



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

The Impact of Fairy Tales

*An Exploration of the Relationships of Parents and Children in
Selected Fairy Tales*

Ritgerð til BA-prófs í ensku

Helga Benediktsdóttir

Maí 2014

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Enskuskor

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Summary

This essay explores the relationships of parents and children as demonstrated in a few selected folk fairy tales, with regard to the ideas of the child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim, Freudian psychoanalytic theory, as well as the feminist theories of Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar and Julia Kristeva. The child protagonists in fairy tales and the influence their personal burdens and victories have on the young listeners of the stories are discussed, and the effects of introducing parental figures as antagonists or serious villains are considered. The power relationships between adults and children are discussed, as well as the ways fairy tales can help children come to terms with their position in the social hierarchy of their lives. Oppressive parental figures are then considered further as the evil Queen of “Little Snow-white” is analysed through feminist and psychoanalytic theory, and the oedipal issues suggested by Freud are applied to the relationship of Snow-white and the Queen. Freud’s theories are then explored further in regards to the tale of “Hansel and Gretel,” as children’s fears of abandonment and survival without their parents are discussed, and Bettelheim’s ideas on that particular fairy tale are considered. Hansel and Gretel’s plight, and eventual happy ending is then compared to the tragic ending of H.C. Andersen’s “The Little Match Girl,” in which the young girl’s suffering, caused by her parents’ neglect, only ceases when she finds solace in death. The religious undertones in “The Little Match Girl” make room for discussion of religious aspects of fairy tales and the Christian myth of the Fall of Man – the original sin which leads God to shun his children, Adam and Eve, and leave them to fend for themselves outside of Paradise. Lastly the Grimm’s fairy tale “The Seven Ravens” is noted for its religious implications, and characters from the tale are compared with individuals from Christian mythology.

Table of Contents

Introduction	2
1. The Child Hero	5
2. Parents in Fairy Tales: the Evil Stepmother	9
3. Feminism and the Evil Stepmother	14
4. Abandonment and Separation Anxiety	17
5. The Fall from Paradise	22
Conclusion	25
Works Cited	26

Introduction

“Once upon a time” is a phrase familiar to children all over the world as the beginning of a fairy tale, whether it be a story of kings, farmers or orphaned children. These four words serve as an invitation to an adventure in a magical world of wonder, but fairy tales are more than simple stories told to entertain children. Fairy tales and folk stories have followed human societies through the ages and still play a significant part of children’s lives. These stories have travelled through oral storytelling as well as print, in times and places of limited sources of entertainment as well as in large metropolitan areas of the electronic age, teeming with possible exciting leisure activities. The similarity of folk fairy tales all over the globe suggests a basic structure that is universal to human comprehension. Marie-Louise von Franz suggests that “Fairy tales are most generally human in their structure” and “In each type of tale you can study the most basic structures of human behaviour” (13). Perhaps this universal human connection is the reason why the classic tales of princes, princesses, witches and wolves in lands far away and long ago, are as appealing to children today as they were a century ago. The Austrian born child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim finds folk fairy tales of great value when it comes to the upbringing of children. In his book, *The Uses of Enchantment* (1989), Bettelheim studies their universal importance in understanding childhood development and states his opinions on the way children work through the psychological problems of maturing:

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. (Bettelheim 6-7)

According to Bettelheim, fairy tales have a unique value here, as they “offer new dimensions to the child’s imagination,” and the form and structure of these tales “suggest images to the child by which he can structure his daydreams and with them give better direction to his life” (7). Children far and wide still benefit from hearing tales of the fictional children in these stories, dealing with various problems that can be of life-threatening nature. These problems often deal with the child’s relationship with his or her parents or parental figures, as the hero of the story might struggle with abandonment issues or suffer the wrath of an evil stepmother. The young readers or listeners can sympathise with these issues of insecurity and disputes, as their own parents and guardians are both their affectionate caregivers, and also the prime authoritative figures in their lives, which allows for clashes of what the child wants and what the parent insists the child needs. The focus of this essay will be on this most important of relationships presented in fairy tales, the one of a parent and child, with the aim to analyse this bond, the related problems that present themselves in a few well known stories and myths, and the effect they have on their young readers.

This essay will use a combination of psychological and feminist theories to analyse the relationships of children and adults in fairy tales, as well as the impact they can have on the young and impressionable minds of children. The well known Grimm fairy tales “Little Snow-white” and “Hansel and Gretel,” as well as H.C. Andersen’s story “The Little Match Girl” will be examined, and the fall from Paradise will be discussed as the ultimate dispute of father and child. To begin with the protagonists of fairy tales will be discussed, and particularly the fact they are often young children themselves. The dangers the protagonists face are compared with struggles and fears the young readers face in their daily lives, as well as the underlying psychological issues and anxieties they might struggle with. The importance of fairy tales in regard to the child’s social and emotional development will be considered, and furthermore how the child can benefit from being introduced to evil things and upsetting situations through this medium. The second chapter focuses on the relationship between child and parent, and discusses the seemingly universal theme of the evil stepmother in regards to Freudian theories. The classic Grimm’s fairy tale “Little Snow-white” will be discussed in that context, and the relationship between stepmother and daughter explored. The third chapter then looks at the relationship of the Queen and Little Snow-white from a feminist point of view. The fourth chapter delves further into Freud’s theories and how they are suited to “Hansel and Gretel,” another tale dealing with a cruel mother figure,

as well as issues of separation and abandonment which are often of truly great concern to children whose entire lives revolve around their parents and immediate family. Hansel and Gretel's satisfying ending is then compared with the tragedy of H.C. Andersen's "The Little Match Girl," and the effect death and complete abandonment can have on young readers is discussed. In the fifth chapter a comparison is made of children falling from their parents' good graces and the Fall of Man out of the garden of Paradise, as well as Christian and mythical components of prominent children's stories. "The Seven Ravens" is acknowledged for its Christian references and implications, and the Christian myths of Creation and the Fall of Man will be mentioned in relation to oedipal complexities of the parent who suffers from jealousy. The fall from Grace will be compared with parents who shun their children in fairy tales such as in the previously discussed "Little Snow-white" and "Hansel and Gretel."

1. The Child Hero

Fairy tales and folk stories have been of interest to many academics through the years and in his discussion on genealogy in Grimm's fairy tales, the historical anthropologist William de Blécourt states:

According to the German dictionary initiated by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, a *Märchen*, which is now considered as the German equivalent of a fairy tale, was originally, in the most common sense of the word, a mere rumour, not necessarily believable. More specifically, it was a conscious lie, something made up, a fantasy, something imagined and thus also a story produced from imagination. (de Blécourt 26-27)

This original meaning of the word *Märchen* is a quite fitting description of a fairy tale, as fairy tales are not intended to reflect the actual reality of their reader, but to entertain and sometimes send a moral message. However, these stories told to children in their formative years are more than exaggerated tall tales. Their social and emotional depth is profound and the children's developing minds connect incidents from their favourite night time stories with struggles they face in their daily lives. Children who have heard fairy tales, folk tales, and other stories and legends from young age are introduced to some of the problems they fear the most in this world: that their mother will die, that their father will die, they will be stuck with a terrible, murderous stepparent, or that they will be left alone by their parents to fend for themselves, at risk of being devoured by some wicked, dark creature. This display of abandonment and loss is frightening to the child, but is presented in such a way that the child still feels safe and protected because the setting is more often a magical place in a land far away and a long time ago. The presence of magic, the existence of enchanted beings and objects, and the frequent appearances of talking animals enthrall the young readers, but at the same time reassure them that the parts of the stories that frighten them do not exist to taunt and torment them in reality. Bettelheim proclaims that "no sane child ever believes that [fairy tales] describe the world realistically" (117) but "every child believes in magic, and he stops doing so when he grows up" (118). Children who ask if the events of the stories are true are often given an answer before the tale even begins as the first words of many tales are the classic fairy tale opening "Once upon a time," or more specifically detached from the child's reality as "The Frog King's" opening: "In old times when wishing still helped one" (Grimm "The Frog King"). This indicates that the story about to be told

does not realistically depict the contemporary situation and reality of the child (Bettelheim 117).

An important aspect of these stories is how they present protagonists that children can relate to, and show those heroes overcome the problems they face, problems children are afraid of having to face themselves. Hearing these stories allows the children reassurance that even though the situation seems desperate, the clever and dexterous child can take care of himself. The child hero presented in fairy tales is often the youngest child of the family or a stepchild, and so the hero is repeatedly isolated from his other siblings or from his parents, even oppressed and disadvantaged. The heroes are often small, seemingly unable to take care of themselves and have to rely on others, but through the course of the story manage to rise above their woes. Grimm's "Cinderella" is an example of a story in which the heroine is oppressed by her stepmother and stepsisters and made to slave for them, is met with no love and feels no sense of companionship. Eventually she is raised from the ashes of the fireside and marries a prince, with some help from the magic that is usually to be found in the world of fairy tales. Cinderella's change of fortune – her transformation from a ragged, defeated, kitchen wench into a princess – is also characteristic of a fairy tale hero. Hansel and Gretel's transition from dire poverty to riches is another example. The fairy tale heroes go on a journey through which they mature and change, and eventually emerge victorious. The change these heroes can undergo sends the message that nothing is set in stone; the heroes, whatever their origin, their appearance or their social situation, can change their fortunes if they apply themselves. According to Max Lüthi: "In the fairy tale, all things are possible ... the lowest can rise to the highest position, and those in the highest position – evil queens, princes, princesses, government ministers – can fall and be destroyed" (*Once Upon a Time* 138). This message is of course rather unrealistic, as social mobility in the 19th century was hardly common, and rather reflects wishful thinking of the underprivileged than something applicable to reality. Still these characters who long for a better life and succeed in their struggles offer hope, and the reader feels the "capacity for change of man in general" (138). Everyone is capable of change and maturation, the process which the fairy tale depicts: the child-hero develops and matures, surpasses the need for parental guidance and eventually is no longer a child, perhaps even getting married and having children herself.

The fairy tale hero's relationship with his or her family is often the origin and cause of the action of the tale itself. The hatred of the Queen for Snow-white sets the plot in motion, and her persistence to murder Snow-white eventually leads to her own demise. The parents in "Hansel and Gretel" send their children to die in the woods, and the father's sudden anger with his sons in "The Seven Ravens" is the reason for them being cursed. These stories can serve as examples for another common trait of the fairy tale hero: the hero leaves home, "often because of a family conflict, at other times in order to fulfill a task, to bring about a disenchantment, or simply to 'see the world'" (Lüthi *The Fairytale as an Art Form and Portrait of Man* 136). Snow-white flees from her childhood home in her father's castle, and Hansel and Gretel are abandoned and lost in the woods. Sometimes the heroes return but the return is not of great importance compared to the journey itself. The journey of the child hero can often be compared to the developing years of adolescence, and after his or her mission has been fulfilled the hero stands as a more mature and developed person on the brink of adulthood. The simple fact that an abundance of fairy tales end with a marriage and the hero living happily ever after suggests that the journey that particular hero took spanned from childhood to adulthood; the struggles the hero faced reflecting the struggles of children finding their way through adolescence and towards maturity. The initial fright and unease that follows leaving home and the supposed safety of the parents' arms is overcome, and the heroes prove to themselves and the world that they are capable of surviving, and triumphing, without the help of their parents.

The hero's relationship with parental and authoritative figures and the popular theme of leaving home are a few of many common traits fairy tales have. One feature Bettelheim points out is that many fairy tale heroes share the experience of falling into a deep sleep at a crucial point in their development and "Each reawakening or rebirth symbolizes the reaching of a higher stage of maturity and understanding" (Bettelheim 214). He suggests that "Change signifies the need to give up something one had enjoyed up to then," (214) and takes Snow-white's experiences for example. The reader is given to understand that she lives a comfortable life in her father's castle until her stepmother's jealousy rears its head, and she is forced to leave that life behind and flee into the untamed wild of the forest. There she finds refuge, falls asleep across seven beds, and wakes up under the protection of the seven dwarfs. When the Queen has seemingly managed to end her daughter's life Snow-white appears dead but eventually wakes up and marries a prince. The difficulties of giving up familiarity and its security

are “painful growing-up experiences which cannot be avoided,” (215) and these stories help assure the child that he or she needs not be afraid of change or letting go of dependence on others. Even though change can be difficult to cope with, the transitional period will pass and the child will, like Snow-white, “emerge on a higher and better plane” (Bettelheim 215) and lead a more fulfilled life, in charge of his own existence.

Problems such as Snow-white’s: being shunned from home and forced to fend for herself, can serve as a sort of rites of passage. Snow-white is dependent on the kindness of strangers, but Hansel and Gretel for example, are faced with a terrible witch when they leave their parents’ home. The challenge they meet is a dangerous one, but eventually they defeat the witch, and that victory brings them wealth and renders them no longer a burden on their family and society. Poverty and starvation are not problems anymore and so they have achieved financial security and independence, something their father and mother failed to do. Their insecurities and anxiety towards their parents no longer hold them back, and with their return home their father’s situation is greatly improved – as opposed to them being a burden on the household in the beginning of the story. The social gap between children and adults is vast, as adults are normally considered in charge of their children since the adult’s age and experiences often lead to him or her being better informed and more capable of making reasonable and constructive decisions. This social hierarchy is very clear to children and sometimes their position in this structure frustrates them, which results in a power struggle between children and adults, sometimes in the sense of the larger structures of society and adults as a whole – and sometimes the frustration is simply directed at their parents.

2. Parents in Fairy Tales: the Evil Stepmother

Some parents will not want their children to delve deep into stories in which the villain is the maternal or paternal figure of the hero. Some cannot handle the fact that children will harbour spiteful feelings towards their parents at some point, but according to Bettelheim, being familiar with the image of an evil stepparent, children can find it easier to deal with incidents when their real parents frighten or disappoint them (67). This helps them to deal with the situation and “forgiving” potential outbursts or disciplinary actions, as however justified these actions might be in the eyes of the parent, children are not always able to understand the reason for them being reprimanded, or the true extent of their “crime.”

It is important to note that most prominent classic fairy tales and children’s stories deal with heroes who are either orphans, brought up by widows or widowers, have to suffer the proximity of an evil stepparent or have been abducted from their rightful family. There are in fact rather few classic fairy tales or prominent children’s stories in which the reader is presented with a hero in a traditional household with two loving parents perfectly able to take care of their child. Stories of children who have lost one or both of their parents, have been forcefully separated from their family or suffer the wrath of a hateful stepparent are very prominent, as is evident for example when taking a look at popular Grimm’s fairy tales. Snow-white lives in fear of her jealous and murderous stepmother while poor Cinderella has to slave for hers. Hansel and Gretel are abandoned in the forest by their parents who are too poor to keep them, and the brothers in “The Seven Ravens” are shunned by their anxious father while taking too long to get water. Family and the relationships of parents and children are prominent symbols in all of these tales, and very important subjects to children hearing the stories since the lives of young children still essentially revolve around their parents and family. The fact that their parents are the most important people in children’s lives can be very frightening as children are completely dependent on them, and some children cannot fathom surviving without them. These complexities that can bother children are addressed in many fairy tales, and these stories serve to assure them that they need not worry, by depicting children who suffer hardships and adversity but find the strength to persevere and emerge victorious.

The tale “Little Snow-white” from the collections of the Brothers Grimm tells a story of a young girl turning into a beautiful young woman, and her stepmother who

resents her for that. Snow-white's biological mother wishes for a "a child as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as the wood of the window-frame" (Grimm "Little Snow-white"), she is then blessed with a little daughter who possesses all these characteristics, but tragically dies shortly after giving birth. The King remarries and the beautiful new Queen is "proud and haughty" and cannot bear the thought of any woman surpassing her beauty. When the young Snow-white becomes more beautiful than the Queen, the latter's insane jealousy gnaws at her day and night and she begins to truly hate the innocent child. Her envy and pride takes hold of her, resulting in a murderous plan of having the child killed. This terrible task is not carried out as the huntsman takes pity on Snow-white and lets her escape into the forest, bringing back a boar heart as proof of Snow-white's slaying, which the Queen then eats. This level of villainy is appalling, but the story does not end there. After finding out about Snow-white's escape, the Queen follows the girl and makes three attempts at her life, the last one appearing to have successfully robbed the young innocent girl of her life.

This hysterical vanity and jealousy of the Queen is psychotic, but she gets her punishment in the end when she is forced to dance in hot iron slippers until she drops dead. The Queen's actions are teeming with underlying oedipal issues, as her insane jealousy brings her to murder her own stepdaughter. Instead of facing the reality of the passing of time, and ageing with grace while being joyful of her stepdaughter growing and maturing into a beautiful woman, she manically plans to rid herself of her opponent by killing her. The descriptions of the Queen's state of mind are telling, as she falls deeper into the pit of murderous envy and bitterness. At first she is proud and haughty, but satisfied with knowing that she is the most beautiful woman in all the land, but when her magic mirror announces that Snow-white has become the most beautiful the Queen "turned yellow and green with envy" (Grimm "Little Snow-white") and her heart heaves with hatred for her daughter until her envy and pride has grown enough for her to arrange for her daughter's murder. "Blood rushed to her heart with fear" when she finds out that Snow-white has not been killed by the laces, and when the comb fails she trembles and shakes with rage and proclaims: "Snow-white shall die, even if it costs me my life!" When her final murder attempt seems to have been successful, "her envious heart had rest, so far as an envious heart can have rest" (Grimm "Little Snow-white). The intense jealousy felt by the Queen cripples her capability to love, and completely consumes her life, not allowing her to rest while Snow-white still walks the earth. This

inability to take joy in her child growing and blossoming into a beautiful young woman is laced with oedipal issues.

Before discussing the oedipal conflicts between the Queen and Snow-white it is necessary to recall the myth of Oedipus and its relations to psychoanalytic theory. In Greek mythology Oedipus is a king of Thebes who kills his father and marries his mother (“Oedipus”). