

of the sophisticated adult. Applying the psychoanalytic model of the human personality, fairy tales carry important messages to the conscious, the preconscious, and the unconscious mind, on whatever level each is functioning at the time. By dealing with universal human problems, particularly those which preoccupy the child's mind, these stories speak to his budding ego and encourage its development, while at the same time relieving preconscious and unconscious pressures. As the stories unfold, they give conscious credence and body to id pressures and show ways to satisfy these that are in line with ego and superego requirements.

But my interest in fairy tales is not the result of such a technical analysis of their merits. It is, on the contrary, the consequence of asking myself why, in my experience, children—normal and abnormal alike, and at all levels of intelligence—find folk fairy tales more satisfying than all other children's stories.

The more I tried to understand why these stories are so successful at enriching the inner life of the child, the more I realized that these tales, in a much deeper sense than any other reading material, start where the child really is in his psychological and emotional being. They speak about his severe inner pressures in a way that the child unconsciously understands, and—without belittling the most serious inner struggles which growing up entails—offer examples of both temporary and permanent solutions to pressing difficulties.

When a grant from the Spencer Foundation provided the leisure to study what contributions psychoanalysis can make to the education of children—and since reading and being read to are essential means of education—it seemed appropriate to use this opportunity to explore in greater detail and depth why folk fairy tales are so valuable in the upbringing of children. My hope is that a proper understanding of the unique merits of fairy tales will induce parents and teachers to assign them once again to that central role in the life of the child they held for centuries.

Fairy Tales and the Existential Predicament

In order to master the psychological problems of growing up—overcoming narcissistic disappointments, oedipal dilemmas, sibling rivalries; becoming able to relinquish childhood dependencies; gaining a feeling of selfhood and of self-worth, and a sense of moral obligation

A child needs to understand what is going on within his conscious self so that he can also cope with that which goes on in his unconscious. He can achieve this understanding, and with it the ability to cope, not through rational comprehension of the nature and content of his unconscious, but by becoming familiar with it through spinning out daydreams—ruminating, rearranging, and fantasizing about suitable story elements in response to unconscious pressures. By doing this, the child fits unconscious content into conscious fantasies, which then enable him to deal with that content. It is here that fairy tales have unequalled value, because they offer new dimensions to the child's imagination which would be impossible for him to discover as truly on his own. Even more important, the form and structure of fairy tales suggest images to the child by which he can structure his daydreams and with them give better direction to his life.

In child or adult, the unconscious is a powerful determinant of behavior. When the unconscious is repressed and its content denied entrance into awareness, then eventually the person's conscious mind will be partially overwhelmed by derivatives of these unconscious elements, or else he is forced to keep such rigid, compulsive control over them that his personality may become severely crippled. But when unconscious material is to some degree permitted to come to awareness and worked through in imagination, its potential for causing harm—to ourselves or others—is much reduced; some of its forces can then be made to serve positive purposes. However, the prevalent parental belief is that a child must be diverted from what troubles him most: his formless, nameless anxieties, and his chaotic, angry, and even violent fantasies. Many parents believe that only conscious reality or pleasant and wish-fulfilling images should be presented to the child—that he should be exposed only to the sunny side of things. But such one-sided fare nourishes the mind only in a one-sided way, and real life is not all sunny.

There is a widespread refusal to let children know that the source of much that goes wrong in life is due to our very own natures—the propensity of all men for acting aggressively, asocially, selfishly, out of anger and anxiety. Instead, we want our children to believe that, inherently, all men are good. But children know that *they* are not always good; and often, even when they are, they would prefer not to be. This contradicts what they are told by their parents, and therefore makes the child a monster in his own eyes.

The dominant culture wishes to pretend, particularly where children are concerned, that the dark side of man does not exist, and

professes a belief in an optimistic meliorism. Psychoanalysis itself is viewed as having the purpose of making life easy—but this is not what its founder intended. Psychoanalysis was created to enable man to accept the problematic nature of life without being defeated by it, or giving in to escapism. Freud's prescription is that only by struggling courageously against what seem like overwhelming odds can man succeed in wringing meaning out of his existence.

