less mentally flexible than children meshes with the consensus of contemporary cognitive theory on this point.

The magical ring with its wish-granting function is the major thing that tests the children in terms of imagination. The ring becomes the basis for many of the hijinks that happen throughout the novel. Its function in the plot is to generate the story through creating different situations. The children take turns making use of the ring, and this cooperative imaginative activity divides up the plot of the novel. Over the course of their adventures with the magic ring, the children both create and manage the effects their wishes have. The children learn to control their imaginations because the magical ring grants their wishes so powerfully and specifically. The magical ring makes it so that what a person imagines can become reality, like the holes in the castle wall that turn out to have been magically repaired in the past or the inanimate objects that become the living Ugly-Wuglies. That the narrative models the need to control one's imagination because it relates to physical (thus real-world) manifestations challenges child readers to grow cognitively so that they see a relationship between their imagination and the real world.

In the most revelatory section about how to use the ring, Kathleen and Mabel converse with statues representing various gods. Phoebus instructs them on how to be more specific with

their wishes.[4] The girls wish that the boys would also be able to converse with the statues, and since the only way to converse with other statues is to be a statue, Phoebus explains that they should have wished for the boys to be statues and join them where they are located. He starts his explanation, "'Wish for them that which Mabel wished for herself. Say—'" before he is cut off by Kathleen, who wishes without thinking, Phoebus continues, "'If you hadn't interrupted' said Phoebus 'but there, we can't expect old heads on the shoulders of young marble. You should have wished them *here*'" (234). Phoebus emphasizes strategizing, a cognitive feat that requires specificity and focus of the children. Nesbit uses the Greek god of, among other things, prophecy, to teach Mabel and Kathleen the importance of thinking ahead and anticipating the effects of their wishes before uttering them. Phoebus challenges them to be specific, to plan out a course of events in advance, to rehearse, and strategize. He opens up the way for the girls to start thinking at a higher level. From that point on the children have no more problems using the magic because learning specificity of language while wishing helps them advance their ability to use their imagination in more complex ways. The children have learned to harness their imagination so that they can plan ahead and think about the consequences of their wishes before making them. They have effectively vaulted up into higher order cognition. The magical ring is the ability of one's imagination to manifest in the real world. The ring is a metaphor for the potential of what one imagines to become reality, and learning this lesson helps the children advance cognitively.

Magic is an element of the novel that crosses the threshold between the real and the imagined. Through the use of the magical ring, Nesbit gives magic actual restrictions and ramifications as if it were a real sort of power that, when used, has consequences. In thinking about magic realistically, as Nesbit encourages her readers to do, a child is developing the use of

[4] Phoebus is a famous epithet of the god Apollo. In Greek, *phoebus* means "bright."

imagination in a practical way that allows him or her to think about actions and their possible future ramifications. Nikolajeva writes illuminatingly in "Edith Nesbit—The Maker of Modern Fairy Tales" that Nesbit is responsible for creating the modern fairy tale genre as it is today. *The Enchanted Castle* has quite a few restrictions on magic, and the central magical focus is a ring that, as Nikolajeva observes, "is whatever its bearer wants it to be: it may be a wishing-ring, it may make you invisible or four yards high, it may make inanimate objects alive. You cannot take the ring off before the magic wears out. In other words, the magic is irreversible, you cannot unwish" (37). Nikolajeva's greater point is that the children in Nesbit's novel must learn to "control their wishes"—in other words, the children must learn how to utilize their imagination to reach what they desire.

