Bad Fathers, Wicked Stepmothers, Cannibalistic Witches, and Amorous Princes

A Psychoanalytic Study of Fairy Tales

By

Robert S. White

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Contents

Preface

Psychoanalysis has been interested in fairy tales and myths from the very beginning. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud (1900) felt he had found the royal road to the unconscious. In neurotic mechanisms, repression blocks charged infantile experience from consciousness; the symptom returns as a compromise formation to consciousness in its disguised form. Likewise, in dreams, a censor, partially relaxed during sleep, allows a partial discharge of the accumulation of anxiety during the day, now called the day residue. These current anxieties combine with unconscious, infantile anxieties to form the latent dream. The manifest dream, what the dreamer remembers, is the disguised form that can be allowed into consciousness. Freud felt he could find in myths the same eternal truths about the unconscious that he had previously found in dreams. The myth of Oedipus could be considered the founding myth of psychoanalysis. Freud soon turned to the study of fairy tales, which he thought, in conjunction with German romanticism, as access to more primary modes of thinking. The fairy tale was equated with the dream. For example, in the Wolfman case, Freud (1918) connected a dream with the fairy tale "Little Red Riding Hood." Freud dispatched Géza Róheim on an anthropological expedition to prove that the Oedipus myth was universally found in all cultures. What Róheim did was to collect folk tales and myths; he wrote a number of the early psychoanalytic papers on folk and fairy tales. This was a golden age of interest in fairy tales among the earlier Freudians. In addition, Freud formed an alliance with Jung, who had an independent interest in myth. Both Jung and Freud believed in a phylogenetic inheritance; certain psychological structures were inborn and inherited through generations. While Freud never gave up his belief that the Oedipus complex was inborn and inherited, the Freudian circle after him never took up this issue. Moreover, it is only in the last several decades that psychoanalytic theory has begun to realize that Freud's view of the primitive was irretrievably bound up in colonialism and racist structures and needs to be rethought. However, Jung maintained the centrality of inherited psychic structures, which he called

archetypes. Consequently, the Jungians have remained much more interested in myth and fairy tales than the Freudians.

Parallel to the Freudian interest, the study of folk and fairy tales became an academic discipline. The Grimm brothers were among the first collectors of folk tales, which were thought to be the origin of the literary fairy tale. In the late nineteenth century, folk tales were collected in various European cultures and later in non-European cultures. What became apparent in these studies was that basic motifs and narrative themes transcend individual cultures and can be traced through time and across geographic regions. Out of this grew structural models that attempted to classify fairy tale motifs in great detail. There was very little interest in the meaning of fairy tales, perhaps as a reaction to psychoanalytic meaning, which many academic folklorists thought was naïve. On the other hand, psychoanalysts generally ignored academics and were unaware of the volumes of research documenting the oral folk tale tradition that underlies the literary fairy tales. The current generation of academic studies of folk and fairy tales is more interested in meaning, including psychoanalytic meaning.

The next wave of psychoanalytic interest in fairy tales came in the publication of Bruno Bettelheim's book on fairy tales in 1976, *The Uses of Enchantment*. Bettelheim was one of the Austrian emigrants to the United States fleeing Hitler's Germany before the war. He settled in Chicago and had a controversial career as the founder of a school for troubled adolescents. He has been accused of inflating his credentials and mistreating students in his school. He was never formally trained in psychoanalysis and was not accepted in psychoanalytic circles. It was not clear if he ever received a degree in clinical psychology. Later in his life, he wrote *The Uses of Enchantment*, his best-known work. This work was an immediate success and won a National Book Award for contemporary thought. It is still in print today. The book was highly influential and stimulated a literary resurgence in fairy tales. Today, fairy tales are everywhere, rewritten in modern dress, found in novels, operas, and plays, and expanded in fantasy literature.

Bettelheim's book has been criticized from both sides. As an example of applied psychoanalysis, Bettelheim reflects on the psychoanalysis of his day, American ego psychology. Everything is interpreted through the lens of oedipal conflict, that is, incestuous desire for the opposite-sex parent and rivalry with a same-sex parent at a neurotic level of organization. Moreover, Bettelheim is preoccupied with the reassurance of recovery and resolution. These dynamic issues are fine for the generally well-adjusted child traversing the usual stages of development. But they do not speak to trauma, abandonment over-stimulation, non-standard gender identities, or states of panic and disorganization. Fairy tales can convey the depths of these feeling states. The naming and toleration of terrifying states are just as important as reassurance. For example, Hans Loewald (1960) takes an image from the Odyssey, where Odysseus visits the underworld to consult the blind seer, Tiresias. There, the ghosts awaken to new life as soon as they taste blood. Loewald interprets this image as "the blood of recognition which the patient's unconscious is given to taste—so that the old ghosts may reawaken to life." (p. 29). Bion (1962) uses the term pathological projective identification, where the patient under pressure increases evacuation processes, causing "evacuated at high speed as missiles to annihilate space." (p. 307). Both Loewald and Bion refer to terror-filled fantasy.