This is exactly the message that fairy tales get across to the child in manifold form: that a struggle against severe difficulties in life is unavoidable, is an intrinsic part of human existence—but that if one does not shy away, but steadfastly meets unexpected and often unjust hardships, one masters all obstacles and at the end emerges victorious.

Modern stories written for young children mainly avoid these existential problems, although they are crucial issues for all of us. The child needs most particularly to be given suggestions in symbolic form about how he may deal with these issues and grow safely into maturity. "Safe" stories mention neither death nor aging, the limits to our existence, nor the wish for eternal life. The fairy tale, by contrast, confronts the child squarely with the basic human predicaments.

For example, many fairy stories begin with the death of a mother or father; in these tales the death of the parent creates the most agonizing problems, as it (or the fear of it) does in real life. Other stories tell about an aging parent who decides that the time has come to let the new generation take over. But before this can happen, the successor has to prove himself capable and worthy. The Brothers Grimm's story "The Three Feathers" begins: "There was once upon a time a king who had three sons. . . . When the king had become old and weak, and was thinking of his end, he did not know which of his sons should inherit the kingdom after him." In order to decide, the king sets all his sons a difficult task; the son who meets it best "shall be king after my death."

It is characteristic of fairy tales to state an existential dilemma briefly and pointedly. This permits the child to come to grips with the problem in its most essential form, where a more complex plot would confuse matters for him. The fairy tale simplifies all situations. Its figures are clearly drawn; and details, unless very important, are eliminated. All characters are typical rather than unique.

Contrary to what takes place in many modern children's stories, in fairy tales evil is as omnipresent as virtue. In practically every fairy tale good and evil are given body in the form of some figures and their

actions, as good and evil are omnipresent in life and the propensities for both are present in every man. It is this duality which poses the moral problem, and requires the struggle to solve it.

Evil is not without its attractions—symbolized by the mighty giant or dragon, the power of the witch, the cunning queen in "Snow White"—and often it is temporarily in the ascendency. In many fairy tales a usurper succeeds for a time in seizing the place which rightfully belongs to the hero—as the wicked sisters do in "Cinderella." It is not that the evildoer is punished at the story's end which makes immersing oneself in fairy stories an experience in moral education, although this is part of it. In fairy tales, as in life, punishment or fear of it is only a limited deterrent to crime. The conviction that crime does not pay is a much more effective deterrent, and that is why in fairy tales the bad person always loses out. It is not the fact that virtue wins out at the end which promotes morality, but that the hero is most attractive to the child, who identifies with the hero in all his struggles. Because of this identification the child imagines that he suffers with the hero his trials and tribulations, and triumphs with him as virtue is victorious. The child makes such identifications all on his own, and the inner and outer struggles of the hero imprint morality on him.

The figures in fairy tales are not ambivalent—not good and bad at the same time, as we all are in reality. But since polarization dominates the child's mind, it also dominates fairy tales. A person is either good or bad, nothing in between. One brother is stupid, the other is clever. One sister is virtuous and industrious, the others are vile and lazy. One is beautiful, the others are ugly. One parent is all good, the other evil. The juxtaposition of opposite characters is not for the purpose of stressing right behavior, as would be true for cautionary tales. (There are some amoral fairy tales where goodness or badness, beauty or ugliness play no role at all.) Presenting the polarities of character permits the child to comprehend easily the difference between the two, which he could not do as readily were the figures drawn more true to life, with all the complexities that characterize real people. Ambiguities must wait until a relatively firm personality has been established on the basis of positive identifications. Then the child has a basis for understanding that there are great differences between people, and that therefore one has to make choices about who one wants to be. This basic decision, on which all later personality development will build, is facilitated by the polarizations of the fairy tale.

Furthermore, a child's choices are based, not so much on right versus wrong, as on who arouses his sympathy and who his antipathy.

