

THE USES OF ENCHANTMENT

The Meaning and Importance
of Fairy Tales

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INTRODUCTION:

THE STRUGGLE FOR MEANING

If we hope to live not just from moment to moment, but in true consciousness of our existence, then our greatest need and most difficult achievement is to find meaning in our lives. It is well known how many have lost the will to live, and have stopped trying, because such meaning has evaded them. An understanding of the meaning of one's life is not suddenly acquired at a particular age, not even when one has reached chronological maturity. On the contrary, gaining a secure understanding of what the meaning of one's life may or ought to be —this is what constitutes having attained psychological maturity. And this achievement is the end result of a long development: at each age we seek, and must be able to find, some modicum of meaning congruent with how our minds and understanding have already developed.

Contrary to the ancient myth, wisdom does not burst forth fully developed like Athena out of Zeus's head; it is built up, small step by small step, from most irrational beginnings. Only in adulthood can an intelligent understanding of the meaning of one's existence in this world be gained from one's experiences in it. Unfortunately, too many parents want their children's minds to function as their own do—as if mature understanding of ourselves and the world, and our ideas about the meaning of life, did not have to develop as slowly as our bodies and minds.

Today, as in times past, the most important and also the most difficult task in raising a child is helping him to find meaning in life. Many growth experiences are needed to achieve this. The child, as he develops, must learn step by step to understand himself better; with this he becomes more able to understand others, and eventually can relate to them in ways which are mutually satisfying and meaningful.

To find deeper meaning, one must become able to transcend the

narrow confines of a self-centered existence and believe that one will make a significant contribution to life—if not right now, then at some future time. This feeling is necessary if a person is to be satisfied with himself and with what he is doing. In order not to be at the mercy of the vagaries of life, one must develop one's inner resources, so that one's emotions, imagination, and intellect mutually support and enrich one another. Our positive feelings give us the strength to develop our rationality; only hope for the future can sustain us in the adversities we unavoidably encounter.

As an educator and therapist of severely disturbed children, my main task was to restore meaning to their lives. This work made it obvious to me that if children were reared so that life was meaningful to them, they would not need special help. I was confronted with the problem of deducing what experiences in a child's life are most suited to promote his ability to find meaning in his life; to endow life in general with more meaning. Regarding this task, nothing is more important than the impact of parents and others who take care of the child; second in importance is our cultural heritage, when transmitted to the child in the right manner. When children are young, it is literature that carries such information best.

Given this fact, I became deeply dissatisfied with much of the literature intended to develop the child's mind and personality, because it fails to stimulate and nurture those resources he needs most in order to cope with his difficult inner problems. The preprimers and primers from which he is taught to read in school are designed to teach the necessary skills, irrespective of meaning. The overwhelming bulk of the rest of so-called "children's literature" attempts to entertain or to inform, or both. But most of these books are so shallow in substance that little of significance can be gained from them. The acquisition of skills, including the ability to read, becomes devalued when what one has learned to read adds nothing of importance to one's life.

We all tend to assess the future merits of an activity on the basis of what it offers now. But this is especially true for the child, who, much more than the adult, lives in the present and, although he has anxieties about his future, has only the vaguest notions of what it may require or be like. The idea that learning to read may enable one later to enrich one's life is experienced as an empty promise when the stories the child listens to, or is reading at the moment, are vacuous. The worst feature of these children's books is that they cheat the child of what he ought to gain from the experience of literature: access to deeper meaning, and that which is meaningful to him at his stage of development.

For a story truly to hold the child's attention, it must entertain him and arouse his curiosity. But to enrich his life, it must stimulate his imagination; help him to develop his intellect and to clarify his emotions; be attuned to his anxieties and aspirations; give full recognition to his difficulties, while at the same time suggesting solutions to the problems which perturb him. In short, it must at one and the same time relate to all aspects of his personality—and this without ever belittling but, on the contrary, giving full credence to the seriousness of the child's predicaments, while simultaneously promoting confidence in himself and in his future.

In all these and many other respects, of the entire "children's literature"—with rare exceptions—nothing can be as enriching and satisfying to child and adult alike as the folk fairy tale. True, on an overt level fairy tales teach little about the specific conditions of life in modern mass society; these tales were created long before it came into being. But more can be learned from them about the inner problems of human beings, and of the right solutions to their predicaments in any society, than from any other type of story within a child's comprehension. Since the child at every moment of his life is exposed to the society in which he lives, he will certainly learn to cope with its conditions, provided his inner resources permit him to do so.

Just because his life is often bewildering to him, the child needs even more to be given the chance to understand himself in this complex world with which he must learn to cope. To be able to do so, the child must be helped to make some coherent sense out of the turmoil of his feelings. He needs ideas on how to bring his inner house into order, and on that basis be able to create order in his life. He needs —and this hardly requires emphasis at this moment in our history— a moral education which subtly, and by implication only, conveys to him the advantages of moral behavior, not through abstract ethical concepts but through that which seems tangibly right and therefore meaningful to him.

The child finds this kind of meaning through fairy tales. Like many other modern psychological insights, this was anticipated long ago by poets. The German poet Schiller wrote: "Deeper meaning resides in the fairy tales told to me in my childhood than in the truth that is taught by life." (The Piccolomini, III, 4.)

Through the centuries (if not millennia) during which, in their re-telling, fairy tales became ever more refined, they came to convey at the same time overt and covert meanings—came to speak simultaneously to all levels of the human personality, communicating in a manner which reaches the uneducated mind of the child as well as that

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 unequaled 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 ascendancy. 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 fairytale figure is a very good person, then the child decides that he wants to be good, too.

A moral 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.

Fairy Tale: A Unique Art Form

While it entertains the child, the fairy tale enlightens him about himself, and fosters his personality development. It offers meaning on so many different levels, and enriches the child's existence in so many ways, that no one book can do justice to the multitude and diversity of the contributions such tales make to the child's life.

This book attempts to show how fairy stories represent in imaginative form what the process of healthy human development consists of, and how the tales make such development attractive for the child to engage in. This growth process begins with the resistance against the parents and fear of growing up, and ends when youth has truly found itself, achieved psychological independence and moral maturity, and no longer views the other sex as threatening or demonic, but is able to relate positively to it. In short, this book explicates why fairy tales make such great and positive psychological contributions to the child's inner growth.

The delight we experience when we allow ourselves to respond to a fairy tale, the enchantment we feel, comes not from the psychological meaning of a tale (although this contributes to it) but from its literary qualities — the tale itself as a work of art. The fairy tale could not have its psychological impact on the child were it not first and foremost a work of art.

Fairy tales are unique, not only as a form of literature, but as works of art which are fully comprehensible to the child, as no other form of art is. As with all great art, the fairy tale's deepest meaning will be different for each person, and different for the same person at various moments in his life. The child will extract different meaning from the same fairy tale, depending on his interests and needs of the moment. When given the chance, he will return to the same tale when he is ready to enlarge on old meanings, or replace them with new ones.

As works of art, fairy tales have many aspects worth exploring in addition to the psychological meaning and impact to which this book is devoted. For example, our cultural heritage finds expression in fairy tales, and through them is communicated to the child's mind.* An-

*One example may illustrate: In the Brothers Grimm's story "The Seven Ravens," seven brothers disappear and become ravens as their sister enters life. Water has to be fetched from the well in a jug for the girl's baptism, and the loss of the jug is the fateful event which sets the stage for the story. The ceremony of baptism also heralds

other volume could detail the unique contribution fairy tales can and do make to the child's moral education, a topic which is only touched on in the pages which follow.

Folklorists approach fairy tales in ways germane to their discipline; linguists and literary critics examine their meaning for other reasons. It is interesting to observe that, for example, some see in the motif of Little Red Riding Hood's being swallowed by the wolf the theme of night devouring the day, of the moon eclipsing the sun, of winter replacing the warm seasons, of the god swallowing the sacrificial victim, and so on. Interesting as such interpretations are, they seem to offer little to the parent or educator who wants to know what meaning a fairy story may have to the child, whose experience is, after all, quite far removed from interpretations of the world on the basis of concerns with nature or celestial deities.

Fairy tales also abound in religious motifs; many Biblical stories are of the same nature as fairy tales. The conscious and unconscious associations which fairy tales evoke in the mind of the listener depend on his general frame of reference and his personal preoccupations. Hence, religious persons will find in them much of importance that is not mentioned here.