From the folkloric side, the academic community considers Bettelheim naïve. He does not recognize the research into the variety of folk tales that may be allied with particular literary fairy tales. He settles on a single meaning and does not consider other plausible meanings. It has given psychoanalysis a bad name in academia. He was accused of plagiarizing academic work without giving proper credit to other authors.

My personal interest in the psychoanalysis of fairy tales began when a severely traumatized patient of mine in a five-day-per-week psychoanalytic treatment brought up an article in the New York Times magazine concerning traumatized adolescents and their resilience. But the article did not interest her; the two illustrations caught her eye. There were two scenes from "Hansel and Gretel," one showing the two children looking at the witch's house and the two children leaving the house. From that point forward, motifs from "Hansel and Gretel" appeared in our

work and proved to be a central turning point in the treatment. It became both the exposure to the full intensity of the traumas (the first panel) and the possibility of leaving the trauma behind (the second panel). This revived my childhood fascination with these tales, primarily the Grimms' tales, and I started to read more, going back to the originals and learning about their history and background.

I think of this book as following Bettelheim and amending his work in two ways. I want to pay attention to academic scholarships. What is more important in this context is the existence of multiple variations of any one tale, both within a nationality and across nationalities. We can also trace particular tales handed down from one literary tradition to another. The literary version that became canon was the one version of the tale written down. By looking at the variations, we can better understand the possible multiple meanings. The other road to meaning that I take up is the modern rewriting of the tales, which, when well done, adds new layers of meaning to the tales. I will also take up examples of fantasy, a more modern novelistic treatment of fairy tale themes. Secondly, while I agree with Bettelheim's oedipal interpretations and his emphasis on recovery, I aim to add meaning that captures the deeper traumatic nature of human life. In these studies, I want to capture unnoticed and alternative meanings.

Bettelheim's book was written for the general public. This book is aimed differently. The primary audience for this book is clinical psychoanalysts, those who work with adults and children. The book does assume a basic working knowledge of psychoanalytic principles. The book can be read by therapists who work in various theoretical backgrounds and see the type of patients I describe. Other professionals who work with children, teachers, childcare workers, social workers, and even sophisticated parents might benefit. It could serve as a reference in academic classes in folklore and folktales.

In the past decades, Disney cartoons have popularized and introduced fairy tales to a new generation of readers. We have "Snow White," "Rapunzel," "Beauty and the Beast," "Pinocchio," "Cinderella," "Sleeping Beauty," and "The Snow Queen" as feature films. While these films have

undoubtedly helped to keep this tradition alive, the Disney "effect" has been to soften the edges by reducing the overt sexuality and violence in the original tales. A chapter will look at selected Disney cartoons to examine this effect critically.

It will quickly become apparent to the sophisticated psychoanalytic reader that fairy tales admit to multiple readings. Their simplified structure and their focus on basic emotional themes demand multiple meanings. In my interpretation, I want to tease out the less obvious meanings, which are always a personal choice. I will leave it to my readers to supply their own meanings to these wonderful creations.

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List of Illustrations Heading – Walter Crane from *Household Stories* by the Brothers Grimm.1882. Common Domain.

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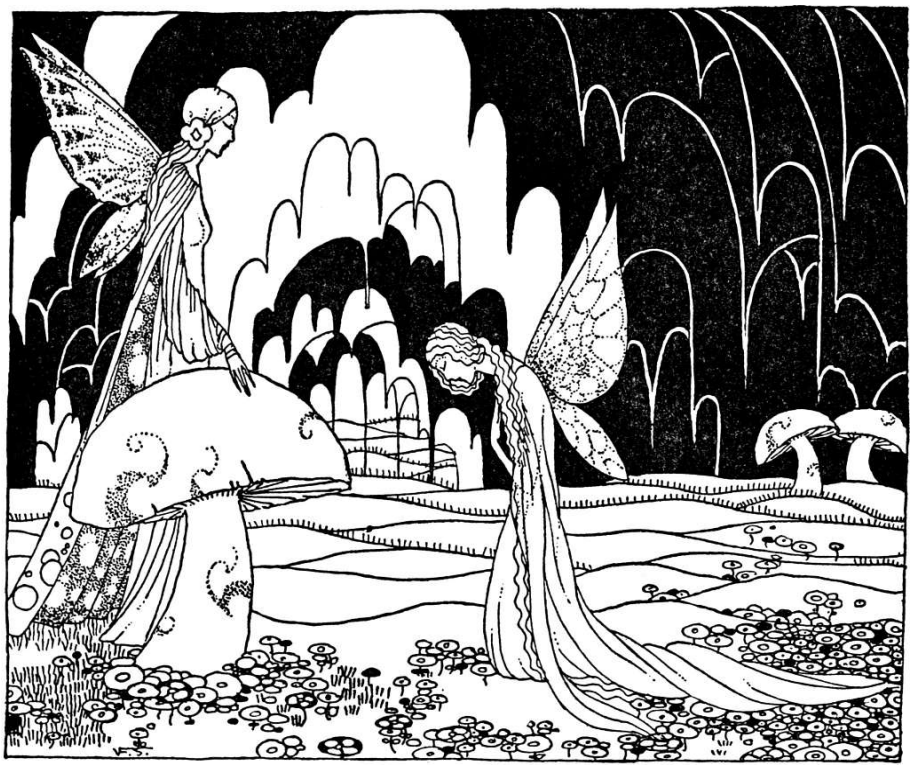
References Header – Walter Crane from *Household Stories* by the Brothers Grimm. 1882. Common Domain.