The more simple and straightforward a good character, the easier it is for a child to identify with it and to reject the bad other. The child identifies with the good hero not because of his goodness, but because the hero's condition makes a deep positive appeal to him. The question for the child is not "Do I want to be good?" but "Who do I want to be like?" The child decides this on the basis of projecting himself wholeheartedly into one character. If this fairy-tale figure is a very good person, then the child decides that he wants to be good, too.

Amoral fairy tales show no polarization or juxtaposition of good and bad persons; that is because these amoral stories serve an entirely different purpose. Such tales or type figures as "Puss in Boots," who arranges for the hero's success through trickery, and Jack, who steals the giant's treasure, build character not by promoting choices between good and bad, but by giving the child the hope that even the meekest can succeed in life. After all, what's the use of choosing to become a good person when one feels so insignificant that he fears he will never amount to anything? Morality is not the issue in these tales, but rather, assurance that one can succeed. Whether one meets life with a belief in the possibility of mastering its difficulties or with the expectation of defeat is also a very important existential problem.

The deep inner conflicts originating in our primitive drives and our violent emotions are all denied in much of modern children's literature, and so the child is not helped in coping with them. But the child is subject to desperate feelings of loneliness and isolation, and he often experiences mortal anxiety. More often than not, he is unable to express these feelings in words, or he can do so only by indirection: fear of the dark, of some animal, anxiety about his body. Since it creates discomfort in a parent to recognize these emotions in his child, the parent tends to overlook them, or he belittles these spoken fears out of his own anxiety, believing this will cover over the child's fears.

The fairy tale, by contrast, takes these existential anxieties and dilemmas very seriously and addresses itself directly to them: the need to be loved and the fear that one is thought worthless; the love of life, and the fear of death. Further, the fairy tale offers solutions in ways that the child can grasp on his level of understanding. For example, fairy tales pose the dilemma of wishing to live eternally by occasionally concluding: "If they have not died, they are still alive." The other ending—"And they lived happily ever after"—does not for a moment fool the child that eternal life is possible. But it does indicate that which alone can take the sting out of the narrow limits of our time on this earth: forming a truly satisfying bond to another. The tales teach that when one has done this, one has reached the ultimate in

emotional security of existence and permanence of relation available to man; and this alone can dissipate the fear of death. If one has found true adult love, the fairy story also tells, one doesn't need to wish for eternal life. This is suggested by another ending found in fairy tales: "They lived for a long time afterward, happy and in pleasure."

An uninformed view of the fairy tale sees in this type of ending an unrealistic wish-fulfillment, missing completely the important message it conveys to the child. These tales tell him that by forming a true interpersonal relation, one escapes the separation anxiety which haunts him (and which sets the stage for many fairy tales, but is always resolved at the story's ending). Furthermore, the story tells, this ending is not made possible, as the child wishes and believes, by holding on to his mother eternally. If we try to escape separation anxiety and death anxiety by desperately keeping our grasp on our parents, we will only be cruelly forced out, like Hansel and Gretel.

Only by going out into the world can the fairy-tale hero (child) find himself there; and as he does, he will also find the other with whom he will be able to live happily ever after; that is, without ever again having to experience separation anxiety. The fairy tale is future-oriented and guides the child—in terms he can understand in both his conscious and his unconscious mind—to relinquish his infantile dependency wishes and achieve a more satisfying independent existence.

Today children no longer grow up within the security of an extended family, or of a well-integrated community. Therefore, even more than at the times fairy tales were invented, it is important to provide the modern child with images of heroes who have to go out into the world all by themselves and who, although originally ignorant of the ultimate things, find secure places in the world by following their right way with deep inner confidence.

The fairy-tale hero proceeds for a time in isolation, as the modern child often feels isolated. The hero is helped by being in touch with primitive things—a tree, an animal, nature—as the child feels more in touch with those things than most adults do. The fate of these heroes convinces the child that, like them, he may feel outcast and abandoned in the world, groping in the dark, but, like them, in the course of his life he will be guided step by step, and given help when it is needed. Today, even more than in past times, the child needs the reassurance offered by the image of the isolated man who nevertheless is capable of achieving meaningful and rewarding relations with the world around him.

attachments to his parents—that is, his oedipal conflicts. In regard to these, too, fairy tales help the child to comprehend better the nature of his predicaments and offer ideas which give him courage to struggle with his difficulties and strengthen hopes for their successful resolution.

