

The Phantom Tollbooth

a Wheelock Family Theatre Study Guide
prepared by Ann Sorvari

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Norton Juster's original 1961 novel, *The Phantom Tollbooth*, is that rare book for children that delights both young people and adults. Children follow Milo's magical and mysterious adventures in the Lands Beyond, cheering him on as he gradually discovers how very much there is to know and wonder about the world and how much he loves the process of discovery, connection, and achievement. Adults, meanwhile, can be found nodding approvingly at the valuable life lessons the book provides, while laughing out loud at its verbal cleverness and reminding themselves that they, too, must remain open to the new, the adventurous, and the deliciously fun.

The Wheelock Family Theatre is proud to present a wonderful new adaptation of the classic book, one which remains very true to the adventures and spirit of the novel while adding songs and dances and bringing the whole colorful world of the Lands Beyond to vibrant life. The musical version of the book began life, interestingly, as an opera which was first produced in 1995. This new, shorter version suitable for younger audiences was copyrighted in 2002 and had its world-premiere professional production at Wheelock Family Theatre. We are thrilled to stage it again in celebration of the 50th anniversary of the book's publication.

As with any adaptation, this one must leave out many elements of the original novel. For students who have read the book, these omissions and changes can make for interesting and fruitful discussions after seeing the play. However, this guide assumes that *The Phantom Tollbooth* will be a new experience for your students as they see it on stage. We hope it will take them on a journey for which there is plenty of Rhyme and Reason and which will take them out of the Doldrums, well Beyond Expectations, to a Fine, Fantastic Afternoon.

What's the Point?

Milo is a boy who, quite literally, doesn't know what to do with himself. He is, for all intents and purposes, asleep, and it isn't until he has traveled through the Phantom Tollbooth that his experiences wake him up. The world that surrounds him is rich with potential—from the toys in his room, to the other children wanting to include him in their friendships and activities, to his lessons at school. But nothing interests Milo: he can't see the point of doing anything.

Questions that might get at this feeling:

- Have you ever felt bored at home? What made you bored? What made you stop feeling that way?
- Have you ever been bored at school? Why? How did you stop?
- Do you like being bored? Explain how it makes you feel.
- Do you ever question why you must learn certain things at school? What kinds of knowledge seem useless to you? Why?
- Have you ever thought of doing something active, like riding a bike or playing basketball, but then decided it wasn't worth the trouble? Why did it seem that way?
- Have you ever done something just because you had nothing better to do? Explain how it worked out; did you enjoy it? Why or why not?

Beyond Expectations

Milo doesn't care about anything, because he doesn't have any expectations. That is, he doesn't see any of his choices as making a difference or fitting together. Other people may have expectations for him, but they are not his own. In the play, Milo must go beyond...everything he has ever done. He must go beyond the expectations others have for him when they provide him with toys, the opportunity for friendships, and education—he must develop the habit of thought, of seeing how thoughts connect, of deciding on goals and achievements that matter to *him*.

Questions for this idea:

- Do people expect things of you? What kinds of things?
- How do you feel about those expectations? Do you usually meet them?
- What kinds of things do you expect of yourself? Do you usually meet them? How do you feel when you do—and when you don't?
- What would it be like if no one ever expected anything of you? Can you think of both good and bad aspects of that situation?
- Explain this idea: ***To have expectations you have to think.***
- And this: ***To have expectations you have to be able to choose.***

- To choose, you have to understand the idea of “whether”—that is, to understand the options you have available to choose from. Think of some “whether” options that you must consider every day; is it easy or hard? Why?
- **Notice: EVERY TIME YOU MAKE A DECISION YOU ARE THINKING AND YOU ARE MEETING AN EXPECTATION—IMAGINE THAT!**
- What does it mean to “go beyond expectations”? Is it good to do so? Think of examples, both positive and negative.