Part I
Introduction and Overview

Fairy tales! Are they stories to read to children before bedtime to help them sleep, cute Disney cartoons complete with cuddly animals and singing princesses, or worlds of fantasy to escape into? Fairy tales are all of these, at least in our modern world, but they retain something of their origin, which is quite the opposite. Fairy tales are like the kings and queens that the peasant class aspire to; they are the dressed-up versions of a vast array of folktales, popular songs, urban legends, conspiracy theories, and the like, one foot in the earthy stew of popular culture and one foot in the polish of high, literary culture. To be human is to tell stories, and the best always plays with basic human needs and conflicts: wanting power over others, getting rich, rising in rank, being abused and humiliated, and finding a suitable mate. Every culture has its folktale tradition, and, in many cultures, certain folktales have evolved into their literary cousins, the fairy tale. In Western European culture, the fairy tale, as a genre, first became popular in the sixteenth century and rapidly evolved to the form we know today, exemplified by the Grimms' collections in nineteenth-century Germany. Since the publication of the Grimm brother's collection, fairy tales have become an academic interest for scholars, who have collected diverse tales and developed theories about their origin, purpose, and meaning. Psychoanalysis became interested in fairy tales from the beginning of Freud's work. He considered dreams as the royal road to the unconscious; myths and fairy tales soon followed as another royal road. Many of the early pioneers of psychoanalysis wrote about fairy tales. Jung, who went his separate way from Freud because of his concept of archetypes, wrote extensively about myth and fairy tales.



Old French Fairy Tales
Virginia Sterret

One

What is a Fairy Tale?

Child of the pure unclouded brow
And dreaming eyes of wonder!
Though time be fleet, and I and thou
Are half a life asunder,
Thy loving smile will surely hail
The love-gift of a fairy-tale.

Lewis Carroll, in *Through the Looking-Glass*

Introduction

Human beings are storytellers. We need to find meaning in our lives, dream, wonder, know why we are here, understand why we die, and puzzle over evil and sickness. Once we developed the use of language, we likely told stories. Oral folktales and myths are found in every human culture, and they go back a very long time—most likely as long as we've been talking.

Myths

To this end, major human cultures have produced foundational literary works that define and ground a culture. These attempts to answer the grand questions: Where did we come from, what is the nature of good and evil, and what happens after we die? For Western European culture, we could include Greek and Roman myths, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* of Homer, the *Hebrew Bible*, the *Republic* and the *Dialogues of Plato*, and the *Aeneid* of Virgil, among many others. Most of the above are myths and sacred narratives that explain the creation of the physical world and the beings within that world. They establish norms, values, and ideals of human society and relationships. Myths occur in the remote past and are populated by Gods and other supernatural beings, often in relationship or

conflict with human beings (Bascom, 1965; Jones, 2002). Legends are quasi-historical narratives meant to depict larger-than-life cultural ideals.

Folklore and Folk tales

Folklore is a broad term that encompasses the traditions of a particular people, passed down from generation to generation and preserved through memory or practice. It includes a wide range of cultural elements, such as customs, rituals, dances, songs, and oral narratives. When we talk about folklore in a more specific sense, we are usually referring to the orally transmitted prose and verse forms that can be found in all human societies. These forms might include anecdotes, jokes, riddles, fables, parables, speeches, legends, tall tales, epics, folk tales, poems, and more.

Folk tales are secular prose narratives handed down from generation to generation, meant to entertain. These tales, reflecting the aspirations, needs, and dreams of the particular society or tribe, would be told by a gifted storyteller, originally memorized and passed on through the generations to an audience actively participating in their shaping (Zipes, 2001).[1] Unlike myth, these stories are much closer to the "common folk." They are stories derived from folklore told to explain the trials and tribulations of ordinary lives. Baudy comedy, high and low class, terror, and triumph all mix together in timeless tales that capture how children mature into adults, find mates, and achieve livelihoods. These folk tales capture universal human conflict: deprivation, rivalry, loss, generational conflicts, finding love, and achieving wealth. Folk tales are similar to dreams; they have a manifest narrative structure of character types drawn on broad strokes and a spare, compact narrative. It is possible to derive a latent structure of multiple meanings and motives, each of which can illuminate aspects of human relationships. These tales were told mainly by adults for adults. Within a culture, many versions of each tale can be found that perpetuate a similar storyline. Moreover, particular tales cross

[1] Jack Zipes (1937-) is a professor emeritus at the University of Minnesota. He pioneered the study of fairy tales as historical evolution and as a product of their social and cultural milieu. His influence is seen throughout this book. He is also sympathetic and critical of psychoanalytic methods.

cultural boundaries; the details may change but the overall structure of the tale remains intact. While particular tales express a particular culture's traditions and expectations, universal beliefs, dreams, and fears can be found among tales from different cultures (Jones, 2002).