There is a point in the novel that the ring stops operating as a magical wish-granting ring. Specifically, the final wish it fulfills is a wish for it to not be magical any longer. Its traditional magical quality, wish granting, runs out. The eventual loss of the ring's magic is reflective of Nikolajeva's assertion that magic has limits and restrictions in Nesbit's novel. However, I propose that the ring still has a wish-granting function even when it is no longer magical. Its magical ability occurs in a much more mundane but perhaps no less fantastic way that shows adults do still have strong imaginations. At the end of the novel, Mademoiselle (the children's governess) wishes that the ring's magic be undone and that the ring itself loses its magic. Mademoiselle then takes possession of the ring in the real world, where it becomes a wedding ring. That role, in itself, is magical insofar as a ring has no actual ability to bind two people together except through the symbolic power that individuals project onto it. In this way, the magic of the ring never ends because it continues to be an object that grants desired effects. In the real world, people imbue objects with symbolic meaning. Marriage, like magic, means entering into a pact where there are

restrictions, just as Nikolajeva posits is a requirement of magic in Nesbit's novels, namely that a wish is irreversible once made. The pact of marriage is a vow, at least ostensibly unbreakable; just as in Nesbit's novel one cannot take off the magic ring for a stipulated number of hours, the wearer of the wedding ring cannot take it off until the marriage is over, which in 1907 is expected to be "until death do you part." In the end, it is adults who make the ring magical one last time. In perhaps humanity's greatest feat of imagination, they exchange vows and rings, imbuing their devotion to one another as a physical representation of their love.

It is only when the ring is made unmagical that it is revealed how much of the fantasy world was being fabricated by the ring. After Mademoiselle makes the wish to dispel the magic of the ring and have it only be a wedding ring signifying the bond between herself and Lord Yalding, everyone wakes up the next morning to find that the jewels in the treasure room have vanished, the passage to the back of the Temple of Flora (where most of the magic in the novel happens) is gone. Many of the castle statues are nowhere to be found, secret passages and rooms have disappeared, and large chunks of the castle itself are missing. Without its magical power the castle becomes more mundane, with walls that are going to be very costly to patch up now, making the veil between magic and the real world almost nonexistent. There suddenly does not seem to be very much difference between the two at all, and perhaps there never was.

Nesbit effectively uses the ring as a symbol for the power and function of imagination for the imaginer to be both within the world while conceiving of the many potentialities of their world. The experience that the imaginer gets from imagining becomes a kind of rehearsal for more complicated cognition like critical thinking, as Gerald shows when he imagines multiple scenarios in order to figure out the best course of action in a short amount of time. Similarly, if people's imaginations lead to greater understanding and experience, which they then act upon, it is as if

those imaginings have happened in reality, inasmuch as the imaginers are affected by their imagining. Envisioning and planning are higher-order thinking where imagination operates as a foundation for rehearsal before performing actions in the real world. The dual purpose of the narrative within *The Enchanted Castle* is that imagining things can also be done through reading. Thus, Nesbit argues for the importance of reading as well as the power of imagination in her novel. It is no coincidence that the child protagonists are strong readers in addition to having keen imaginations. Reading facilitates imagination, which, in turn, facilitates cognitive development. The test of how well the children will be able to use their newfound critical thinking skills in real-world situations is through their use of the magical ring and its ability to make manifest their imaginings.

Nesbit's use of the children having to think through wish manifestation and its real-world applications shows that imagination is a cognitive skill that continues to be used throughout adulthood. As adults, people use imagination on a daily basis to perform mundane activities from planning events to managing their vacations. Thus, Nesbit's novel makes a claim for the importance of imagination as well as for having command over it. Nesbit seems to say that developing imagination is an intrinsic part of being a child, one that is a necessary skill for the mature mind. She constantly puts her child protagonists in situations where their ability to tap into imagination is their greatest asset that makes them uniquely suited to solve problems. The novel makes further arguments for why imagination is important to everyday life. The first is that it helps children learn empathy, like Gerald, while also showing that imagination relates to a child's ability to problem-solve and think critically as contemporary cognitive theorists contend. These are skills that children need to develop to take into adulthood. However, the continued function of the ring even without its magical power shows that imagination also has a function for adults. The idea of

valuing and attributing qualities to objects to which these qualities are not innate is a practice of imagination. Nesbit implies in *The Enchanted Castle* that while adults approach the use and concept of imagination differently from children, imagination remains incredibly useful in adulthood.