OEDIPAL CONFLICTS AND RESOLUTIONS

THE KNIGHT IN SHINING ARMOR AND THE DAMSEL IN DISTRESS

In the throes of oedipal conflict, a young boy resents his father for standing in his way of receiving Mother's exclusive attention. The boy wants Mother to admire *him* as the greatest hero of all; that means that somehow he must get Father out of the way. This idea, however, creates anxiety in the child, because without Father to protect and take care of them, what would happen to the family? And what if Father were to find out that the little boy wanted him out of the way . . . might he not take a most terrible revenge?

One can tell a small boy many times that someday he will grow up, marry, and be like his father—without avail. Such realistic advice provides no relief from the pressures the child feels right now. But the fairy tale tells the child how he can live with his conflicts: it suggests fantasies he could never invent for himself.

The fairy tale, for example, offers the story of the unnoticed little boy who goes out into the world and makes a great success of life. Details may differ, but the basic plot is always the same: the unlikely hero proves himself through slaying dragons, solving riddles, and living by his wits and goodness until eventually he frees the beautiful princess, marries her, and lives happily ever after.

No little boy has ever failed to see himself in this starring role. The story implies: it's not Father whose jealousy prevents you from having Mother all to yourself, it's an evil dragon—what you really have in mind is to slay an evil dragon. Further, the story gives veracity to the boy's feeling that the most desirable female is kept in captivity by an evil figure, while implying that it is not Mother the child wants for

himself, but a marvelous and wonderful woman he hasn't met yet, but certainly will. The story tells more of what the boy wants to hear and believe: that it is not of her own free will that this wonderful female (i.e., Mother) abides with this bad male figure. On the contrary, if only she could, she would much prefer to be with a young hero (like the child). The dragon slayer always has to be young, like the child, and innocent. The innocence of the hero with whom the child identifies proves by proxy the child's innocence, so that, far from having to feel guilty about these fantasies, the child can feel himself to be the proud hero.

It is characteristic of such stories that once the dragon is slain—or whatever deed that frees the beautiful princess from her captivity is accomplished—and the hero is united with his beloved, we are given no details about their later life, beyond being told that they lived “happily ever after.” If their children are mentioned, it's usually a later interpolation by someone who thought the story would become more enjoyable or realistic if such information were offered. But introducing children into the story's ending shows little comprehension of a small boy's imaginings about a blissful existence. A child cannot and does not want to imagine what is actually involved in being a husband and father. This would imply, for example, that he would have to leave Mother for most of the day to work—while the oedipal fantasy is a situation where the boy and Mother will never be separated for a moment. The little boy certainly doesn't want Mother to be busy with housekeeping, or taking care of other children. He doesn't want to have sex with her either, because that is still an area full of conflict for him, if he has much awareness of it at all. As in most fairy tales, the little boy's ideal is just he and his princess (Mother), all their needs and wishes taken care of, living by themselves and for each other forever.

The oedipal problems of a girl are different from those of a boy, and so the fairy stories which help her to cope with her oedipal situation are of a different character. What blocks the oedipal girl's uninterrupted blissful existence with Father is an older, ill-intentioned female (i.e., Mother). But since the little girl also wants very much to continue enjoying Mother's loving care, there is also a benevolent female in the past or background of the fairy tale, whose happy memory is kept intact, although she has become inoperative. A little girl wishes to see herself as a young and beautiful maiden—a princess or the like—who is kept captive by the selfish, evil female figure and hence unavailable to the male lover. The captive princess' real father

is depicted as benevolent, but helpless to come to the rescue of his lovely girl. In “Rapunzel” it is a vow that stymies him. In “Cinderella” and “Snow White” he seems unable to hold his own against the all-powerful stepmother.