Most fairy tales originated in periods when religion was a most important part of life; thus, they deal, directly or by inference, with religious themes. The stories of *The Thousand and One Nights* are full of references to Islamic religion. A great many Western fairy tales have religious content; but most of these stories are neglected today and unknown to the larger public just because, for many, these religious themes no longer arouse universally and personally meaningful associations. The neglect of "Our Lady's Child," one of the most beautiful stories of the Brothers Grimm, illustrates this. It begins ex-

the beginning of a Christian existence. It is possible to view the seven brothers as representing that which had to disappear for Christianity to come into being. If so, they represent the pre-Christian, pagan world in which the seven planets stood for the sky gods of antiquity. The newborn girl is then the new religion, which can succeed only if the old creed does not interfere with its development. With Christianity, the brothers who represent paganism become relegated to darkness. But as ravens, they dwell in a mountain at the end of the world, and this suggests their continued existence in a subterranean, subconscious world. Their return to humanity occurs only because the sister sacrifices one of her fingers, and this conforms to the Christian idea that only those who are willing to sacrifice that part of their body which prevents them from reaching perfection, if the circumstance requires it, will be allowed to enter heaven. The new religion, Christianity, can liberate even those who remained at first arrested in paganism.

actly like “Hansel and Gretel”: “Hard by a great forest dwelt a wood-cutter with his wife.” As in “Hansel and Gretel,” the couple are so poor that they can no longer feed themselves and their three-year-old daughter. Moved by their distress, the Virgin Mary appears to them and offers to take care of the little girl, whom she takes with her to heaven. The girl lives a wonderful life there until she reaches the age of fourteen. At this time, much as in the very different tale of “Blue-beard,” the Virgin entrusts the girl with the keys to thirteen doors, twelve of which she may open, but not the thirteenth. The girl cannot resist this temptation; she lies about it, and in consequence has to return to earth, mute. She undergoes severe ordeals and is about to be burned at the stake. At this moment, as she desires only to confess her misdeed, she regains her voice to do so, and is granted by the Virgin “happiness for her whole life.” The lesson of the story is: a voice used to tell lies leads us only to perdition; better we should be deprived of it, as is the heroine of the story. But a voice used to repent, to admit our failures and state the truth, redeems us.

Quite a few of the Brothers Grimm’s other stories contain or begin with religious allusions. “The Old Man Made Young Again” starts: “At the time when our Lord still walked the earth, he and St. Peter stopped one evening at a smith’s house. . . .” In another story, “The Poor Man and the Rich Man,” God, like any other fairy-tale hero, is tired from walking. That story begins: “In olden times, when the Lord himself still used to walk about on this earth amongst men, it once happened that he was tired and overtaken by the darkness before he could reach an inn. Now there stood on the road before him two houses facing each other....” But important and fascinating as these religious aspects of fairy stories are, they remain beyond the scope and purpose of this book, and so are left unexamined here.

Even given this book’s relatively restricted purpose, that of suggesting why fairy tales are so meaningful to children in helping them cope with the psychological problems of growing up and integrating their personalities, some serious but necessary limitations have had to be accepted.

The first of these lies in the fact that today only a small number of fairy tales are widely known. Most of the points made in this book could have been illustrated more vividly if some of the more obscure fairy stories could have been referred to. But since these tales, though once familiar, are presently unknown, it would have been necessary to reprint them here, making for a book of unwieldy size. Therefore the decision was made to concentrate on a few still-popular fairy stories, to show some of their underlying meanings, and how these

may relate to the child's growing-up problems, to our understanding of ourselves and of the world. And the second part of the book, rather than striving for an exhaustive completeness that is beyond reach, examines some well-known favorites in some detail, for the meaning and pleasure that may be gained from them.

If this book had been devoted to only one or two tales, it would have been possible to show many more of their facets, although even then complete probing of their depths would not have been achieved; for this, each story has meanings on too many levels. Which story is most important to a particular child at a particular age depends entirely on his psychological stage of development, and the problems which are most pressing to him at the moment. While in writing the book it seemed reasonable to concentrate on a fairy tale's central meanings, this has the shortcoming of neglecting other aspects which might be much more significant to some individual child because of problems he is struggling with at the time. This, then, is another necessary limitation of this presentation.

For example, in discussing "Hansel and Gretel," the child's striving to hold on to his parents even though the time has come for meeting the world on his own is stressed, as well as the need to transcend a primitive orality, symbolized by the children's infatuation with the gingerbread house. Thus, it would seem that this fairy tale has most to offer to the young child ready to make his first steps out into the world. It gives body to his anxieties, and offers reassurance about these fears because, even in their most exaggerated form — anxieties about being devoured — they prove unwarranted: the children are victorious in the end, and a most threatening enemy — the witch — is utterly defeated. Thus, a good case could be made that this story has its greatest appeal and value for the child at the age when fairy tales begin to exercise their beneficial impact, that is, around the age of four or five.

But separation anxiety — the fear of being deserted — and starvation fear, including oral greediness, are not restricted to a particular period of development. Such fears occur at all ages in the unconscious, and thus this tale also has meaning for, and provides encouragement to, much older children. As a matter of fact, the older person might find it considerably more difficult to admit consciously his fear of being deserted by his parents, or to face his oral greed; and this is even more reason to let the fairy tale speak to his unconscious, give body to his unconscious anxieties, and relieve them, without this ever coming to conscious awareness.

Other features of the same story may

offer much need reassurance and guidance to an older child. In early adolescence a girl had been fascinated by “Hansel and Gretel,” and had derived great comfort from reading and rereading it, fantasizing about it. As a child, she had been dominated by a slightly older brother. He had, in a way, shown her the path, as Hansel did when he put down the pebbles which guided his sister and himself back home. As an adolescent, this girl continued to rely on her brother; and this feature of the story felt reassuring. But at the same time she also resented the brother’s dominance. Without her being conscious of it at the time, her struggle for independence rotated around the figure of Hansel. The story told her unconsciously that to follow Hansel’s lead led her back, not forward, and it was also meaningful that, although Hansel was the leader at the story’s beginning, it was Gretel who in the end achieved freedom and independence for both, because it was she who defeated the witch. As an adult, this woman came to understand that the fairy tale had helped her greatly in throwing off her dependence on her brother, as it had convinced her that an early dependence on him need not interfere with her later ascendancy. Thus, a story which for one reason had been meaningful to her as a young child provided guidance for her at adolescence for a quite different reason.

The central motif of “Snow White” is the pubertal girl’s surpassing in every way the evil stepmother who, out of jealousy, denies her an independent existence — symbolically represented by the stepmother’s trying to see Snow White destroyed. The story’s deepest meaning for one particular five-year-old, however, was far removed from these pubertal problems. Her mother was cold and distant, so much so that she felt lost. The story assured her that she need not despair: Snow White, betrayed by her stepmother; was saved by males — first the dwarfs and later the prince. This child, too, did not despair because of the mother’s desertion, but trusted that rescue would come from males. Confident that “Snow White” showed her the way, she turned to her father, who responded favorably; the fairy tale’s happy ending made it possible for this girl to find a happy solution to the impasse in living into which her mother’s lack of interest had projected her. Thus, a fairy tale can have as important a meaning to a five-year-old as to a thirteen-year-old, although the personal meanings they derive from it may be quite different.

In “Rapunzel” we learn that the enchantress locked Rapunzel into the tower when she reached the age of twelve. Thus, hers is likewise the story of a pubertal girl, and of a jealous mother who tries to prevent her from gaining independence—a typical adolescent prob-

lem, which finds a happy solution when Rapunzel becomes united with her prince. But one five-year-old boy gained quite a different reassurance from this story. When he learned that his grandmother, who took care of him most of the day, would have to go to the hospital because of serious illness—his mother was working all day, and there was no father in the home—he asked to be read the story of Rapunzel. At this critical time in his life, two elements of the tale were important to him. First, there was the security from all dangers in which the substitute mother kept the child, an idea which greatly appealed to him at that moment. So what normally could be viewed as a representation of negative, selfish behavior was capable of having a most reassuring meaning under specific circumstances. And even more important to the boy was another central motif of the story: that Rapunzel found the means of escaping her predicament in her own body—the tresses on which the prince climbed up to her room in the tower. That one's body can provide a lifeline reassured him that, if necessary, he would similarly find in his own body the source of his security. This shows that a fairy tale—because it addresses itself in the most imaginative form to essential human problems, and does so in an indirect way—can have much to offer to a little boy even if the story's heroine is an adolescent girl.

These examples may help to counteract any impression made by my concentration here on a story's main motifs, and demonstrate that fairy tales have great psychological meaning for children of all ages, both girls and boys, irrespective of the age and sex of the story's hero. Rich personal meaning is gained from fairy stories because they facilitate changes in identification as the child deals with different problems, one at a time. In the light of her earlier identification with a Gretel who was glad to be led by Hansel, the adolescent girl's later identification with a Gretel who overcame the witch made her growth toward independence more rewarding and secure. The little boy's first finding security in the idea of being kept within the safety of the tower permitted him later on to glory in the realization that a much more dependable security could be found in what his body had to offer him, by way of providing him with a lifeline.

As we cannot know at what age a particular fairy tale will be most important to a particular child, we cannot ourselves decide which of the many tales he should be told at any given time or why. This only the child can determine and reveal by the strength of feeling with which he reacts to what a tale evokes in his conscious and unconscious mind. Naturally a parent will begin by telling or reading to his child

a tale the parent himself or herself cared for as a child, or cares for now. If the child does not take to the story, this means that its motifs or themes have failed to evoke a meaningful response at this moment in his life. Then it is best to tell him another fairy tale the next evening. Soon he will indicate that a certain story has become important to him by his immediate response to it, or by his asking to be told this story over and over again. If all goes well, the child's enthusiasm for this story will be contagious, and the story will become important to the parent too, if for no other reason than that it means so much to the child. Finally there will come the time when the child has gained all he can from the preferred story, or the problems which made him respond to it have been replaced by others which find better expression in some other tale. He may then temporarily lose interest in this story and enjoy some other one much more. In the telling of fairy stories it is always best to follow the child's lead.