Out of the Doldrums

What does it mean to be “in the doldrums”? Look up “doldrums” and also “lethargy” to understand what kind of people the Lethargarians are. If you were to ask them, they might say they were very busy, all day long. Here is a list of the things they do; what do you notice about it? They wake, stretch, yawn, eat, nap, lounge, rest, eat, nap, daydream, dawdle, delay, loaf, dine, sleep. They do NOT think or laugh; if they did, they’d “never get anything done.”

- Can you think of times when you have been busy getting nothing done? Describe one; what did that day feel like to you? Do you have many days like that? Why?
- Why would thinking and laughing prevent you from getting nothing done?
- What happens when you decide to start thinking about something? Is it the same thing that happens to Milo?
- The king’s advisors in Dictionopolis offer synonyms to Milo. Why is that helpful to him in learning to think? Would it be helpful to anyone? Explain.

Deciding to Try

An amazing thing begins to happen to Milo; the more he thinks and does, the more he cares about how things turn out. He makes his first decision, to go past the Phantom Tollbooth, just because he doesn’t have anything better to do. He makes his second, to rescue Rhyme and Reason from their exile, because he cares about them and wants to eliminate the confusion he sees in Dictionopolis. Furthermore, this decision requires him to look into himself and think about what kind of person he is, as he realizes in his song “Do I Dare?” As Milo thinks about whether to try to rescue the princesses, he realizes that it would take a hero to do so. He asks himself: Do I want to be a hero? And the answer is yes.

If we think back to the idea of expectations, we see that, instead of having no expectations for himself at all, he is now, in the Lands Beyond, going beyond not only his own previous expectations for himself, but also anyone else’s ideas of what he can do. Another important idea in this section of the play is that both King Azaz and the Mathemagician start to tell Milo

something and then decide not to. It later transpires that what they *didn't* tell him is that they thought his mission was impossible.

Questions to consider:

- Have you ever been faced with a huge challenge which you would like to accept but aren't sure you can meet? Describe your feelings as you decided whether or not to try. Were you happy with the decision you made?
- If you think someone cannot succeed at a task she is about to try, should you tell her? Why or why not?
- What differences does it make to you whether you are encouraged or discouraged to try something new and difficult? Explain.

Questioning Assumptions

One of the most important lessons Milo learns is to question assumptions to get at the truth. We all need to be able to assume basic information to avoid figuring out the entire world every day. For example, it is safe to assume that the sun will continue to rise every morning, even if we can't see it. A particular child may safely assume that he will be required to go to school every day.

However, assumptions are not always to be trusted. Information which we believe to be true may not prove to be so. As we grow, we learn this is so and we begin to question our assumptions. This can be a painful experience or an exhilarating one, but in either case it is a part of the process of learning to think about what we know and do.

Questions for this idea:

Assumption	Truth
A person is just himself, the same no matter what.	A person can be many things, both to himself and to others: shortest giant, smallest midget, etc. It's all a matter of how you look at it: or, in other words, your perspective.

To understand the idea of perspective, try this: think of a time in the last few months when you felt very small. Now think of a time when you felt really big, grown up, or strong. What caused these different feelings? After all, you probably looked exactly the same to others in both situations. Now, think about the character Milo meets in the play. Milo assumes he's just an ordinary man, based on how he looks. But if you question that assumption, you can see that an ordinary man IS a very short giant.

- Have you ever made an assumption about a person based on his or her appearance or behavior? Have you always been right? If not, why not?
- Are you always the same person? Are you different, for example, at home than you are with your friends, or when you come into a new situation? If you feel different, is it because you change or because others see you differently—or, to go back to a previous word, because their *expectations* of you are different?
- Why is it useful and important to question the assumption that people are always the same?

Assumption	Truth
If you are given a choice between various options, one of them must be the correct one.	There may be more than one right choice, and there may be none.

- What do we mean when we say “right” or “wrong” choices? Are those words sometimes too narrow, limiting the way we think about a problem? What words might we substitute?
- Think of a time when you had a choice to make. How did you decide what the “right” choice was? Do you think another choice would have worked as well as the one you made?
- Is it a good idea to question what you believe to be true? Are there some things which should not be questioned? What would they be, for you? Would they be the same for everyone?