What is a fairy tale?

Fairy tales are challenging to define, as there is a bewildering variety of themes and categories. The stories that we recognize as fairy tales likely originated in a subtype of oral folktales called wonder folktales (*Zaubermärchen* or *conte merveilleux*), defined by Thompson (1977) as:

> ...A tale of some length involving a succession of motifs or episodes. It moves in an unreal world without definite locality or definite creatures and is filled with the marvelous. In this never-never land, humble heroes kill adversaries, succeed to kingdoms and marry princesses (p. 8).

At the heart of such tales is a quest and the resulting marvelous or astonishing transformation of the main character into fulfillment and emancipation (Zipes, 2001). The literary fairy tale, then, is one of the versions from the oral tradition that has been written down and cleaned up.

In the West, fairy tales began to be written down in the Medieval Period, blossoming first in Italy, then France, and finally in Germany (see Chapter 2). The stories they are based on can be traced back to Arabian, Indian, and Greek sources, and similar tales are found in Asian, African, and Native North American traditions. Indeed, folklorists have collected folk and fairy tales, remarkably similar in structure and content, from all the major cultures worldwide.

Critics have noted several implications in the shift from oral to written forms: the written version often becomes canonical and the oral versions are forgotten; the written version is often cleaned up, its bawdy and aggressive content purged, its social criticism toned down, and moralistic elements added. The written versions were aimed at particular audiences.

French fairy tales were written by and for the nobility and reflected the courtly style of their time. In contrast, the Grimms' fairy tales focused on upward mobility and the values of self-direction and hard work, which appealed to the developing middle class of their day.

The term fairy tale was coined by Mme d'Aulnoy as *conte de fée*. Yet, as J. R.R. Tolkien[2] (1983) and others have pointed out, fairy tales do not always include fairies. Tolkien would prefer to define fairy tales by the place of magic, which he calls *Faërie:*

> Faërie contains many things besides elves and fays, and besides dwarfs, witches, trolls, giants, or dragons: it holds the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky; and the earth, and all things that are in it: tree and bird, water and stone, wine and bread, and ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted. (p. 113)

Fairy tales always have marvelous and enchanted qualities that must be accepted at face value, an acceptance of the supernatural as a legitimate part of the world (Jones, 2002).

Structure of Fairy Tales

Fairy tales in the Western tradition have primarily evolved into a set narrative structure. The narratives follow specific conventions that have evolved, but only some of the conventions need to be in an individual tale (Tatar,[3] 1987; Bottigheimer,[4] 2009). A fairy tale is a type of short story, a compressed[5] narrative typically featuring some form of magic or enchantment. It is fictional, often set in timeless settings (once upon a time) and generic, unspecified places (the woods), with two-dimensional characters (completely good or bad), either named by category

[2] Tolkien, of course, produced a masterpiece of twentieth-century fantasy, *The Lord of the Rings* cycle.
[3] Maria Tatar, born 1945 in Germany, is a professor of Germanic studies at Harvard University and has written widely on fairy tales.
[4] Ruth Bottigheimer is a professor of English at Stony Brook University and has written widely on fairy tales.
[5] The Northern European style, set by the Grimm brothers, features a spare narrative of the actions, with little psychological comment, while the French and Italian narratives are more expansive and psychological.

(stepmother) or having common names (Gretel or Hans). At the heart of the fairy tale is an enchanted or magical space, a kind of underworld where transformations occur.

The social structure is feudal in nature. The French feature the nobility, while the Grimm brothers typically use kings, queens, craftsmen, and peasants as stock protagonists. This reflects the sensibility of the fairy tale authors and their times. The French wanted to modernize the feudal customs of the nobility, while the Germans looked to feudal structures of the past as a national identity.

The fairy tale always portrays a hero, whom the reader is meant to identify with, and several secondary personas: villains, donors, and helpers -- the helpers and donors can either aid or threaten -- each character enacting multiple roles. There is frequently a pattern of separation, a call to adventure, initiation, a confrontation with a task or adversary, and finally, a return home (Campbell, 1970). The hero initially lives in a family setting but is confronted with a crisis or a prohibition, in which he or she either violates a norm, must perform a task, or is forced to leave home. Their assigned task becomes a heroic quest, its fate primarily determined by the protagonist's character. The hero is a wanderer who enters a magical space, encountering a villain, a mysterious individual, or creatures who give a gift. The protagonist is often expected to help the creatures who gives the gift -- woe to any character who does not. The protagonist must battle and conquer the evil forces. There is a temporary setback in the protagonist's fortunes, and a wonder or miracle is needed to reverse the fortunes. The protagonist uses these gifts -- often coming in groups of three -- to achieve his goal. The villain is punished, and the evil forces are banished. The success of the protagonist leads to marriage, money, or wisdom. The direction is usually rags to riches.