Even if a parent should guess correctly why his child has become involved emotionally with a given tale, this is knowledge best kept to oneself. The young child's most important experiences and reactions are largely subconscious, and should remain so until he reaches a much more mature age and understanding. It is always intrusive to interpret a person's unconscious thoughts, to make conscious what he wishes to keep preconscious, and this is especially true in the case of a child. Just as important for the child's well-being as feeling that his parent shares his emotions, through enjoying the same fairy tale, is the child's feeling that his inner thoughts are not known to his parent until he decides to reveal them. If the parent indicates that he knows them already, the child is prevented from making the most precious gift to his parent of sharing with him what until then was secret and private to the child. And since, in addition, a parent is so much more powerful than a child, his domination may appear limitless—and hence destructively overwhelming—if he seems able to read the child's secret thoughts, know his most hidden feelings, even before the child himself has begun to become aware of them.

Explaining to a child why a fairy tale is so captivating to him destroys, moreover, the story's enchantment, which depends to a considerable degree on the child's not quite knowing why he is delighted by it. And with the forfeiture of this power to enchant goes also a loss of the story's potential for helping the child struggle on his own, and master all by himself the problem which has made the story meaningful to him in the first place. Adult interpretations, as correct as they may be, rob the child of the opportunity to feel that he, on his own,

through repeated hearing and ruminating about the story, has coped successfully with a difficult situation. We grow, we find meaning in life, and security in ourselves by having understood and solved personal problems on our own, not by having them explained to us by others.

Fairy-tale motifs are not neurotic symptoms, something one is better off understanding rationally so that one can rid oneself of them. Such motifs are experienced as wondrous because the child feels understood and appreciated deep down in his feelings, hopes, and anxieties, without these all having to be dragged up and investigated in the harsh light of a rationality that is still beyond him. Fairy tales enrich the child's life and give it an enchanted quality just because he does not quite know how the stories have worked their wonder on him.

This book has been written to help adults, and most especially those with children in their care, to become more fully aware of the importance of such tales. As has already been pointed out, innumerable interpretations besides those suggested in the text that follows may be pertinent; fairy tales, like all true works of art, possess a multifarious richness and depth that far transcend what even the most thorough discursive examination can extract from them. What is said in this book should be viewed as illustrative and suggestive merely. If the reader is stimulated to go beyond the surface in his own way, he will extract ever more varied personal meaning from these stories, which will then also become more meaningful to the children he may tell them to.

Here, however, one especially crucial limitation must be noted: The true meaning and impact of a fairy tale can be appreciated, its enchantment can be experienced, only from the story in its original form. Describing the significant features of a fairy tale gives as little feeling for what it is all about as the listing of the events of a poem does for its appreciation. Such a description of main features, however, is all that a book like this one can provide, short of actually reprinting the stories. Since most of these fairy tales are readily available elsewhere, the hope is that this book will be read in conjunction with a rereading of the tales discussed.* Whether it is "Little Red Riding Hood," "Cinderella," or any other fairy tale, only the story itself permits an appreciation of its poetic qualities, and with it an understanding of how it enriches a responsive mind.

* The versions of the fairy tales discussed in this book are referred to in the Notes at the end of the book.

FAIRY TALE VERSUS MYTH

OPTIMISM VERSUS PESSIMISM

Plato—who may have understood better what forms the mind of man than do some of our contemporaries who want their children exposed only to “real” people and everyday events—knew what intellectual experiences make for true humanity. He suggested that the future citizens of his ideal republic begin their literary education with the telling of myths, rather than with mere facts or so-called rational teachings. Even Aristotle, master of pure reason, said: “The friend of wisdom is also a friend of myth.”

Modern thinkers who have studied myths and fairy tales from a philosophical or psychological viewpoint arrive at the same conclusion, regardless of their original persuasion. Mircea Eliade, for one, describes these stories as “models for human behavior [that,] by that very fact, give meaning and value to life.” Drawing on anthropological parallels, he and others suggest that myths and fairy tales were derived from, or give symbolic expression to, initiation rites or other *rites de passage*,—such as a metaphoric death of an old, inadequate self in order to be reborn on a higher plane of existence. He feels that this is why these tales meet a strongly felt need and are carriers of such deep meanings*

Other investigators with a depth-psychological orientation emphasize the similarities between the fantastic events in myths and fairy

* Eliade, who is influenced in these views by Saintyves, writes: “It is impossible to deny that the ordeals and adventures of the heroes and heroines of fairy tales are almost always translated into initiatory terms. Now this to me seems of the utmost importance: from the time—which is so difficult to determine—when fairy tales took shape as such, men, both primitive and civilized alike, have listened to them with a pleasure susceptible of indefinite repetition. This amounts to saying that initiatory scenarios—even camouflaged, as they are in fairy tales—are the expression of a psychodrama that answers a deep need in the human being. Every man wants to experience certain perilous situations, to confront exceptional ordeals, to make his way into the Other World—and he experiences all this, on the level of his imaginative life, by hearing or reading fairy tales.”

tales and those in adult dreams and daydreams—the fulfillment of wishes, the winning out over all competitors, the destruction of enemies—and conclude that one attraction of this literature is its expression of that which is normally prevented from coming to awareness.¹⁰

There are, of course, very significant differences between fairy tales and dreams. For example, in dreams more often than not the wish fulfillment is disguised, while in fairy tales much of it is openly expressed. To a considerable degree, dreams are the result of inner pressures which have found no relief, of problems which beset a person to which he knows no solution and to which the dream finds none. The fairy tale does the opposite: it projects the relief of all pressures and not only offers ways to solve problems but promises that a “happy” solution will be found.

We cannot control what goes on in our dreams. Although our inner censorship influences what we may dream, such control occurs on an unconscious level. The fairy tale, on the other hand, is very much the result of common conscious and unconscious content having been shaped by the conscious mind, not of one particular person, but the consensus of many in regard to what they view as universal human problems, and what they accept as desirable solutions. If all these elements were not present in a fairy tale, it would not be retold by generation after generation. Only if a fairy tale met the conscious and unconscious requirements of many people was it repeatedly retold, and listened to with great interest. No dream of a person could arouse such persistent interest unless it was worked into a myth, as was the story of the pharaoh’s dreams as interpreted by Joseph in the Bible.

There is general agreement that myths and fairy tales speak to us in the language of symbols representing unconscious content. Their appeal is simultaneously to our conscious and unconscious mind; to all three of its aspects—id, ego, and superego—and to our need for ego-ideals as well. This makes it very effective; and in the tales’ content, inner psychological phenomena are given body in symbolic form:

Freudian psychoanalysts concern themselves with showing what kind of repressed or otherwise unconscious material underlies myths and fairy tales, and how these relate to dreams and daydreams.”

Jungian psychoanalysts stress in addition that the figures and events of these stories conform to and hence represent archetypical psychological phenomena, and symbolically suggest the need for gaining a higher state of selfhood—an inner renewal which is achieved as personal and racial unconscious forces become available to the person.”

There are not only essential similarities between myths and fairy

tales; there are also inherent differences. Although the same exemplary figures, and situations are found in both and equally miraculous events occur in both, there is a crucial difference in the way these are communicated. Put simply, the dominant feeling a myth conveys is; this is absolutely unique; it could not have happened to any other person, or in any other setting; such events are grandiose, awe-inspiring, and could not possibly happen to an ordinary mortal like you or me. The reason is not so much that what takes place is miraculous, but that it is described as such. By contrast, although the events which occur in fairy tales are often unusual and most improbable, they are always presented as ordinary, something that could happen to you or me or the person next door when out on a walk in the woods. Even the most remarkable encounters are related in casual, everyday ways in fairy tales.

An even more significant difference between these two kinds of story is the ending, which in myths is nearly always tragic, while always happy in fairy tales. For this reason, some of the best-known stories found in collections of fairy tales don't really belong in this category. For example, Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Match Girl" and "The Steadfast Tin Soldier" are beautiful but extremely sad; they do not convey the feeling of consolation characteristic of fairy tales at the end. Andersen's "The Snow Queen," on the other hand, comes quite close to being a true fairy tale.

The myth is pessimistic, while the fairy story is optimistic, no matter how terrifyingly serious some features of the story may be. It is this decisive difference which sets the fairy tale apart from other stories in which equally fantastic events occur, whether the happy outcome is due to the virtues of the hero, chance, or the interference of super-natural figures.

Myths typically involve superego demands in conflict with id-motivated action, and with the self-preserving desires of the ego. A mere mortal is too frail to meet the challenges of the gods. Paris, who does the bidding of Zeus as conveyed to him by Hermes, and obeys the demand of the three goddesses in choosing which shall have the apple, is destroyed for having followed these commands, as are untold other mortals in the wake of this fateful choice.

Try as hard as we may, we can never live up fully to what the superego, as represented in myths by the gods, seems to require of us. The more we try to please it, the more implacable its demands. Even when the hero does not know that he gave in to the proddings of his id, he is still made to suffer horribly for it. When a mortal incurs the

displeasure of a god without having done anything wrong, he is destroyed by these supreme superego representations. The pessimism of myths is superbly exemplified in that paradigmatic myth of psychoanalysis, the tragedy of Oedipus.

The myth of Oedipus, particularly when well performed on the stage, arouses powerful intellectual and emotional reactions in the adult—so much so, that it may provide a cathartic experience, as Aristotle taught all tragedy does. After watching Oedipus, a viewer may wonder why he is so deeply moved; and in responding to what he observes as his emotional reaction, ruminating about the mythical events and what these mean to him, a person may come to clarify his thoughts and feelings. With this, certain inner tensions which are the consequence of events long past may be relieved; previously unconscious material can then enter one's awareness and become accessible for conscious working through. This can happen if the observer is deeply moved emotionally by the myth, and at the same time strongly motivated intellectually to understand it.

