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## Everlasting Contrasts: Babbitt's Use of Opposites in *Tuck Everlasting*

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For more than a quarter of a century, *Tuck Everlasting* (Babbitt 1975) has been a treasured element of many children's and adults' libraries. With the 2002 release of Disney Pictures' adaptation of *Tuck Everlasting*, a new audience discovered Natalie Babbitt's timeless adolescent story. The release of the movie, with its Academy Award-winning cast including Sissy Spacek, Ben Kingsley and William Hurt, generated a new wave of interest in the book. This being the case, it is not remiss for us to cast a loving glance back to this classic American novel.

It was with fondness that I again returned to Babbitt's book for another pleasurable reading experience to prepare me for my viewing of the new movie. Each time I re-read *Tuck Everlasting*, I admire anew Babbitt's masterful use of opposites and extremes in creating the world of Winnie Foster and the Tuck family. By the use of polarities, Babbitt emphasizes and exaggerates the features of those things being contrasted. Within the pages of *Tuck Everlasting* can be found numerous examples of such opposites and direct contrasts.

### **Mortality versus Immortality**

At the heart of *Tuck Everlasting* is the contrasting of mortality and immortality. Tuck, his wife Mae, and their two sons, Miles and Jesse, and their family horse, have inadvertently drunk from a fountain of

eternal life. As time passes, they discover they cannot die. Jesse loses his balance, falls out of a tree and lands on his head. The family fears that he must surely have broken his neck but, to their great relief and surprise the fall "didn't hurt him a bit" (38). Shortly thereafter, hunters mistake the Tucks' horse for a deer. The hunters accidentally shoot the horse, but the bullet passes "right on through him, and didn't hardly leave a mark" (39). The Tucks begin to recognize their invincibility. A snake bites Tuck, Jesse eats poisonous toadstools, Mae slices her hand cutting bread – all without hurting them. After ten years, and then twenty, the Tucks see that they are never getting any older. Miles is "more'n forty by then" but still looks twenty-two (39). The Tucks report that in eighty-seven years, they have not aged at all.

Ten-year-old Winnie Foster chances across the magical fountain in the wooded lot that her family owns. The day is "hot and breathless" (23). Winnie has "lost her patience...and decided to think about running away" (4). Winnie is as much interested in running away from the stifling and oppressive heat of her mother and grandmother as that of the sun "on a day that was...near to boiling" (13). "I don't think I can stand it much longer," Winnie complains (14). She seeks the cooling shade of the woods and when Winnie happens upon the fresh water spring, she thirstily prepares to slake her dry throat. Mae, Miles

and Jesse, however, kidnap her. While insisting on a drink from the spring, Winnie is suddenly “seized and swung through the air, open-mouthed” (31), forced on the horse’s back, and hurried away to the Tuck’s cabin.

When Winnie finally reaches the cabin and is introduced to Tuck, the old man tells Winnie that meeting her is the best thing that has happened to him in eighty years. Tuck tells Winnie that the reason for kidnapping her was to prevent her from drinking from the spring. He explains the impact that the spring has had upon his own life and the lives of his family. Tuck takes great care in stressing that the age-old human longing to avoid death is not as desirable as it initially might seem. Tuck explains the role of life and death, and the necessity for someone to experience both. Life is about “growing and changing, and always moving on. That’s the way it’s supposed to be,” Tuck informs Winnie (62). “Dying’s part of the wheel [of life], right there next to being born,” (63) Tuck stresses. Winnie learns “that birth and death, compassion and loneliness, innocence and knowledge, joy and sorrow, freedom and constraint are all a part of the wheel of life” (Hartvigsen and Hartvigsen 1987, 183).

This theme of life versus death, or immortality versus mortality, is central to the novel. As the book unfolds, Winnie leaves behind her childhood and we see her “crossing a threshold to maturity” (Hearne 2000, 158). Winnie is blossoming through adolescence and toward womanhood—perhaps, in a mortal world, the height of immortality—where it becomes possible for a woman to conceive, create and give birth to offspring. Winnie’s immediate predicament, however, is that she has now been presented with the opportunity to elude death. Winnie is faced with the possibility of dispensing with the constraints of mortality, casting aside the need to produce offspring

in order to achieve any semblance of immortality. Winnie now possesses the potential to live, in the flesh, for all time. What should she decide—life eternal or endless death?

### **Different Perspectives**

Winnie’s decision is made more difficult given that she must consider Jesse and Tuck’s differing views of the situation. These contrasting viewpoints are at least partly understandable given the different position of life within which Tuck and his son find themselves frozen. Jesse is in the prime of life. At seventeen, he is described as “a boy, almost a man” (25). He is “glorious” and “wonderful” to look at and is “even more beautiful up close” (25, 27). In contrast, Tuck is aged and weary. He is a “big man” with a “sad face” hosting “melancholy creases [on] his cheeks” (48).

Tuck says that his family’s predicament, is that they are “stuck so’s [they] can’t move on” (63). Tuck’s words suggest that he would gladly face death—cheerfully *accept* death—in order to “move on” with his life. In being unable to die, Tuck feels that he is also unable to live.

In contrast, Mae tells Winnie that Jesse “can’t stay on in any one place for long” (53). Jesse’s life is one of continual motion and exploration. He is excited by the prospect of “go[ing] all around the world, see[ing] everything” (72). He does “what strikes him at the moment” (53) in his pursuit of eternal happiness and joy. When Jesse proposes to Winnie, he says she and he “could have a good time that never, never stopped” (72). Tuck may feel himself stuck in the same state forever, but Jesse proposes a state of continuing good times involving constant travel and movement from one state of wedded bliss to another.

Tuck is of the opinion that “you can’t call it living, what we got” (64). Without the prospect of death, Tuck reasons

that there is no life. The opposite perspective, such as that also held by the envious man in the yellow suit, is that the Tucks are not only living, but are getting to live forever!

### Order and Disorder

*Tuck Everlasting* revolves primarily around the question of mortality and immortality. Carefully embedded within the story structure there are, however, numerous additional examples of extremes from opposite ends of various spectrums.

Winnie is accustomed to the ordered, spotlessly clean Foster house that has been “mopped and swept and scoured into limp submission” (50). The “square and solid” Foster house has a “touch-me-not appearance” and is surrounded by a four-foot high iron fence which seems almost to shout to the world, “Move on—we don’t want you here” (6). The family home is so regimented that Winnie feels like a prisoner “cooped up in a cage” (14). She dreams of breaking free to “make some kind of difference in the world” (15).

The Fosters’ sovereignty extends out of doors, where a manicured lawn is “cut painfully to the quick” (6). Once beyond the confines of the fence—beyond the extent of the Fosters’ reign of control—things become less ordered. Winnie is able to thrust “her arms through the bars of the fence and [pluck] at the weeds on the other side” (14). As Winnie sets out on her path toward independence and moves further from the Fosters’ and deeper into the wood she encounters “endless tangled vines” (24). The contrasting appearance of the Fosters’ house and the nearby wood even evokes different reactions from passers-by. The house is “so proud of itself that you wanted to make a lot of noise as you passed, maybe throw a rock or two.” On the other hand, the appearance of the wood “made you want to speak in whispers” (6).

When Winnie first arrives at the Tuck home, she is taken aback by the unkempt appearance of their cabin. In contrast to her feelings of being a prisoner inside her own home, however, Winnie comes to delight in the love with which she is showered while staying inside the home of her kidnappers. The Tucks share their home with “gentle eddies of dust” and “silver cobwebs” that reflect an ambiance in which a mouse has taken up residence in one of the table drawers—“and welcome to him!” (50). Despite the dishes “stacked in perilous towers,” walls that are “piled and strewn and hung with everything imaginable,” furniture scattered about “helter-skelter” and a sofa whose arms are “webbed with strands of thread and dangerous with needles” (50, 52), Winnie finds the cabin charming, comfortable and welcoming.

### Circles, Springs and Storms

In talking with Winnie, Tuck’s words stress the cyclical nature of life and death. This circle motif is a recurring theme in the book. The book begins with the imagery of the Ferris wheel. The outside of the Ferris wheel moves a great deal, covering lots of area. The hub of the wheel, however, while revolving a full 360 degrees, actually never moves far. It is a “fixed point...best left undisturbed, for without [it], nothing holds together” (4). It does a full circle, but never moves far beyond its point of origin.