The pleasure and enchantment of fairy tales never fail. Initially intended for adult reading and entertainment, fairy tales have increasingly been considered children's literature, paralleling a British and European change

in the conception of children from mini-adults to a particular time of innocence and growth[6] in Germany.

As old as they are, these stories still capture the interest of children and adults. Indeed, fairy tales have remained a mainstream in our modern culture, with new translations of familiar tales, modern adaptations, movies, songs, operas, and the rise of fantasy as a new literary genre. Clearly, there is something characteristic in them that transcends the particular plot or character.

Interpretation

What is this transcendence? Freud (1913) thought that fairy tales, like dreams, are closer to the unconscious expression of emotions and psychological conflict than everyday experience. Fairy tales strip away social politeness and repressed emotional states; forbidden or avoided emotions are acted out in full view, such as incest, greed, hate, envy, and rivalry. Working out of such emotional states requires a lengthy quest and searching. The spare and binary structure of the tales allows the projection of multiple interpretive readings. Historically, the more popular fairy tales are continuously metamorphosing, and rewritten in various styles and settings. Their continuing popularity in present-day culture reflects this commonality of basic human emotions, offering a direct connection to forbidden conflicts that nevertheless seek expression, a window behind the mask.

The psychoanalytic method provides access to these hidden symbols. Psychoanalysis always looks for hidden meaning behind the conventional and then finds further hidden meaning behind what is originally hidden in a potentially infinite series. Psychoanalysis is particularly interested in the human problems of illusion, our tendency to create masks to hide psychic pain from ourselves and others[7]. In this sense, psychoanalysis

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[6] Many regard Lewis Carroll's (1993) *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, published in 1865 in England, as the first children's book, coinciding with the Grimm's work on fairy tales

[7] "All three [Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud] begin with a suspicion concerning the illusions of consciousness, and then proceed to employ the stratagem of deciphering;

aims at destroying myths, the myths we create about ourselves, a kind of false consciousness, aiming for more authentic words and connections. Psychoanalysis insists that meanings are personal; each individual develops meaning from personal relationships and life circumstances, yet the human mind works in specific universal ways. We grow up in a sequence of predictable developmental steps; standard mechanisms defend against mental pain, and we can describe configurations of personality types.

What is fascinating is how an individual tale can express multiple meanings, simultaneously narrating the development from adolescence into adulthood and expressing intergenerational conflicts -- incestuous desires, murderous rivalries, and traumatic losses. Psychoanalytic interpretation has traditionally centered on the themes of adolescent development into adulthood and the re-capitulation of oedipal themes in adolescence – separating from parental figures, incest, rivalries, finding sexual partners, and a secure place in adult society. However, behind and below these developmental themes, we can find more primary concerns with trauma and its psychic consequences. Modern re-interpretations of fairy tales often illuminate these traumatic concerns.

Gender Issues

The majority of literary fairy tales have a masculine orientation. In the Grimms' tales, the hero is typically an adolescent boy who must leave home to solve a task set upon him and then return home as a young man. However, there are different kinds of masculinity. Some male heroes, such as the Simpleton, are often passive and lack courage, but they must have a naïve intelligence, a compassion that attracts helpers, and, most importantly, remain humble. The hero will grow through the use of helpers and donors and triumph in the end. I take up Chapter 3, the Grimms' story "The Three Feathers," as an example where Simpleton wins a kingdom from his two brothers. Another group of male heroes, such as tailors, are older and naïve but have courage and cunning and do

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all three, however, far from being detractors of 'consciousness,' aim at extending it" (Ricoeur, 1970, p. 34).

not need helpers. In Chapter 3, the Grimms' "The Cunning Little Tailor" *is* an example of a tailor who must outwit a bear to gain his bride. Trickster heroes like Perrault's "Puss-in-Boots" are rarely found in Grimm but are more prominent in French tales. Female heroines, too, can set out on quests. They must be humble but possess supernatural beauty, although it may be hidden at the beginning, and prove themselves in domestic arts, either on their own or find helpers to complete their tasks. In "Beauty and the Beast," a dutiful daughter must confront a fearsome beast to save her father and, ultimately, gains a prince (see chapter 6). However, there are also examples of strong heroines who take action. In "Fitcher's Bird," a variant of "Bluebeard" (see chapter 7), the youngest sister bests the wizard and saves her two other sisters. Alternatively, in "The Robber Bridegroom" (see chapter 7), a girl is promised to a man who turns out to be a cannibal, and she must use her wits to turn the table on him and get him executed. A smaller group of fairy tales, so-called cautionary tales, do not have happy endings and are designed to portray the consequences of rash deeds. Some versions of "Little Red Riding Hood" (see chapter 8) or "Bluebeard" (see chapter 7) do not end happily and result in the hero's death. Animal tales featuring animals as protagonists in beast epics, as shape-changing humans, or co-exiting with humans are another form of folk tale. The French "Beauty and the Beast" (see chapter 6) where the prince is disguised as a beast, or the Grimms' "Frog King," where the prince is disguised as a frog, are examples of this genre.