Anita Moss's enlightening work on *The Enchanted Castle*, "Makers of Meaning: A Structuralist Study of Twain's *Tom Sawyer* and Nesbit's *The Enchanted Castle*," asks many good questions that she hopes to answer with a structuralist reading of the novel, including "How do readers make sense of texts? How do human beings read and decipher the bewildering universe of signs in which they are immersed? How do conventions shape fictions; how do fictions shape our perceptions of reality?" (39). It makes sense that Moss chose to study this novel of Nesbit's because the short answer to all her questions is imagination—the central concern of the novel as well. Moss argues that Nesbit uses "conventional functions of fairy tales and adventure stories to set up conventional expectations in the reader" and then reverses them, using this reversal to "suggest that reality inside and outside the fiction contains possibilities not yet explored" (42). This suggestion is most pronounced toward the end of the novel when the one thing making the magical world more magical and seemingly different from the real world, the ring, loses its magic and pulls down the barrier between the two. At that point, the distinction between reality and the enchanted castle dissolves. There is only reality then.

At the end of her article, Moss writes that the ending of *The Enchanted Castle* "is sad, for the adults undo all of the magic and force all the meaning finally to reside in their marriage" (44). Still, she suggests, Nesbit makes up for that ending because the ring has given "the children visions of reality as it might be perceived, of life as it might be lived, just as it gives the young couple a vision of the castle as it might through human art be created" (44). Moss's reading makes the ring

both a wish-granter and a form of imagination itself as a window one can look through to see the world manifest as it could be. Put another way, one engages in envisioning via imagination of possibilities. Moss finally argues that in functioning as a lens to see possibilities, the ring also functions the same way that literature does: "In that important way, then, Nesbit suggests, literature takes us into new and previously unimagined realms of meaning and possibility" (44). Moss's insight reminds us that imagination and literature share the core value of giving the reader hitherto unknown concepts to think about, a quality that naturally improves a child's cognitive development.

Nesbit's novel centers on how reading and imagination intertwine to open up new ways for a child to think. Her protagonists exemplify what happens when children are well-read in literature and start to tap into their imagination—they can accomplish any number of tasks in fantastic or mundane situations. Adding contemporary findings from cognitive psychology to the discussion of the importance of imagination provides a richer context for the argument that Nesbit was already making about imagination when she was writing the novel. There is little wonder that cognitive theory has been so interested all this time in understanding imagination. One way to approach childhood cognitive development could be to examine how reading helps improve one's cognitive abilities; thus, the combining of cognitive theory with literary studies should be illuminating, as this reading of *The Enchanted Castle* has shown. Conversely, looking at the assumptions about imagination apparent in this early-twentieth-century text helps to establish the extent to which the insights of cognitive psychology have long been latent in creative works for the young.

Nesbit suggests that the importance of reading fantasy comes from its ability to challenge the mind and to cause the mind to consider perspectives and situations it might otherwise never experience. There are benefits in having rehearsed situations in advance, even simulated situations.

These benefits stem from harnessing the power of imagination and Nesbit's novel is its own simulated situation for the helpfulness of imagination and its potential. That is, *The Enchanted Castle* is a book for children that demonstrates how children use reading to develop higher-order cognitive skills. As such, it comments on what children's literature can (and maybe should) do, and this reading of the novel recognizes and values its metacommentary on the use of children's literature. The fact that Nesbit's novel has already anticipated all these insights long in advance of cognition studies highlights Nikolajeva's argument that cognitive theory, as well as cognitive science, could benefit from engaging more with literary criticism and vice versa. To take her assertion further, Nesbit's theories about imagination—its use in more sophisticated cognitive functions, and reading's contribution to the growth of imagination—are all attributes evident in her novel. Close reading *The Enchanted Castle* suggests that what may seem like current cognitive insights are actually not new as they have been implemented and explored for over one hundred years in children's fantasy literature.

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