Assumption	Truth
“Words can mean anything depending on your mood or your tone of voice, but numbers are always what they’re supposed to be” (stated by the Mathematician).	?

- What do you think? Is this a true statement after all?
- What parts of it do you agree with? What do you disagree with?
- Create a statement that seems true to you regarding this idea.

Assumption	Truth
When you are hungry, whether for food or for ideas, and you get plenty of what you were hungry for, you are satisfied.	Sometimes getting plenty of what you want only makes you hungrier, wanting even more.

- See if you can work out what the following statements mean:
 - “THE MORE YOU WANT THE LESS YOU GET.”
 - “THE LESS YOU WANT, THE MORE YOU HAVE.”
 - “WHEN YOU DON’T HAVE ANYTHING AT ALL, YOU STILL HAVE MORE THAN ENOUGH.”

These statements are *paradoxes*, or statements that seem to be contradictory but that on closer examination prove to be true.

- How does each one prove to be true?
- Think of an example or two which would illustrate each one.

Recognizing Demons

In this play, the demons who inhabit the Mountains of Ignorance are the creatures who try to ensnare Milo (“Gotcha!”) to keep him from doing what he ought/has/wants to do. As they point out, they can work from within or without. That is, they can be impulses of laziness or boredom or fear that arise inside a person to keep him or her from accomplishing something. Or, they can be messages from others that say, “Don’t,” “You can’t,” “Don’t bother.”

The trick to escaping them, as Milo discovers, is recognizing them in the first place. The three demons he encounters all try to take from Milo the skill he has been developing in thinking and taking action for himself.

The Terrible Trivium tries to waste Milo’s time by making him complete meaningless, time-consuming tasks like filling in all the o’s in a book or untangling a huge clump of paperclips.

- Have you ever felt your time was being wasted like this? Give an example.
- When did you realize you were performing useless tasks? How did you escape?
- What makes Milo recognize that he is facing a demon? How does he escape?
- What might we learn from his actions?

“Trivium” is probably an unfamiliar word to most people. Most, however, will recognize its other forms, such as “trivia” and “trivial.” Look in a good dictionary to see if you can find the difference between “trivium” and “trivia.” It might surprise you.

The Demon of Insincerity tries to send Milo in the wrong direction by giving him bad advice. At first, Milo does not recognize this demon and takes the advice.

- How does he figure out the demon’s true nature?
- How can we learn to recognize someone who is trying to sidetrack us this way?
- Why, exactly, is this demon’s advice bad, even though following it would not hurt Milo?

The Senses Taker, whose name is a pun (see the section on Word Games).

- What does this demon want Milo to do?
- His purpose is evil: he wants to destroy Milo’s sense of proportion, his sense of duty, and his sense of purpose. How would the tasks he assigns accomplish this?
- How does Milo recognize the demon’s purpose?
- How does he overcome it?
- What lesson might we learn?

To Know and to Dare

By the time Milo reaches the Castle in the Air, he is a much different person than he was at the beginning of his journey. But, just as it is sometimes difficult to identify the “demons” that block thought and achievement, it is also hard to notice and take pride in the progress we have made.

When the Princesses of Rhyme and Reason praise Milo for his cleverness in convincing Azaz and the Mathemagician to allow him to rescue them, he says, “I don’t feel very clever.” The princesses help him by pointing out that he’s no longer half asleep, but wide awake. He should be proud of how far he’s come, they say, and realize that he is now ready for all the wonders and challenges of the world ahead. Cheered and encouraged, Milo is now ready to solve the next problem that appears: now that the demons have chopped away the staircase to the Castle in the Air, how will they all get back home?

And it is cleverness that solves the problem. Looking at Tock’s clock, Milo has an “Aha!” moment. If time flies, Tock should be able to fly them home. Interestingly, it’s Tock’s clock, but Milo, himself, has never made that connection. So, the solution is clear. Now they have to dare to act, to take that terrifying “leap of faith” that is the basis of courage. And then, because all the forces of the Lands Beyond have come together in a common purpose, they are able to send the demons packing.