The oedipal boy, who feels threatened by his father because of the wish to replace him in Mother's attention, casts Father in the role of the threatening monster. This also seems to prove to the boy how dangerous a rival to the father he is, because otherwise why would this father figure be so threatening? Since the desirable female is held captive by the old dragon, the little boy can believe that only brute force prevents this lovely girl (Mother) from joining him, the much-preferred young hero. In fairy stories which help the oedipal girl to understand her feelings and find vicarious satisfaction, it is the (step-)mother's or the enchantress' intense jealousy which keeps the lover from finding the princess. This jealousy proves that the older woman knows the young girl is preferable, more lovable, and more deserving of being loved.

While the oedipal boy does not want any children to interfere with Mother's complete involvement in him, matters are different for the oedipal girl. She does want to give her father the love-gift of being mother to his children. Whether this is an expression of her need to compete with Mother in this respect, or a dim anticipation of her motherhood to come, is difficult to determine. This desire to give Father a child doesn't mean having sexual relations with him—the little girl, like the little boy, doesn't think in such concrete terms. The little girl knows that children are what bind the male even more strongly to the female. That is why in fairy stories dealing in symbolic form with the oedipal wishes, problems, and hardships of a girl, children *are* occasionally mentioned as part of the happy ending.

In the Brothers Grimm's version of “Rapunzel” we are told that the prince in his wanderings “at length came to the desert where Rapunzel, with the twins to which she had given birth, a boy and a girl, lived in wretchedness,” though no children had been mentioned before. When she embraces the prince, two of Rapunzel's tears wet his eyes (which had been pierced and blinded) and cure his blindness; and “he led her to his kingdom where he was joyfully received, and where they lived happily for a long time.” Once they are united, no more is said about the children. They are only a symbol in the story of the bond between Rapunzel and the prince during their separation. Since we are not told of the two having been married, and there is no other suggestion of any form of sexual relation, this mention of children in

fairy tales supports the idea that children can be gotten without sex, just as a result of love.

In the usual course of family life, the father is often out of the home, while the mother, having given birth to the child and nursed him, continues to be heavily involved in all child care. As a result, a boy can easily pretend that Father is not all that important in his life. (A girl cannot as readily imagine dispensing with Mother's care, however.) That is why replacement of an original "good" father by a bad stepfather is as rare in fairy tales as the evil stepmother is frequent. Since fathers have typically given much less attention to the child, it is not such a radical disappointment when this father begins to stand in the child's way, or to make demands of him. So the father who blocks the boy's oedipal desires is not seen as an evil figure within the home, or split into two figures, one good and one bad, as the mother often is. Instead, the oedipal boy projects his frustrations and anxieties onto a giant, monster, or dragon.

In a girl's oedipal fantasy, the mother is split into two figures: the pre-oedipal wonderful good mother and the oedipal evil stepmother. (Sometimes there are bad stepmothers in fairy stories with boys, such as in "Hansel and Gretel," but such tales deal with problems other than oedipal ones.) The good mother, so the fantasy goes, would never have been jealous of her daughter or have prevented the prince (father) and the girl from living happily together. So for the oedipal girl, belief and trust in the goodness of the pre-oedipal mother, and deep loyalty to her, tend to reduce the guilt about what the girl wishes would happen to the (step)mother who stands in her way.

Thus, both oedipal girls and boys, thanks to the fairy tale, can have the best of two worlds: they can fully enjoy oedipal satisfactions in fantasy and keep good relations to both parents in reality.