Vicariously experiencing what happened to Oedipus, what he did and what he suffered, may permit the adult to bring his mature understanding to what until then had remained childish anxieties, preserved intact in infantile form in the unconscious mind. But this possibility exists only because the myth refers to events which happened in the most distant times, as the adult's oedipal longings and anxieties belong to the dimmest, past of his life. If the underlying meaning of a myth were spelled out and presented as an event that could have happened in the person's adult conscious lifetime, then this would vastly increase old anxieties, and result in deeper repression.

A myth is not a cautionary tale like a fable which, by arousing anxiety, prevents us from acting in ways which are described as damaging to us. The myth of Oedipus can never be experienced as warning us not to get caught in an oedipal constellation. If one is born and raised as a child of two parents, oedipal conflicts are inescapable.

The oedipus complex is the crucial problem of childhood—unless a child remains fixated at an even earlier stage of development, such as the oral stage. A young child is completely caught up in oedipal conflicts as the inescapable reality of his life. The older child, from about age five on, is struggling to extricate himself by partly repressing the conflict, partly solving it by forming emotional attachments to others besides his parents, and partly sublimating it. What such a child needs least of all is to have his oedipal conflicts activated by such a myth. Suppose that the child still actively wishes, or has barely repressed the

desire, to rid himself of one parent in order to have the other exclusively; if he is exposed—even though only in symbolic form—to the idea that by chance, unknowingly, one may murder a parent and marry the other, then what the child has played with only in fantasy suddenly assumes gruesome reality. The consequence of this exposure can only be increased anxiety about himself and the world.

A child not only dreams about marrying his parent of the other sex, but actively spins fantasies around it. The myth of Oedipus tells what happens if that dream becomes reality—and still the child cannot yet give up wishful fantasies of marrying the parent at some future time. After hearing the myth of Oedipus, the conclusion in the child's mind could only be that similar horrible things—the death of a parent and mutilation of himself—will happen to him.

At this age, from four until puberty, what the child needs most is to be presented with symbolic images which reassure him that there is a happy solution to his oedipal problems—though he may find this difficult to believe—provided that he slowly works himself out of them. But reassurance about a happy outcome has to come first, because only then will the child have the courage to labor confidently to extricate himself from his oedipal predicament.

In childhood, more than in any other age, all is becoming. As long as we have not yet achieved considerable security within ourselves, we cannot engage in difficult psychological struggles unless a positive outcome seems certain to us, whatever the chances for this may be in reality. The fairy tale offers fantasy materials which suggest to the child in symbolic form what the battle to achieve self-realization is all about, and it guarantees a happy ending.

Mythical heroes offer excellent images for the development of the superego, but the demands they embody are so rigorous as to discourage the child in his fledgling strivings to achieve personality integration. While the mythical hero experiences a transfiguration into eternal life in heaven, the central figure of the fairy tale lives happily ever after on earth, right among the rest of us. Some fairy tales conclude with the information that if perchance he has not yet died, the hero may be still alive. Thus, a happy though ordinary existence is projected by fairy tales as the outcome of the trials and tribulations involved in the normal growing-up process.

True, these psychosocial crises of growing up are imaginatively embroidered and symbolically represented in fairy tales as encounters with fairies, witches, ferocious animals, or figures of superhuman intelligence or cunning—but the essential humanity of the hero, de-

spite his strange experiences, is affirmed by the reminder that he will have to die like the rest of us. Whatever strange events the fairy-tale hero experiences, they do not make him superhuman, as is true for the mythical hero. This real humanity suggests to the child that, whatever the content of the fairy tale, it is but fanciful elaborations and exaggerations of the tasks he has to meet, and of his hopes and fears.

Though the fairy tale offers fantastic symbolic images for the solution of problems, the problems presented in them are ordinary ones: a child's suffering from the jealousy and discrimination of his siblings, as is true for Cinderella; a child being thought incompetent by his parent, as happens in many fairy tales—for example, in the Brothers Grimm's story "The Spirit in the Bottle." Further, the fairy-tale hero wins out over these problems right here on earth, not by some reward reaped in heaven.

The psychological wisdom of the ages accounts for the fact that every myth is the story of a particular hero: Theseus, Hercules, Beowulf, Brunhild. Not only do these mythical characters have names, but we are also told the names of their parents, and of the other major figures in a myth. It just wouldn't do to name the myth of Theseus "The Man Who Slew the Bull," or that of Niobe "The Mother Who Had Seven Daughters and Seven Sons."

The fairy tale, by contrast, makes clear that it tells about everyman, people very much like us. Typical titles are "Beauty and the Beast," "The Fairy Tale of One Who Went Forth to Learn Fear." Even recently invented stories follow this pattern—for example, "The Little Prince," "The Ugly 'Duckling,'" "The Steadfast Tin Soldier." The protagonists of fairy tales are referred to as "a girl," for instance, or "the youngest brother." If names appear, it is quite clear that these are not proper names, but general or descriptive ones. We are told that "Because she always looked dusty and dirty, they called her Cinderella," or: "A little red cap suited her so well that she was always called 'Little Red Cap.'" Even when the hero is given a name, as in the Jack stories, or in "Hansel and Gretel," the use of very common names makes them generic terms, standing for any boy or girl.

This is further stressed by the fact that in fairy stories nobody else has a name; the parents of the main figures in fairy tales remain nameless. They are referred to as "father," "mother," "stepmother," though they may be described as "a poor fisherman" or "a poor wood-cutter." If they are "a king" and "a queen," these are thin disguises for father and mother, as are "prince" and "princess" for boy and girl. Fairies and witches, giants and godmothers remain equally unnamed, thus facilitating projections and identifications.

Mythical heroes are of obviously superhuman dimensions, an aspect which helps to make these stories acceptable to the child. Otherwise the child would be overpowered by the implied demand that he emulate the hero in his own life. Myths are useful in forming not the total personality, but only the superego. The child knows that he cannot possibly live up to the hero's virtue, or parallel his deeds; all he can be expected to do is emulate the hero to some small degree; so the child is not defeated by the discrepancy between this ideal and his own smallness.

The real heroes of history, however, having been people like the rest of us, impress the child with his own insignificance when compared with them. Trying to be guided and inspired by an ideal that no human can fully reach is at least not defeating—but striving to duplicate the deeds of actual great persons seems hopeless to the child and creates feelings of inferiority: first, because one knows one cannot do so, and second, because one fears others might.

Myths project an ideal personality acting on the basis of superego demands, while fairy tales depict an ego integration which allows for appropriate satisfaction of id desires. This difference accounts for the contrast: between the pervasive pessimism of myths and the essential optimism of fairy tales.

FEAR OF FANTASY

WHY WERE FAIRYTALES 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

people. They do not realize that fairy tales do not try to describe the external world and “reality.” Nor do they recognize that no sane child ever believes that these tales describe the world realistically.

Some parents fear that by telling their children about the fantastic events found in fairy tales, they are “lying” to them. Their concern is fed by the child’s asking, “Is it true?” Many fairy tales offer an answer even before the question can be asked—namely, at the very beginning of the story. For example, “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves” starts: “In days of yore and times and tides long gone,…” The Brothers Grimm’s story “The Frog King, or Iron Henry” opens: “In olden times when wishing still helped one…” Such beginnings make it amply clear that the stories take place on a very different level from everyday “reality.” Some fairy tales do begin quite realistically: “There once was a man and a woman who had long in vain wished for a child.” But the child who is familiar with fairy stories always extends the times of yore in his mind to mean the same as “In fantasy land …” This exemplifies why telling just one and the same story to the neglect of others weakens the value fairy tales have for children, and raises problems which are answered by familiarity with a number of tales.

The “truth” of fairy stories is the truth of our imagination, not that of normal causality. Tolkien, addressing himself to the question of “Is it true?” remarks that “It is not one to be rashly or idly answered.” He adds that of much more real concern to the child is the question: “Was he good? Was he wicked?” That is, [the child] is more concerned to get the Right side and the Wrong side clear.”

Before a child can come to grips’ with reality, he must have some frame of reference to evaluate it. When he asks whether a story is true, he wants to ‘know whether the story ‘contributes something of importance to his understanding, and whether it has something significant to tell him in regard to his greatest concerns.

To quote Tolkien once more: “Often enough what children mean when they ask: ‘Is it true?’ [is] ‘I like this, but is it contemporary? Am I safe in my bed?’ The answer: ‘There is certainly no dragon in England today’ is all that they want to hear.” “Fairy stories,” he continues, are “plainly not primarily concerned with possibility, but with desirability.” This the child clearly recognizes, since nothing is more “true” to him than what he desires.

Speaking of his childhood, Tolkien recalls: “I had no desire to have either dreams or adventures like *Alice*, and the account of them merely amused me. I had little desire to look for buried treasure or

fight pirates, and *Treasure Island* left me cool. But the land of Merlin and Arthur was better than these, and best of all the nameless North of Sigurd of the Voelungs, and the prince of all dragons. Such lands were preeminently desirable. I never imagined that the dragon was of the same order as the horse. The dragon had the trademark *Of Faerie* written plainly upon him. In whatever world he had his being it was of Other-world. . . . I desired dragons with a profound desire. Of course, I in my timid body did not wish to have them in the neighborhood, intruding in my relatively safe world."³⁶

In reply to the question whether the fairy story tells the truth, the answer should address itself not to the issue of truth in factual terms, but to the child's concern of the moment, be this his fear that he is apt to be bewitched, or his feelings of oedipal rivalry. For the rest, an explanation that these stories do not take place in the here and now, but in a faraway never-never-land is nearly always sufficient. A parent who from his own childhood experience is convinced of the value of fairy tales will have no difficulty in answering his child's questions; but an adult who thinks these tales are only a bunch of lies had better not try telling them; he won't be able to relate them in a way which would enrich the child's life.