Questions for this idea:

- Milo has overcome many obstacles since he left the safety of his room. Why doesn’t he feel clever for having done so? Is it a good idea to stop and look back every now and then to remind yourself of what you have done? Why? What might you learn?
- Think about the “magic objects” that Milo has learned to use: the dictionary and the pencil. In one way, these are very ordinary parts of everyday life, so what makes them magic? Put another way, what “powers” do they have? Why did Milo never recognize their powers before?
- How does Milo use the power of words to solve the problem of how to get back home from the Castle in the Air?
- What does the expression “**leap of faith**” mean? What do the characters have to have faith in, as they leap from the castle?
- Sometimes, no matter how brave an individual is, he or she needs help to achieve a goal (or meet an expectation). Milo says, “I couldn’t have done it without all of you helping me,” and it’s true. Think of an example in your own life, when you had a great idea and started well, but needed help to get it done. How did you feel about that whole process?
- Why are both the Mathemagician and King Azaz willing to come together to help Milo, when they wouldn’t even talk to one another before? Can you think of a time when people you know, who had been enemies, became friends again? What happened to cause that change? What might we learn from that process?

How Do We Know What's Possible?

How do we know what we can and cannot do? The play offers us several ways to think about that problem, culminating in two direct statements at the end. Before getting to that question, however, Milo had to take several important steps.

- HE HAD TO BE GIVEN A SPECIAL STIMULUS, OUTSIDE HIS USUAL EXPERIENCE.
- HE HAD TO BE INTERESTED ENOUGH IN IT, EVEN FOR NO SPECIAL REASON, TO TAKE ACTION.
- HE HAD TO LEARN THE IMPORTANCE OF THINKING AND LAUGHING.
- HE HAD TO REALIZE THAT THINKING LEADS TO CHOICES AND BECOME WILLING TO MAKE THEM.
- HE HAD TO CARE ABOUT THE OUTCOME OF HIS CHOICES.
- HE HAD TO REALIZE THAT THERE IS MORE THAN ONE WAY OF LOOKING AT A PROBLEM.
- HE HAD TO DARE TO ACT, EVEN WHEN ACTION COULD BE DANGEROUS.
- HE HAD TO KEEP TO HIS PURPOSE, EVEN THOUGH MANY FORCES TRIED TO DISTRACT HIM.
- HE HAD TO USE HIS NEW ABILITY TO BE QUICK-WITTED IN A TIME OF CRISIS.
- HE HAD TO REALIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF HELP AND ENCOURAGEMENT IN ACCOMPLISHING HIS GOALS.
- HE HAD TO REJOICE IN WHAT HE HAD BEEN ABLE TO DO AND TO KNOW.
- HE HAD TO UNDERSTAND THAT HE COULD GO HOME AND FIND THE SAME KIND OF ADVENTURE AND LEARNING *WITHIN* HIS NORMAL EXPERIENCE, BY USING THE INTELLIGENCE, CURIOSITY, AND COURAGE THAT HE NOW KNEW HE POSSESSED.

Milo's journey—and that of any person, young or old—could be thought of as coming down to two interrelated statements at the end of the play. Either, or both, could make for great class discussion after the students have seen the play.

“What you CAN do is often a matter of what you WILL do.”

“Many things are possible as long as you don't THINK they're impossible.”

Now that Milo has learned these lessons, he's ready to go home. The books, the friends outside, the games he's surrounded by are no longer the baggage of a tired, pointless trudge through the day—now they represent worlds to explore. He CAN do it, and now he knows he WILL.

Words at Play Worksheet

Students' enjoyment of the play might be enhanced if they work on some of the puns and language jokes ahead of time. The following worksheet brings out some of them.