For the oedipal boy, if Mother disappoints him, there is the fairy princess in the back of his mind—that wonderful woman of the future who will compensate for all his present hardships, and the thought of whom makes it much easier to bear up under them. If Father is less attentive to his little girl than *she* desires, she can endure such adversity because a prince will arrive who will prefer her to all competitors. Since everything takes place in never-never-land, the child need not feel guilty or anxious about casting Father in the role of a dragon or evil giant, or Mother in the role of a miserable stepmother or witch. The little girl can love her real father all the better because her resentment over his failure to prefer her to her mother is explained by his unfortunate ineffectuality (as with fathers in fairy tales), for

which nobody can blame him since it is due to superior powers; besides, it will not prevent her from getting her prince. A girl can love her mother more because she puts out all her anger at the mother-competitor, who gets what she deserves—as Snow White's stepmother is forced to put on "red-hot shoes, and dance until she dropped dead." And Snow White—and with her the little girl—need not feel guilty because her love of her true mother (who preceded the stepmother) has never stopped. The boy can love his real father even better after having gotten out all his anger at him through a fantasy of destroying the dragon or the bad giant.

Such fairy-tale fantasies—which most children would have a hard time inventing so completely and satisfactorily on their own—can help a child a great deal to overcome his oedipal anguish.

The fairy story has other unequaled values in helping the child with oedipal conflicts. Mothers cannot accept their little boys' wishes to do away with Daddy and marry Mommy; but a mother can participate with pleasure in her son's imagining himself as the dragon slayer who gains possession of the beautiful princess. Also, a mother can fully encourage her daughter's fantasies about the handsome prince who will join her, thus helping her to believe in a happy solution despite her present disappointment. Thus, far from losing Mother because of the oedipal attachment to Father, the daughter realizes that Mother not only approves of such wishes in disguise, but even hopes for their realization. Through fairy tales the parent can join the child in all voyages of fancy, while still retaining the all-important function of fulfilling the parental tasks in reality.

Thus a child can have the best of both worlds, which is what he needs to grow up into a secure adult. In fantasy a girl can win out over the (step)mother whose efforts to prevent her happiness with the prince fail; a boy can slay the monster and gain what he wishes in a far-distant land. At the same time, both girls and boys can retain at home the real father as protector and the real mother who dispenses all the care and satisfactions a child needs. Since it is clear all along that slaying the dragon and marrying the enslaved princess, or being discovered by the fairy prince and punishing the wicked witch, occur in faraway times and countries, the normal child never mixes them up with reality.

Oedipal-conflict stories are typical of a large class of fairy tales that extend the child's interests outside the immediate family. To make his first steps toward becoming a mature individual, the child must begin to look to the larger world. If the child does not receive support from

his parents in his real and imaginary investigation of the world outside his home, it is at the risk of impoverishing the development of his personality.

It is not wise to urge a child in so many words to begin to enlarge his horizons, or to inform him specifically how far to go in his explorations of the world, or how to sort out feelings about his parents. If a parent verbally encourages a child to "mature," to move out psychologically or geographically, the child interprets this as meaning "they want to get rid of me." The result is the direct opposite of what is intended. For the child then feels unwanted and unimportant, and such feelings are most detrimental to the development of his ability to cope with this wider world.

The child's learning task is precisely that of making decisions about moving out on his own, in his own good time, and into the areas of living he himself selects. The fairy tale helps in this process because it only beckons; it never suggests, demands, or tells. In the fairy tale all is said implicitly and in symbolic form: what the tasks for one's age might be; how one might deal with one's ambivalent feelings about one's parents; how this welter of emotions can be mastered. It also warns the child of some of the pitfalls he can expect and perhaps avoid, always promising a favorable outcome.

FEAR OF FANTASY

WHY WERE FAIRY TALES OUTLAWED?

Why do many intelligent, well-meaning, modern, middle-class parents, so concerned about the happy development of their children, discount the value of fairy tales and deprive their children of what these stories have to offer? Even our Victorian ancestors, despite their emphasis on moral discipline and their stodgy way of life, not only permitted but encouraged their children to enjoy the fantasy and excitement of fairy tales. It would be simple to blame such a prohibition of fairy tales on a narrow-minded, uninformed rationalism, but this is not the case.

Some people claim that fairy tales do not render "truthful" pictures of life as it is, and are therefore unhealthy. That "truth" in the life of a child might be different from that of adults does not occur to these

THE USES OF ENCHANTMENT

The Meaning and Importance
of Fairy Tales

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