Some parents fear that their children may get carried away by their fantasies; that when exposed to fairy tales, they will come to believe in magic. But every child believes in magic, and he stops doing so when he grows up (with the exception of those who have been too disappointed in reality to be able to trust its rewards). I have known disturbed children who had never been told fairy stories but who invested an electric fan or motor with as much magic and destructive power as any fairy story ever ascribed to its most powerful and nefarious figure."

Other parents fear that a child's mind may become so overfed by fairy-tale fantasies as to neglect learning to cope with reality. Actually, the opposite is true. Complex as we all are—conflicted, ambivalent, full of contradictions—the human personality is indivisible. Whatever an experience may be, it always affects all the aspects of the personality at the same time. And the total personality, in order to be able to deal with the tasks of living, needs to be backed up by a rich fantasy combined with a firm consciousness and a clear grasp of reality.

Faulty development sets in when one component of the personality —id, ego, or superego; conscious or unconscious—overpowers any of the others and depletes the total personality of its particular resources. Because some people withdraw from the world and spend

most of their days in the realm of their imaginings, it has been mistakenly suggested that an overrich fantasy life interferes with our coping successfully with reality. But the opposite is true: those who live completely in their fantasies are beset by compulsive ruminations which rotate eternally around some narrow, stereotypical topics. Far from having a rich fantasy life, such people are locked in, and they cannot break out of one anxious or wish-fulfilling daydream. But free-floating fantasy, which contains in imaginary form a wide variety of issues also encountered in reality, provides the ego with an abundance of material to work with. This rich and variegated fantasy life is provided to the child by fairy stories, which can help prevent his imagination from getting stuck within the narrow confines of a few anxious or wish-fulfilling daydreams circling around a few narrow preoccupations.

Freud said that thought is an exploration of possibilities which avoids all the dangers inherent in actual experimentation. Thought requires a small expenditure of energy, so we have energy available for action after we have reached decisions through speculating about the chances for success and the best way to achieve it. This is true for adults; for example, the scientist “plays with ideas” before he starts to explore them more systematically. But the young child’s thoughts do not proceed in an orderly way, as an adult’s do—the child’s fantasies are his thoughts. When a child tries to understand himself and others, or figure out what the specific consequences of some action might be, he spins fantasies around these issues. It is his way of “playing with ideas.” To offer a child rational thought as his major instrument for sorting out his feelings and understanding the world will only confuse and restrict him.

This is true even when the child seems to ask for factual information. Piaget describes how a girl not yet four years old asked him about an elephant’s wings. He answered that elephants don’t fly. To which the girl insisted, “Yes, they do; I’ve seen them.” His reply was that she must be joking. This example shows the limits of a child’s fantasies. The little girl was obviously struggling with some problem, and factual explanations were no help at all, because they did not address themselves to that problem.

If Piaget had engaged in conversation about where the elephant needed to fly to in such a hurry, or what dangers he was trying to escape from, then the issues which the child was grappling with might have emerged, because Piaget would have shown his willingness to accept her method of exploring the problem. But Piaget was trying

to understand how this child's mind worked on the basis of his rational frame of reference, while the girl was trying to understand the world on the basis of her understanding: through fantasy elaboration of reality as *she* saw it.

This is the tragedy of so much "child psychology": its findings are correct and important, but do not benefit the child. Psychological discoveries aid the adult in comprehending the child from within an adult's frame of reference. But such adult-understanding of the machinations of a child's mind often increases the gap between them—the two seem to look at the same phenomenon from such different points of view that each sees something quite different. If the adult insists that the way he sees things is correct—as it may well be, seen objectively and with adult knowledge—this gives the child a hopeless feeling that there is no use in trying to arrive at a common understanding. Knowing who holds the power, the child, to avoid trouble and have his peace, says that he agrees with the adult, and is then forced to go it alone.

Fairy tales underwent severe criticism when the new discoveries of psychoanalysis and child psychology revealed just how violent, anxious, destructive, and even sadistic a child's imagination is. A young child, for example, not only loves his parents with an incredible intensity of feeling, but at times also hates them. With this knowledge, it should have been easy to recognize that fairy tales speak to the inner mental life of the child. But, instead, doubters claimed that these stories create or at least greatly encourage these upsetting feelings.

Those who outlawed traditional folk fairy tales decided that if there were monsters in a story told to children, these must all be friendly – but they missed the monster a child knows best and is most concerned with: the monster he feels or fears himself to be, and which also sometimes persecutes him. By keeping this monster within the child unspoken of, hidden in his unconscious, adults prevent the child from spinning fantasies around it in the image of the fairy tales he knows. Without such fantasies, the child fails to get to know his monster better, nor is he given suggestions as to how he may gain mastery over it. As a result, the child remains helpless with his worst anxieties – much more so than if he had been told fairy tales which give these anxieties form and body and also show ways to overcome these monsters. If our fear of being devoured takes the tangible form of 'a witch, it can be gotten rid of by burning her in the oven! But these considerations did not occur to those who outlawed fairy tales.

It is a strangely limited, one-sided picture of adults and life which children are expected to accept as the only correct one. Starving the

imagination of the child was expected to extinguish the giants and ogres of the fairy tale—that is, the dark monsters residing in the unconscious—so that these would not obstruct the development of the child’s rational mind. The rational ego was expected to reign supreme from babyhood on! This was not to be achieved by the ego’s conquering the dark forces of the id, but by preventing the child from paying attention to his unconscious or hearing stories which would speak to it. In short, the child would supposedly repress his unpleasant fantasies and have only pleasant ones.*

Such id-repressing theories do not work, however. What may happen when a child is forced to repress the content of his unconscious may be illustrated by an extreme example. After long therapeutic work, a boy who, at the end of his latency period had suddenly become mute explained the origin of his mutism. He said: “My mother washed out my mouth with soap because of all the bad words I used, and these had been pretty bad, I admit. What she did not know was that by washing out all the bad words, she also washed out all the good ones.” In therapy all these bad words were freed, and with this, the good ones also reappeared. Many other things had gone wrong in this boy’s early life; washing his mouth with soap was not the main cause of his mutism, though it was a contributing one.

The unconscious is the source of raw materials and the basis upon which the ego erects the edifice of our personality, In this simile our fantasies are the natural resources which provide and shape this raw material, making it useful for the ego’s personality-building tasks. If we are deprived of this natural resource, our life remains limited; without fantasies to give us hope, we do not have the strength to meet the adversities of life. Childhood is the time when these fantasies need to be nurtured.

We do encourage our children’s fantasies; we tell them to paint what they want, or to invent stories. But unfed by our common fantasy heritage, the folk fairy tale, the child cannot invent stories on his own which help him cope with life’s problems. All the stories he can invent

*It is as if Freud’s dictum on the essence of development toward higher humanity consisting of “where there was id, there should be ego” were perverted into its opposite: “where there was id, there should be none of it.” But Freud clearly implied that only the id can provide the ego with the energy necessary to mold unconscious tendencies and use them constructively. Although more recent psychoanalytic theory posits that the ego is also invested from birth with its own energy, an ego which cannot draw on the much larger sources of id energies in addition will be a weak one. Further, an ego which is forced to expend its limited amount of energy on keeping the id’s energy repressed is doubly depleted:

are just expressions of his own wishes and anxieties. Relying, on his own resources, all the child can imagine are elaborations of where he presently is, since he cannot know where he needs to go, nor how to go about getting there. This is where the fairy tale provides what the child needs most: it begins exactly where the child is emotionally, shows him where he has to go, and how to do it. But the fairy tale does this by implication, in the form of fantasy material which the child can draw on as seems best to him, and by means of images which make it easy for him to comprehend what is essential for him to understand.

The rationalizations for continuing to forbid fairy tales despite what psychoanalysis revealed about the unconscious, particularly that of children, took many forms. When it could no longer be denied that the child is beset by deep conflicts, anxieties, violent desires, and helplessly tossed about by all kinds of irrational processes, it was concluded that because the child is already afraid of so many things, anything else that looked fearsome should be kept from him. A particular story may indeed make some children anxious, but once they become better acquainted with fairy stories, the fearsome aspects seem to disappear, while the reassuring features become ever more dominant, *The original displeasure of anxiety then turns into the great pleasure of anxiety successfully faced and mastered.*

Parents who wish to deny that their child has murderous wishes and wants to tear things and even people into pieces believe that their child must be prevented from engaging in such thoughts (as if this were possible). By denying access to stories which implicitly tell the child that others have the same fantasies, he is left to feel that he is the only one who imagines such things. This makes his fantasies really scary. On the other hand, learning that others have the same or similar fantasies makes us feel that we are a part of humanity, and allays our fear that having such destructive ideas has put us beyond the common pale.