1. What is a PUN?
2. Explain how the names of the following characters in the play are puns:
 - a. the Whether Man
 - b. the Senses Taker
 - c. the Watch Dog
3. Some of the word jokes in the play occur when phrases that we think we know are used in a different way than we expect. Explain these word jokes:
 - a. The scenery went rushing by.
 - b. The Land of Expectations is the place you must get to before you get to the place you're going to. Of course there are some people who never go beyond Expectations.
 - c. I was just killing time, I guess. (alarm rings, Milo shields clock)
 - d. We have all your proper—not your common—nouns.
 - e. Time flies, doesn't it? Yes, and this is one time when it should!
 - f. Since they were banned, in all this land there's neither rhyme nor reason. (What does this phrase mean? Look up the word "rhyme" to find another meaning than you already know.)
4. Names and places. Some of these are jokes; some just make more sense if you think about the parts of the words.
 - a. For the city of Dictionopolis: look up the meaning of "diction." Then go to "metropolis" in the dictionary and see if you can find out what "polis" means. Why is this a good name for a city of words?
 - b. For Digitopolis, look up "digit." Put it with "polis" and explain why it is a good name for a city of numbers.

- c. Can you figure out why the king of Dictionopolis is named Azaz? Is it a good choice?
- d. The word “mathemagician” is not in the dictionary, but it should remind you of a similar word that IS there. What is that word? Why do you think the character is given a made-up name instead of a perfectly good dictionary word?
- e. Can you think of a reason for calling the main character Milo?
- f. Why do you think the Watch Dog is called Tock instead of Tick?

The Experience of the Play

Although it is interesting to think about and analyze the elements of a play, the important thing is the way people react to it as they experience it in the audience. A musical is much more than words, song, and dance; it is a total experience affected by the director and choreographer, the actors, the costumes, the sets, the lighting and sound, the orchestra, and, of course, the audience.

Questions about the experience of the play:

- What was your favorite character? Explain.
- Which character would you like to play? Think about the advantages and disadvantages of playing the lead character versus playing a smaller part.
- How well did the characters make you care about what was happening to them?
- Choose one or two examples where they succeeded very well, and explain.
- What were the funniest moments of the play? The scariest? The most thought-provoking?
- Did any part of the play seem like a part of your own life? Explain.
- Did the costumes help you to understand what each character was like? Did the costumes fit the characters’ personalities?
- Which costume would you like to have, if you could? Why?
- Did the sets make it clear where the action was taking place?
- Did the sets seem imaginative and appropriate to the action?
- Where was lighting or sound used especially well to enhance the effect of a scene?
- Did you enjoy the singing and dancing? Did it fit naturally into the story?
- Which songs did you like best? Which one showed the most about the person singing it?
- Which dances were most enjoyable to watch? Why? Which one would you like to learn to do, if you could?

Final Projects

You may want to assign a project to your students as a wrap-up of your study of the play. Here are some suggestions.

- Write a review of the play, including a summary of the story and your opinion of the acting, sets, costumes, lighting and sound, music and dancing, and any other element of the production that affected you.
- Write a personal reaction to the play, in which you connect it to your own life and feelings.
- Write a letter to one of the actors, telling him or her how you felt about his or her performance.
- Design your own costume for Milo, Tock, or any of the other characters.
- Design your own set for one or more scenes of the play, and explain why you wanted it to look as it did.
- Think of a part of the play that was spoken rather than sung. Turn that moment into a song.
- Create a new dance for the play, either a new version of a scene that already included dancing, or a brand-new dance for a moment where there was none.

Suggestions for Further Reading

By Norton Juster

- *Alberic the Wise*
- *As: A Surfeit of Similes*
- *The Dot and the Line; a Romance of Lower Mathematics*
- *Otter Nonsense*

Books for Language and Wordplay

- anything by Dr. Seuss
- anything by Shel Silverstein

Books for Magical Adventure

- *The Bridge to Terabithia* by Katherine Paterson
- *The Children of Green Knowe* by L.M. Boston
- *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis
- *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett
- *The Time Bike* by Janet Langton