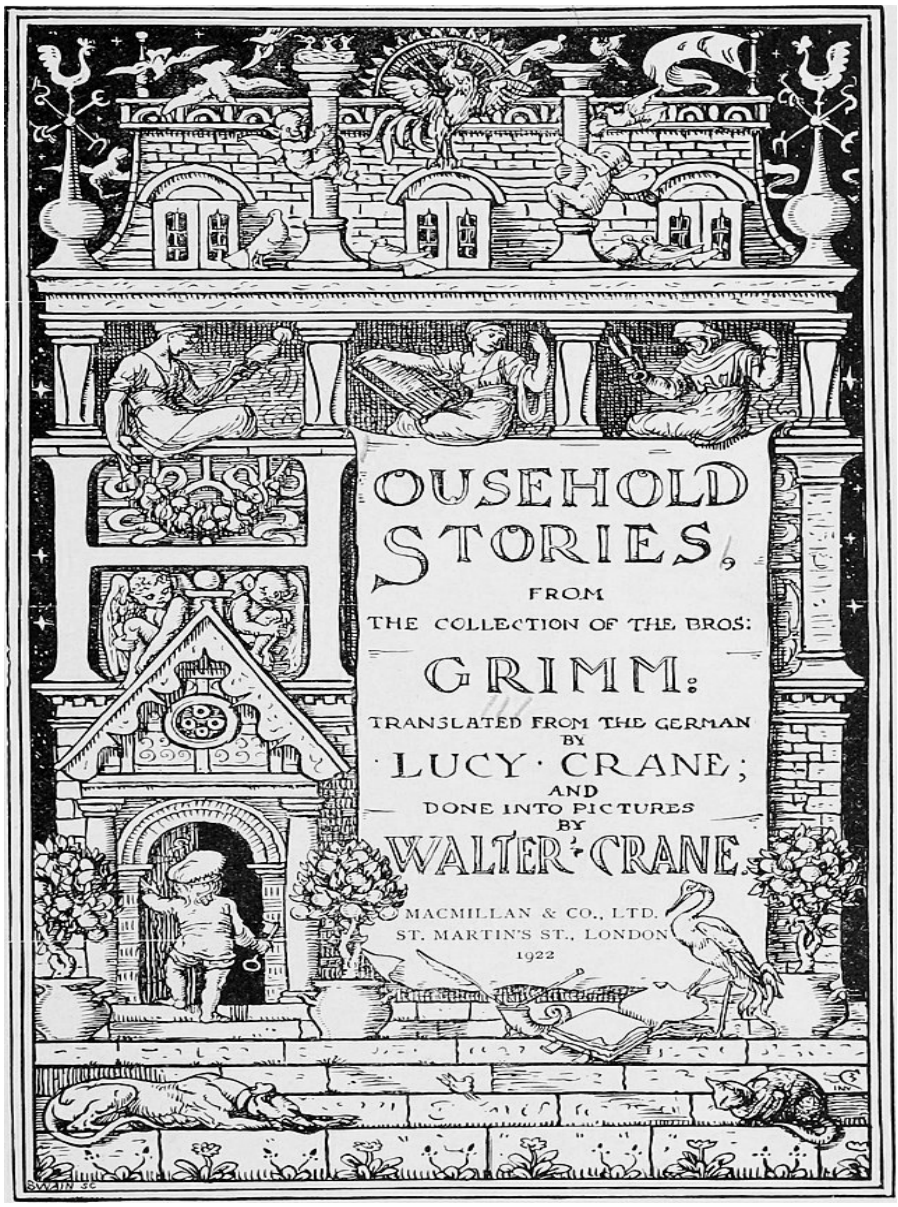
Much of the modern re-writing of fairy tales has a decided feminist bent. Angela Carter has written a series of modern fairy tales from a woman's point of view, such as" Little Red Riding Hood" (see chapter 8), "Beauty and the Beast" (see chapter 6), and "Bluebeard" (See chapter 7). Even Disney has made a concerted effort to find independent and active heroines (see chapter 10 on "Rapunzel").

The genre of fantasy is also included in this book. It is a comparatively modern form of narrative fiction, derived in its English form from medieval legends and epic poetry such as *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. It is written as a novel, always in a fictional space, allowing for character development and a detailed plot. Fairy tale elements, such as magic and a quest structure, are often present in fantasy. I will take up

Peter Pan (see chapter 12) and *The Once and Future King* (see chapter 14) as examples of fantasy in the twentieth century.