There is also an interesting contrast in Babbitt’s description of the fountain that ascends with the power of bestowing eternal life. The water emerges from “a *little* spring bubbling up” at the foot of “the *giant* ash tree at the center of the wood” (8, emphasis added). While water continues to bubble forth from the spring, the tree remains a constant, not growing “one whit in all that time” from the Tuck’s first visit to the

second, some twenty years later (40). The initial that Tuck had carved into the tree remains “as fresh as if it’d just been put there” (40). The Tucks decide that the bubbling, flowing, dynamic spring is “the source of their changelessness” (40).

Babbitt employs a further contrast in the weather. Initially, the characters suffer through the “strange and breathless...dog days” of summer (3), during which the temperature is so extreme that the “slightest exertion” leaves Winnie and others in “a flood of perspiration” (111). It is “mindlessly hot, unspeakably hot, too hot to move or even think” (116). The sun, itself, is “a roar without a sound” (116) which leaves the thirsty earth “cracked, and hard as a rock” (111). The only cloud is one of “hysterical gnats suspended in the heat above the road” (13). Later, however, the sky beings to change. Winnie sees that it is “not so much clouding up as thickening, somehow, from every direction at once, the blank blue gone to haze” (117). As the wind picks up, “the smell of rain” begins to “hang sweet in the air” (118). Lightning flashes and a wild and wet storm rages during Mae’s escape from prison. Rain comes “in sheets...riding the wind, flung crosswise through the night” (125).

### **A Fairy Tale Princess**

Babbitt also uses contrasts to powerfully reinforce the image of Winnie’s blossoming beauty. While Mae Tuck characterizes herself as “plain as salt”(55), she is also described as “a great potato of a woman” (10). What disparity such an image evokes when one considers the lumpy, earthy, plain, colorless, solid, accessible, dependable nature of a potato (Tunnell and Jacobs 2000, 25). Compare this to the soft, sweetness of young Winnie.

Winnie’s childhood purity and innocence is also emphasized when Babbitt contrasts Winnie against a toad. As with the

potato, images generally associated with toads are of lumpy, plain, very earthy beings—certainly not the beautiful, virginal fairy tale heroine that is Winnie. Babbitt, herself, says that “toads are earth creatures like Mae. They’re not beautiful” (as quoted in Hearne 2000, 158). Ironically, however, frogs and toads are “common symbols of sexuality in fairy tales” (Hearne 2000, 158). Here is another contrast between Winnie’s pure innocence and the toad as an image of sexuality.

In the toad itself, we see opposite distinctions. To save it from a dog, Winnie picks up the toad. She discovers the creature is “rough and soft, both at once” (132). Being amphibious, the toad can additionally be seen to represent the contrasting images of water and earth.

### **Innocent Witches and Tainted Saviors**

The contrast between Good and Evil is apparent amidst the murmurs of witchcraft that have led their friends to desert the Tucks. Miles’ wife concludes that he has “sold [his] soul to the Devil” (39). The Tucks have life eternal—which is generally considered to be the religious reward for a mortal existence of purity and goodness. Yet it is they who are accused of Black magic and witchcraft.

Ironically, Winnie initially thinks of the man in the yellow suit as “a kind of savior” (59). As Winnie bounces along on the back of the horse, having just been kidnapped, she and the Tuck’s pass the man in the yellow suit. At that moment, had her mind not “perversely went blank” (33) she could have called out to him and cried for help in liberation from her captors. Later, the man in the yellow suit leads the local policeman to the Tuck cabin, to “save” Winnie. In Babbitt’s novel, however, this supposed savior is the antagonist. The “witches”—the practitioners of Black

magic—are the innocent and good. The “savior” represents corruption and evil.