A strange contradiction is that well-educated parents outlawed fairy tales for their children at just about the time when the findings of psychoanalysis made them aware that, far from being innocent, the mind of the young child is filled with anxious, angry, destructive imaginings.* It is also quite remarkable that these parents, so worried

* Fairy stories stimulate the child's fantasies—as do many other experiences. Since parental objection to fairy stories is often based on the violent or scary events which occur in these tales, an experimental study of fifth-graders may be mentioned which demonstrates that when a child who has a rich fantasy life—something which fairy tales stimulate—is exposed to aggressive fantasy material as it occurs *in* fairy stories

about not increasing their child's anxieties, remained oblivious to all the reassuring messages in fairy tales.

The answer to the puzzle may be found in the fact that psychoanalysis also revealed the child's ambivalent feelings about his parents. It is perturbing to parents to realize that the child's mind is filled not only by deep love, but also by strong hatred of his parents. Wishing to be loved by their child, parents shrink from exposing him to tales which might encourage him to think of parents as bad or rejecting.

Parents wish to believe that if a child sees them as stepmothers, witches, or giants, this has nothing to do with them and how they at moments appear to the child, but is only the result of tales he has heard. These parents hope that if their child is prevented from learning about such figures, he will not see his own parents in this image. In a complete reversal of which they remain largely unaware, such parents fool themselves into believing that if they are seen in such form by the child it is due to the stories he has heard, while actually the opposite is true: fairy tales are loved by the child not because the imagery he finds in them conforms to what goes on within him, but because—despite all the angry, anxious thoughts in his mind to which the fairy tale gives body and specific content—these stories always result in a happy outcome, which the child cannot imagine on his own.

(in the experiment a film with aggressive content), he responds to this experience with a marked *decrease* in aggressive behavior. When not stimulated to engage in aggressive fantasies, no reduction in aggressive behavior could be observed (Ephraim Biblow, "Imaginative Play and the Control of Aggressive Behavior," in Jerome L. Singer, *The Child's World of Make-Believe* [New York: Academic Press, 1943]).

Since fairy tales strongly stimulate a child's fantasy life, the two concluding sentences of this study may be quoted; "The low-fantasy child, as observed during play, presented himself as more motorically oriented, revealing much action and little thought in play activities, The high-fantasy child in contrast was more highly structured and creative and tended to be verbally rather than physically aggressive."

FANTASY, RECOVERY, ESCAPE, AND CONSOLATION

The shortcomings of modern fairy stories highlight the elements which are most enduring in traditional fairy tales. Tolkien describes the facets which are necessary in a good fairy tale as fantasy, recovery, escape, and consolation—recovery from deep despair, escape from some great danger, but, most of all, consolation. Speaking of the happy ending, Tolkien stresses that all complete fairy stories must have it. It is “a sudden joyous ‘turn.’ . . . However fantastic or terrible the adventure, it can give to child or man that hears it, when the ‘turn’ comes, a catch of breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to tears.”⁴⁵

How understandable, then, that when children are asked to name their favorite fairy tales, hardly any modern tales are among their choices.”⁴⁶ Many of these new tales have sad endings, which fail to provide the escape and consolation which the fearsome events in the fairy tale make necessary, to strengthen the child for meeting the vagaries of his life. Without such encouraging conclusions, the child, after listening to the story, would feel that there is indeed no hope of extricating himself from the despairs of his life.

In the traditional fairy tale, the hero is rewarded and the evil person meets his well-deserved fate, thus satisfying the child’s deep need for justice to prevail. How else can a child hope that justice will be done to him, who so often feels unfairly treated? And how else can he convince himself that he must act correctly, when he is so sorely tempted to give in to the asocial proddings of his desires? Chesterton once remarked that some children with whom he saw Maeterlinck’s play *The Blue Bird* were dissatisfied “because it did not end with a Day of Judgment, and it was not revealed to the hero and the heroine that the Dog had been faithful and the Cat faithless, For children are innocent and love justice, while most of us are wicked and naturally prefer mercy.”⁴⁷

One may rightly question Chesterton’s belief in the innocence of children, but he is absolutely correct in observing that the appreciation of mercy for the unjust, while characteristic of a mature mind, baffles the child. Furthermore, consolation not only requires, but is the direct result of justice (or, in the case of adult listeners, mercy) being done,

It seems particularly appropriate to a child that exactly what the evildoer wishes to inflict on the hero should be the bad person’s fate—as the witch in “Hansel and Gretel” who wants to cook children in the oven is pushed into it and burned to death, or the usurper in “The Goose Girl” who names and suffers her own punishment. Consolation requires that the right order of the world is restored; this means punishment of the evildoer, tantamount to the elimination of evil from the hero’s world—and then nothing stands any longer in the way of the hero’s living happily ever after.

Maybe it would be appropriate to add one more element to the four Tolkien enumerates. I believe that an element of threat is crucial to the fairy tale—a threat to the hero’s physical existence or to his moral existence, as the Goose Girl’s. degradation is experienced as a moral predicament by the child. If one contemplates it, it is startling how the fairy-tale hero accepts without question that he is thus threatened

— it just happens. The angry fairy utters a curse in “The Sleeping Beauty,” and nothing can prevent it from coming to pass, at least in its reduced form. Snow White does not wonder why the queen pursues her with such deadly jealousy, nor do the dwarfs, although they warn Snow White to avoid the queen. No question is raised as to why the enchantress in Rapunzel wants to take her away from her parents — it just happens to poor Rapunzel. The rare exceptions concern a stepmother’s wanting to promote her own children at the expense of the heroine, as in “Cinderella”—but even then we are not told why Cinderella’s Father permits it.

In any case, as soon as the story begins, the hero is projected into severe dangers. And this is how the child sees life, even when in actuality his own life proceeds in very favorable circumstances, as far as externals are concerned. To the child it seems that his life is a sequence of periods of smooth living which are suddenly and incomprehensibly interrupted as he is projected into immense danger. He has felt secure, with hardly a worry in the world, but in an instant everything changes, and the friendly world turns into a nightmare of dangers. This happens when a loving parent suddenly makes what seem like utterly unreasonable demands and terrifying threats. A child is convinced that there is no reasonable cause for these things; they just occur; it is his inexorable fate that it should happen. Then the child either gives in to his despair (and some fairy-tale heroes do exactly that—sit—there crying until a magic helper arrives and shows the way to proceed and combat the threat) or else he attempts to run away from it: all, trying to escape a horrid fate as Snow White did: “The poor child was desperately alone in the vast forest and was so terrified ... that she did not know how to help herself. So she began to run and run over pointed stones and through the thorns.”

There is no greater threat in life than that we will be deserted, left all alone. Psychoanalysis has named this—man’s greatest fear—separation anxiety; and the younger we are, the more excruciating is our anxiety when we feel deserted, for the young child actually perishes when not adequately protected and taken care of. Therefore, the ultimate consolation is that we shall never be deserted. There is a cycle of Turkish fairy tales in which the heroes again and again find themselves in the most impossible situations, but succeed in evading or overcoming the danger as soon as they have gained a friend. For example, in one famous fairy tale the hero, Iskender, arouses the enmity of his mother, who forces his father to put Iskender into a casket and set him adrift on the ocean. Iskender’s helper is a green

bird, which rescues him from this and innumerable later dangers, each more threatening than the preceding one. The bird assures Iskender each time with the words “Know, that you are never deserted.”⁴⁸ This, then, is the ultimate consolation, the one that is implied in the common fairy-tale ending, “And they lived happily ever after.”

The happiness and fulfillment which are the ultimate consolation of the fairy tale have meaning on two levels. The permanent union of, for example, a prince and a princess symbolizes the integration of the disparate aspects of the personality—psychoanalytically speaking, the id, ego, and superego—and of achieving a harmony of the theretofore discordant tendencies of the male and the female principles, as discussed in connection with the ending of “Cinderella.”

Ethically speaking, that union symbolizes, through the punishment and elimination of evil, moral unity on the highest plane—and, at the same time, that separation anxiety is forever transcended when the ideal partner has been found with whom the most satisfying personal relation is established. Depending on the fairy tale and what psychological problem area or developmental level it is mainly addressing, this takes quite different external forms, although the intrinsic meaning is always the same.

For example, in “Brother and Sister,” during most of the story the two do not part; they represent the animal and spiritual sides of our personality, which become separated but must be integrated for human happiness. But the main threat occurs after the sister has married her king and is replaced by a usurper after she gives birth to a child. Sister still returns nightly, to take care of her child and her fawn-brother. Her recovery is described as follows: “The king. . . sprang towards her and said, ‘You can’t be anybody but my dear wife.’ At that she answered, ‘Yes, I am your dear wife,’ and in the same moment she was restored to life by the grace of God, was fresh, rosy and of good health.” The ultimate consolation has to wait until evil is done away with: “The witch was cast into the fire and had to burn miserably till she was dead. And as she was burnt to ashes the little deer was returned to his human form, but little sister and little brother lived happily united until their end.” Thus the “happy ending,” the final consolation, consists of both the integration of the personality and the establishment of a permanent relation.

On the surface, things are different in “Hansel and Gretel.” These children achieve their higher humanity as soon as the witch is burned to death, and this is symbolized by the treasures they gain. But since

the two are definitely not of marriageable age, the establishment of human relations which will forever ban separation anxiety is symbolized not by their getting married, but by their happy return home to their father, where—with the death of the other evil figure, the mother—now “All worries had ended, and they lived together in pure joyfulness.”

Compared to what these just and consoling endings tell about the hero's development, the hero's suffering in many modern fairy tales, while deeply moving, seems much less purposeful because it does not lead to the ultimate form of human existence. (Naïve as it may seem, the prince and princess getting married and inheriting the kingdom, ruling it in peace and happiness, symbolizes to the child the highest possible form of existence because this is all he desires for himself: to run his kingdom—his own life—successfully, peacefully, and to be happily united with the most desirable partner who will never leave him.)

Failure to experience recovery and consolation is true enough in reality, but this hardly encourages the child to meet life with steadfastness which will permit him to accept that going through severe trials can lead to existing on a higher plane. Consolation is the greatest service the fairy tale can offer a child: the confidence that, despite all tribulations he has to suffer (such as the threat of desertion by parents in “Hansel and Gretel”; jealousy on the part of parents in “Snow White” and of siblings in “Cinderella”; the devouring anger of the giant in “Jack and the Beanstalk”; the nastiness of evil powers in “The Sleeping Beauty”), not only will he succeed, but the evil forces will be done away with and never again threaten his peace of mind.

Prettified or bowdlerized fairy tales are rightly rejected by any child who has heard them in their original form. It does not seem fitting to the child that Cinderella's evil sisters should go scot-free, or even be elevated by Cinderella. Such magnanimity does not impress the child favorably, nor will he learn it from a parent who bowdlerizes the story so the just and the wicked are both rewarded. The child knows better what he needs to be told. When a seven-year-old was read the story of “Snow White,” an adult, anxious not to disturb the child's mind, ended the story with Snow White's wedding. The child, who knew the story, promptly demanded: “What about the redhot shoes that killed the wicked queen?” The child feels that all's well with the world, and that he can be secure in it, only if the wicked are punished in the end.

This does not mean that the fairy tale fails to take into account the

vast difference between evil as such and the unfortunate consequences of selfish behavior. “Rapunzel” illustrates this point. Despite the fact that eventually the sorceress forces Rapunzel to live in a desert “in great grief and misery,” the sorceress is not punished for it. The reason becomes clear from the events of the story. Rapunzel is named after the German word for rampion (a European vegetable used in salads), and her name is the clue for understanding what happens. Rapunzel’s mother, while pregnant with Rapunzel, was beset by a huge desire for the rampion which grew in the walled-in garden of the sorceress. She persuaded her husband to enter the forbidden garden and get her some rampion. The second time he did so, he was caught by the sorceress, who threatened to punish him for his thievery. He pleaded his case: his pregnant wife’s uncontrollable desire for rampion. The sorceress, moved by his plea, permitted him to take as much of her rampion as he wished, provided “you give me the child your wife will give birth to. The child will fare well, and I shall take care of it like a mother.” The father agreed to those conditions. Thus the sorceress gains the care of Rapunzel because her parents had, first, transgressed into her forbidden domain and, second, agreed to hand Rapunzel over. So the sorceress wanted Rapunzel more than her parents did, or so it seems.

All goes well until Rapunzel is twelve years old—that is, as one must guess from the story, she reaches the age of sexual maturity.. With, this, there is danger that she may leave her adoptive mother. True, it is selfish of the sorceress to try to hold on to Rapunzel no matter what, by secluding her in an inaccessible chamber in a tower. While it is wrong to deprive Rapunzel of the liberty to move about, the sorceress’ desperate wish not to let go of Rapunzel does not seem a serious crime in the eyes of a child, who wants desperately to be held on to by his parents.

The sorceress visits Rapunzel in her tower by climbing up by her tresses—the same tresses which permit Rapunzel to, establish a relation to the prince. Thus the transfer from a relationship established to a parent to that of a lover is symbolized. Rapunzel must know how terribly important she is to her sorceress substitute-mother, because in this story occurs one of the rare “Freudian” slips to be found in fairy tales: Rapunzel, obviously guilty about her clandestine meetings with the prince, spills her secret as she asks the unwary sorceress, “How come you are so much heavier to pull up than the young son of the king?”

Even a child knows that nothing causes greater fury than love

betrayed, and Rapunzel, even while thinking about her prince, knew that the sorceress loved her. Although selfish love is wrong and always loses out, as does the sorceress, again the child can understand that if one loves somebody exclusively, one does not want some other person to enjoy that love and deprive one. To love so selfishly and foolishly is wrong, but not evil. The sorceress does not destroy the prince; all she does is gloat when he becomes deprived of Rapunzel as she is. The prince's tragedy is the result of his own doing: in his despair that Rapunzel is gone, he jumps down from the tower, falling into thorns which pierce his eyes. Having acted foolishly and selfishly, the sorceress loses out—but since she acted from too much love for Rapunzel and not out of wickedness, no harm befalls her.

I mentioned before how consoling it is to the child to be told, in symbolic fashion, that in his own body he possesses the means to gain what he wishes—as the prince reaches Rapunzel on her tresses. The happy ending in Rapunzel is again brought about by Rapunzel's body: her tears heal her lover's eyes, and with this they regain their kingdom.

“Rapunzel” illustrates fantasy, escape, recovery, and consolation, although innumerable other folk fairy tales could serve equally well. The story unfolds as one deed is balanced by another, following each other with geometrical ethical rigor: rampion (Rapunzel) stolen leads to rampion returned from where it was originally taken. The selfishness of the mother, which forces her husband to take the rampion illegally, is balanced by the selfishness of the sorceress, who wishes to keep Rapunzel to herself. The fantastic element is that which provides the final consolation: the power of the body is imaginatively exaggerated by the overlong tresses, on which one can climb up a tower, and by the tears, which can restore sight. But what more reliable source of recovery do we have than our own body?

Both Rapunzel and the prince act immaturely: he spies on the sorceress and sneaks up the tower behind her back, instead of openly approaching her with his love for Rapunzel. And Rapunzel also cheats by not telling what she did, short of her revealing slip. This is why Rapunzel's removal from the tower and her domination by the sorceress do not immediately bring about the happy ending. Both Rapunzel and the prince have to undergo a period of trial and tribulation, of inner growth through misfortune—as is true for the heroes of many fairy tales.

The child is unaware of his inner processes, which is why these are externalized in the fairy tale and symbolically represented by actions

standing for inner and outer struggles. But deep concentration is also required for personal growth. This is typically symbolized in fairy tales by years devoid of overt events, suggesting inner, silent developments. Thus, the physical escape of the child from his parents' domination is followed by a lengthy period of recovery, of gaining maturity.

In the story, after Rapunzel's banishment into the desert, the time comes when she is no longer taken care of by her substitute mother, nor the prince by his parents. Both of them now have to learn to take care of themselves, even in the most adverse circumstances. Their relative immaturity is suggested by their having given up hope—not trusting the future really means not trusting oneself. That is why neither the prince nor Rapunzel is able to search with determination for the other. He, we are told, “wandered blindly through the forest, ate nothing but roots and berries, and did nothing but moan and cry because he had lost his beloved.” Nor are we told that Rapunzel did much of a positive nature; she too lived in misery and moaned and decried her fate. We must assume, nevertheless, that it was for both a period of growing, of finding themselves, an era of recovery. At its end they are ready not only to rescue each other, but to make a good life, one for the other.

ON THE TELLING OF FAIRY STORIES

To attain to the full its consoling propensities, its symbolic meanings, and, most of all, its interpersonal meanings, a fairy tale should be told rather than read. If it is read, it ought to be read with emotional involvement in the story and in the child, with empathy for what the story may mean to him. Telling is preferable to reading because it permits greater flexibility.

It was mentioned before that the folk fairy tale, as distinct from more recently invented fairy tales, is the result of a story being shaped and reshaped by being told millions of times, by different adults to all kinds of other adults and children. Each narrator, as he told the story, dropped and added elements to make it more meaningful to himself and to the listeners, whom he knew well. When talking to a child, the

adult responded to what he surmised from the child's reactions. Thus the narrator let his unconscious understanding of what the story told be influenced by that of the child. Successive narrators adapted the story according to the questions the child asked, the delight and fear he expressed openly or indicated by the way he snuggled up against the adult. Slavishly sticking to the way a fairy story is printed robs it of much of its value. The telling of the story to a child, to be most effective, has to be an interpersonal event, shaped by those who participate in it.

There is no getting around the possibility that this also contains some pitfalls. A parent not attuned to his child, or too beholden to what goes on in his own unconscious, may choose to tell fairy tales on the basis of his needs—rather than those of the child. But even if he does, all is not lost. The child will better understand what moves his parent, and this is of great interest and value to him in comprehending the motives of those most important in his life.

An example of this occurred when a father was about to leave his much more competent wife and his five-year-old son, both of whom he had failed to support for some time. He worried that his son would be entirely in the power of his wife, whom he thought of as a domineering woman, when he was no longer around. One evening the boy requested that the father tell him a bedtime story. His father chose "Hansel and Gretel"; and when the narrative reached the point where Hansel had been put into the cage and was being fattened to be eaten by the witch, the father began to yawn and said he felt too tired to continue; he left the boy, went to bed, and fell asleep. Thus Hansel was left in the power of the devouring witch without any support—as the father thought that he was about to leave his son in the power of his dominant wife.

Although only five years old, the boy understood that his father was about to abandon him, and that his father thought his mother a threatening person, but that he nonetheless saw no way to protect or to rescue his son. While the boy may have had a bad night, he decided that since there seemed to be no hope of his father's taking good care of him, he would have to come to terms with the situation he faced with his mother. The next day he told his mother what had happened, and spontaneously added that even if Father were not around, he knew that Mother would always take good care of him.