Conclusion

What is a fairy tale? The answer can vary depending on one's interest and point of view. Since the point of view is psychoanalytic -- the study of primary symbols based on bodily needs and early childhood relationships -- the following is a working definition. The Grimms have set the narrative structure of the dominant Western fairy tale form. It is a short-story form, using stock character types and a quest structure. The stock narrative provides a safe space (far away and long ago) where primitive and split-off emotions can come alive in consciousness and then be vehicles for projecting inner fears and needs. The hero or heroine is pushed or pulled from their original life into an enchanted or magical transformation space. The magical space may be located outwardly in the world or inwardly in secret places. The crossing into this space may be a seeking of adventure or transgression, the seeking of forbidden knowledge; that is, fairy tales describe a progression that we all embark upon many times throughout our lives. Through the use of magic, primary fantasies such as incest, cannibalism, destruction, and retribution can come to life. They can be linked to the individual patient or child's unconscious. Multiple interpretive versions of individual tales are possible at different developmental levels, but the ultimate progression – from trauma to regression to consolidation and growth – remains the same.



Cover, *Household Stories*
Walter Crane

Two
A History of the Literary Fairy Tale

We want to remain curious, startled, provoked, mystified, and uplifted. We want to glare, gaze, gawk, behold, and stare. We want to be given opportunities to change, and ultimately we want to be told that we can become kings and queens, or lords of our own destinies. We remember wonder tales and fairy tales to keep our sense of wonderment alive and to nurture our hope that we can seize possibilities and opportunities to transform ourselves and our worlds.

Jack Zipes (1991a)

Introduction

How do we account for the psychological power of fairy tales to enchant and terrify us, both in their antiquated story form, their proliferation into other forms, such as retellings, plays, movies, and operas, and their metamorphoses into modern characters and plots? Folkloric scholars have traditionally studied the structure of fairy tales, classifying elemental building blocks in the plots, which allows the study of type, variation, and origin. Still, they have little interest in the psychological aspects of the tales. Psychoanalysts have studied the symbolic meaning of fairy tales, but they have been largely ignorant of variations, leading to arbitrary and idiosyncratic assignment of meaning. In a third approach, fairy tales have been analyzed as a reflection of a particular culture and its social setting. In this sense, we understand the fairy tale as a reflection of current events and anxieties, mirroring or reacting to the culture it comes from.

I want to propose a new hypothesis that combines the psychological and the sociological -- a theory of traumatic origin. In this view, fairy tales tend to arise in periods of intense social or cultural anxiety. They carry both the underlying traumatic anxiety and compensation for that trauma. To this end, I will examine the history of literary fairy tales in Europe, especially three epochs where fairy tales proliferated, first in Italy, then

France, and finally in Germany. For each of these epochs, I will propose specific political and cultural anxieties to which a body of fairy tales is a response. The traumatic origin of the European fairy tale would be the almost continuous cycle of disease, warfare, and poverty from the fourteenth century and continuing into the twentieth century.

We will then look at individual tales to trace derivatives of these anxieties and possible, often magical and idealized solutions to these anxieties. Fairy tales provide an ideal vehicle for these concerns, combining universal psychological concerns, such as maturation, finding mates, or achieving wealth, and a quest structure to find solutions and satisfaction. We can also examine the extraordinary metamorphosis of fairy tales into contemporary plots to reflect the anxieties of our current life. Often, the tale begins and ends in a realistic home setting, but the world in between unfolds in a surreal and magical space.

Academic Studies

In Europe, there were three flowerings of literary fairy tales, first in Italy in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, then in France in the seventeenth century, and finally in Germany in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Zipes, 1991a). As academics expanded their research, it soon became apparent that all the major cultures of the world -- native American, European, African, and Eastern cultures -- each had a rich body of folktales. Many of these folk tales were transformed into literary forms.[1] Fairy tales are not a Western European invention. Fairy tale themes can be traced, often from Indian and Persian sources, through the three epochs of fairy tales in Western Europe. Moving from place to place, the tale has an invariant core but takes on the customs and landscapes of its adopted country. Moreover, it becomes apparent that each popular and well-known literary fairy tale is only one version of many folk tales that could be collected in the field. The Grimms were already aware of this but tended to write a composite fairy tale narrative, trying to find the primitive ideal in the various narratives (Zipes, 2002).

[1] See, for example, the Br'er Rabbit series of stories written by Joel Chandler Harris (1906) in the southern United States but has been shown to have African and Native American folktale roots.

The variants would retain the story's overall theme, but the characters, their actions, and even the outcome could vary. Moreover, as folk tales from around the world were collected, remarkable similarities among widely different cultures were noted. The themes of well-known European fairy tales were also found in African and Eastern cultures, with enough narrative detail to suggest a common origin.

There are three general theories about the origins of folk tales. The first holds that there is a historical source of a particular folk tale. The folk tale and its variants diffused from this primal root across nationalities and through time. In this view, fairy tales represent a historical and cultural record and can be understood as such. This led to a preoccupation with gathering and classifying tales to reconstruct this primal beginning.