### **Surrendering to Freedom**

The Tucks’ inability to die is emphasized when contrasted with the vulnerability and mortality of others. The man in the yellow suit wants nothing more than to acquire what he sees as the priceless gift of life eternal. Rather than realize this dream, however, Mae Tuck kills him. When Mae kills the man, however, we recognize that she does not do it out of malice. Rather, she acts “out of love for Winnie and for all people” (Hartvigsen and Hartvigsen 1987, 180-181). The death of the man in the yellow suit results in Mae’s arrest and imprisonment. It is generally agreed that in an “open-and-shut case....they’ll hang her for sure” (109).

As the novel draws toward its climax, Winnie *surrenders* her freedom, willingly entering jail to take the place of Mae. In sacrificing her liberty for captivity, however, Winnie actually finally *secures* her freedom. It is the “ultimate assertion of her independence, the final breaking of the bonds of trust and fear that had restricted her” (Aippersbach 1990, 91). Winnie is reminded of an old poem:

“*Stone walls do not a prison make,  
Nor iron bars a cage*” (123).

Winnie casts aside the shackles imposed upon her during her upbringing. For all intents and purposes, her militant and suppressive mother and grandmother have imprisoned her as effectively as any stone walls or iron bars. She now declares her independence from the girl who had once been “too neat, too prissy; almost, somehow, too *clean*” (130, italics in original).

The novel’s concluding cemetery scene has been described as “one of the special moments in all children’s literature” (Tunnell 1987, 510). At book’s end, the Tucks visit the town cemetery. As Tuck

reads the monument inscription we discover the decision that Winnie made regarding the course of her life. The journey she selected for life included death. Tuck told Winnie, “you can’t have living without dying” (64). This being the case, in learning of Winnie’s death, we understand that she did live. In choosing death, Winnie opted for life.

### **A Fondness for Contrast**

Babbitt demonstrates a proclivity for contrast. While expressing her lamentations about the lack of great literature for American children, Babbitt (1974) renders contradictory images to emphasize her point. With reference to Utopia and Hell, she says that while the world of “American children’s novels is sweet beyond bearing, the world of American adult novels is black beyond reason” (Babbitt 1974, 182).

In a later article (1986), Babbitt attempts to define her audience. She uses extremes to illustrate the variety that exists within children. Babbitt refers to a photograph of herself and her sister. At the time the photograph was taken, Babbitt was seven years old, and her sister was nine. In the photograph, the sisters are dressed alike, “but that’s where the likeness stops, because [the sister] was fat and [Babbitt] was emaciated.” Despite the “identical cotton dresses,” Babbitt’s arms hang from the puffed sleeves “as loosely...as the clappers in a pair of bells” while Babbitt’s sister’s sleeve cuffs “are like tourniquets.” We also learn that Babbitt’s sister was an excellent student, while Babbitt, herself, was “what the teachers now tactfully refer to as an underachiever.” The sister was “gregarious.” Babbitt was “pretty much of a hermit” (161). This detailed, often comical, analysis of a single photograph is, in itself, evidence of Babbitt’s masterful writing. It also demonstrates how effectively she uses contrasts and opposites to enhance that writing.

In reviewing *Tuck Everlasting*, Aippersbach (1990) maintains that the contrasts contained within the story are consistent with the overall structure of the novel. "It is a simple story that deals effectively with [a] complex theme" (Aippersbach 1990, 83). Aippersbach continues by saying, "the complicated themes of the book are...illustrated by simple things" (95).

In 1974, Babbitt lamented the lack of great literature for children. She complained that American children's novels lacked dynamism. The following year, Farrar, Straus and Giroux published Babbitt's *Tuck Everlasting*. Here is a children's novel that does not lack "art, ambition, craftsmanship, and commitment" (Babbitt 1974, 178). *Tuck Everlasting* continues to be popular over a quarter of a century later. It has received lavish praise. Tunnell (1987) describes it as "one of the most outstanding" of all books. He says it is a "special book" that is embraced by children and adults alike (509). Unlike Babbitt of 1974, people can no longer decry American children's novels as "a wasteland to be irrigated" (185). Babbitt has given us a gem to cherish. After all, "it is difficult to ignore writing that dances to its own wonderful music yet is clear and direct" (Tunnell 1987, 511). Regardless of how the audience feels about the new Disney movie, there remains little doubt that adults and children alike will enthusiastically continue to revisit Babbitt's superb novel.

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