Fortunately, children not only know how to deal with such parental distortions of fairy tales, but they also have their own ways of dealing with story elements which run counter to their emotional needs. They

do this by changing the story around and remembering it differently from its original version, or by adding details to it. The fantastic ways in which the stories unfold encourage such spontaneous changes; stories which deny the irrational in us do not as easily permit such variations. It is fascinating to view the changes, which even the most widely known stories undergo in the minds of individuals, notwithstanding the fact that the story's events are such common knowledge.

One boy reversed the story of Hansel and Gretel so that it was Gretel who was put in the cage, and Hansel who conceived of the idea of using a bone to fool the witch, and who pushed her into the oven, thereby freeing Gretel. To add some female distortions of fairy tales which made them conform to individual needs: a girl remembered "Hansel and Gretel" with the change that it was the father who insisted that the children had to be cast out, despite his wife's entreaties not to do so, and that the father did his evil deed behind his wife's back.

A young lady remembered "Hansel and Gretel" mainly as a story depicting Gretel's dependency on her older brother, and objected to its "male chauvinistic" character. As far as her recollection of the story went—and she claimed to remember it very vividly—it was Hansel who managed to escape by his own wits and who pushed the witch into the oven and thus rescued Gretel. On rereading the story, she was much surprised by the way her memory had distorted it, but realized that all through her childhood she had relished her dependence on a somewhat older brother and, as she put it, "I have been unwilling to accept my own strength and the responsibilities that go along with that awareness." There was another reason why in early adolescence this distortion was strongly reinforced. While her brother had been abroad, her mother had died and she had had to make the arrangements for the cremation. Therefore, even on rereading the fairy tale as an adult she felt revulsion at the idea that it was Gretel who was responsible for the witch being burned to death; it reminded her too painfully of the cremation of her mother. Unconsciously she had understood the story well, especially the degree to which the witch represented the bad mother about whom we all harbor negative feelings, but feel guilty about them. Another girl recalled with rich detail how Cinderella's going to the ball was made possible by her father, despite the stepmother's objections.

I mentioned before that, ideally, the telling of a fairy story should be an interpersonal event into which adult and child enter as equal partners, as can never be the case when a story is read to a child. A story of Goethe's childhood illustrates this.

Long before Freud spoke about id and superego, Goethe from his own experience divined that they were the building blocks of personality. Fortunately for him, in his life each of the two was represented by a parent. “From father I got my bearings, the seriousness in life’s pursuits; from mother the enjoyment of life, and love of spinning fantasies.”⁴⁹ Goethe knew that to be able to enjoy life, to make the hard work of it palatable, we need a rich fantasy life. The account of how Goethe gained some of this ability and self-confidence through his mother’s telling him fairy tales illustrates how fairy tales ought to be told, and how they can bind parent and child together by each making his own contributions. Goethe’s mother recounted in her old age:

“Air, fire, water and earth I presented to him as beautiful princesses, and everything in all nature took on a deeper meaning,” she reminisced. “We invented roads between stars, and what great minds we would encounter. . . . He devoured me with his eyes; and if the fate of one of his favorites did not go as he wished, this I could see from the anger in his face, or his efforts not to break out in tears. Occasionally he interfered by saying: ‘Mother, the princess will not marry the miserable tailor, even if he slays the giant,’ at which I stopped and postponed the catastrophe until the next evening. So my imagination often was replaced by his; and when the following morning I arranged fate according to his suggestions and said, ‘You guessed it, that’s how it came out,’ he was all excited, and one could see his heart beating.”⁵⁰

Not every parent can invent stories as well as Goethe’s mother—who during her lifetime was known as a great teller of fairy stories. She told the stories in line with her listeners’ inner feelings of how things should proceed in the tale, and this was considered the right way to tell these stories. Unfortunately, many modern parents were never themselves told fairy tales as children; and, having thus been deprived of the intense pleasure, and enrichment of the inner life, that these stories give to a child, even the best of parents cannot be spontaneous in providing his child with what was absent from his own experience. In that case, an intellectual understanding of how meaningful a fairy tale can be for his child, and why, must replace direct empathy based on recollections of one’s own childhood.

When speaking here of an intellectual understanding of the meaning of a fairy tale, it should be emphasized that it will not do to approach the telling of fairy tales with didactic intentions. When in various contexts throughout this book it is mentioned that a fairy tale helps the child to understand himself, guides him to find solutions to the problems that beset him, etc., this is always meant metaphorically.

If listening to a fairy tale permits a child to achieve this for himself, that he may be able to do so was not the conscious intention either of those who in the dim past invented a story, or of those who in retelling it hand it down the generations. The purpose in telling a fairy story ought to be that of Goethe's mother: a shared experience of enjoying the tale, although what makes for this enjoyment may be quite different for child and adult. While the child enjoys the fantasy, the adult may well derive his pleasure from the child's enjoyment; while the child may be elated because he now understands something about himself better, the adult's delight in telling the story may derive from the child's experiencing a sudden shock of recognition.

A fairy tale is most of all a work of art, about which Goethe said in his prologue to *Faust*, "Who offers many things will offer some to many a one." This implies that any deliberate attempt to offer something specific to a particular person cannot be the purpose of a work of art. Listening to a fairy tale and taking in the images it presents may be compared to a scattering of seeds, only some of which will be implanted in the mind of the child. Some of these will be working in his conscious mind right away; others will stimulate processes in his unconscious. Still others will need to rest for a long time until the child's mind has reached a state suitable for their germination, and many will never take root at all. But those seeds which have fallen on the right soil will grow into beautiful flowers and sturdy trees—that is, give validity to important feelings, promote insights, nourish hopes, reduce anxieties—and in doing so enrich the child's life at the moment and forever after. Telling a fairy tale with a particular purpose other than that of enriching the child's experience turns the fairy story into a cautionary tale, a fable, or some other didactic experience which at best speaks to the child's conscious mind, while reaching the child's unconscious directly also is one of the greatest merits of this literature.

If the parent tells his child fairy tales in the right spirit – that is, with feelings evoked in himself both through remembering the meaning the story had for him when he was a child, and through its different present meaning to him; and with sensitivity for the reasons why his child may also, derive some personal meaning from hearing the tale — then, as he listens, the child feels understood in his most tender longings, his most ardent wishes, his most severe anxieties and feelings of misery, as well as in his highest hopes. Since what the parent tells him in some strange way happens also to enlighten him about what goes on in the darker and irrational aspects of his mind, this shows the

child that he is not alone in his fantasy life, that it is shared by the person he needs and loves most. In such favorable conditions, fairy tales subtly offer suggestions on how to deal constructively with these inner experiences. The fairy story communicates to the child an intuitive, subconscious understanding of his own nature and of what his future may hold if he develops his positive potentials. He senses from fairy tales that to be a human being in this world of ours means having to accept difficult challenges, but also encountering wondrous adventures.

One must never “explain” to the child the meanings of fairy tales. However, the narrator’s understanding of the fairy tale’s message to the child’s preconscious mind is important. The narrator’s comprehension of the tale’s many levels of meaning facilitates the child’s deriving from the story clues for understanding himself better. It furthers the adult’s sensitivity to selection of those stories which are most appropriate to the child’s state of development, and to the specific psychological difficulties he is confronted with at the moment.

Fairy tales describe inner states of the mind by means of images and actions. As a child recognizes unhappiness and grief when a person is crying, so the fairy tale does not need to enlarge on somebody’s being unhappy. When Cinderella’s mother dies, we are not told that Cinderella grieved for her mother or mourned the loss and felt lonely, deserted, desperate, but simply that “every day she went out to her mother’s grave and wept.”

In fairy tales, internal processes are translated into visual images. When the hero is confronted by difficult inner problems which seem to defy solution, his psychological state is not described; the fairy story shows him lost in a dense, impenetrable wood, not knowing which way to turn, despairing of finding the way out. To everybody who has heard fairy tales, the image and feeling of being lost in a deep, dark forest are unforgettable.

Unfortunately, some moderns reject fairy tales because they apply to this literature standards which are totally inappropriate. If one takes these stories as descriptions of reality, then the tales are indeed outrageous in all respects—cruel, sadistic, and whatnot. But as symbols of psychological happenings or problems, these stories are quite true.

That is why it depends largely on the narrator’s feelings about a fairy tale whether it falls flat or is cherished. The loving grandmother who tells the tale to a child who, sitting on her lap, listens to it enraptured will communicate something very different than a parent who,

bored by the story, reads it to several children of quite different ages out of a sense of duty. The adult's sense of active participation in telling the story makes a vital contribution to, and greatly enriches, the child's experience of it. It entails an affirmation of his personality through a particular shared experience with another human being who, though an adult, can fully appreciate the feelings and reactions of the child.

If, as we tell the story, the agonies of sibling rivalry do not reverberate in us, as well as the desperate feeling of rejection the child has when he doesn't feel he is thought the best; his feelings of inferiority when his body fails him; his dismal sense of inadequacy if he or others expect the performance of tasks that seem Herculean; his anxiety about the "animal" aspects of sex; and how all this and so much more can be transcended—then we fail the child. In this failure we also fail to give the child the conviction that after all his labors a wonderful future is awaiting him—and only this belief can give him the strength to grow up well, securely, with self-confidence and self-respect.