One example of this structural approach is the Aarne–Thompson–Uther classification (ATU number)[2] system. This system classifies recurring plot patterns in the narrative structures of traditional folk tales so that folklorists can organize, classify, and analyze the folktales they research. Vladimir Propp[3] (1895-1970) criticized the ATU system for being static and rigid. He extended the Russian formalist approach to the study of narrative structure. Propp analyzed folk tales by breaking down many Russian folk tales into their simplest irreducible narrative elements (narratemes). By analyzing types of characters and kinds of action, Propp was able to arrive at the conclusion that there were thirty-one generic narratemes in the Russian folk tale. While not all are present, he found that all the tales he analyzed displayed the functions in unvarying sequence. Propp's analysis was syncretic, stressing the importance of a linear sequence of elements in the text. It was not intended to unearth meaning in the folk tales but to find the elemental building blocks that formed the basis of their narrative structure. Structure in Propp's analysis

[2] It was first developed by Antti Aarne (1867–1925) in 1910. The tale-type index was later translated and enlarged by Stith Thompson (1885–1976) in 1928, enlarging its scope. The AT-number system was updated and expanded in 2004 by Hans-Jörg Uther (2011). Uther noted that many of the earlier descriptions were cursory and that the existing system did not allow for expansion.

[3] *The Morphology of the Folk Tale* (Propp, 1968) was published in Russian in 1928 but only became influential in the West when it was translated into English in 1958.

comes before experience; it is a prior form that constitutes the genre of fairy tales, a "common structure" that could be expressed and formalized. In this sense, he, too, sought to find the primal origin of the folk tale.

A new research tool is coming into use that may revolutionize the study of the interrelationship of folk tales among different cultures. It uses statistical methods originally developed to construct evolutionary trees from the genetic analysis of different biological species. Genomes of one species that are more divergent from another species are thought to have split off as separate species earlier in evolution. Folktales can now be mapped in this way, as many story elements are common to a group of tales that show an underlying similarity yet evolve in detail and metaphor both within and between cultures. An analysis compared "Little Red Riding Hood," "The Goat and the Kids," the *Tiger Grandmother* stories, and similar African stories, using 58 versions from 33 cultures and 72 plot points (Tehrani, 2013). This analysis suggested that the root story probably started around 2000 years ago in Europe. The "Little Red Riding Hood" story and the "Goat and the Kids" story diverged somewhat later (see Chapter 9). It is the latter that diffused into Africa and first showed up in Aesop's tales. The East Asian stories are a combination of the two types. This type of study buttresses the theory of a common physical origin of a particular folk tale that gradually diffuses into different cultures.

The second theory is the study of symbolic meaning. Stories speak to the universal needs and fears of human beings, which are cross-cultural. In this sense, fairy tales are thought to have arisen spontaneously in different cultures as a response to universal human needs, a type of convergent evolution. See Chapter 3 for an extended discussion of psychoanalytic thinking about fairy tales.

The structural and symbolic views are rarely studied together (Dundes, 1987). Psychoanalysts are looked down upon and largely ignored by the folklorists because their analyses often appear arbitrary, based on one tale. They ignore the scholarship that shows a family of tale types. To achieve an accurate hidden meaning of a particular tale, a rigorous knowledge of variations would be necessary to distinguish essential from

random elements (Dundes, 1987). This has led most academics to be anti-symbolic and anti-psychological and leads to a denial of any latent meanings in the tales:

> Folklorists and psychoanalysts have, for nearly a century, analyzed the Grimm tales in almost total ignorance of one another. Folklorists blindly committed to anti-symbolic, antipsychological readings of folktales make little or no effort to discover what, if anything, psychoanalysts have to say about the tales they are studying. Psychoanalysts, limited to their twentieth-century patients' free associations to the nineteenth-century Grimm versions of folktales, are blithely unaware of the existence of hundreds of versions of the same tale types so assiduously assembled by folklorists in archives or presented in painstaking detail in historic-geographic monographs. (Dundes, 1987, p. 54)

Dundes (1987) was a notable exception, as he regularly tried incorporating psychoanalytic thinking into his commentary. However, he did not spare psychoanalysis either; he thought that psychoanalysts typically made arbitrary interpretations, based on a reading of a literary fairy tale and having no knowledge of the underlying variations in folklore collected by folklorists. Tatar (2019), too, looked for a synthesis of structural and symbolic approaches.

The third theory is the aspect of a fairy tale that reflects the sociological and cultural conditions of the time they were written down. Even though we can trace a core structure through time and space, each story takes on the anxieties of its own time and space. Such anxieties will be noted as we look at different epochs of story cycles.

Literary Precursors of Fairy Tales

The Grimms are responsible for starting the academic study of folktales and fairy tales, as they are among the first to collect folktales and fairy tales in the field. William Thoms coined the term "folklore" in 1846 in England. 'The folk' are considered the peasantry or the lower classes of a given region (Dundes, 1980). Much of the early folkloric studies is focused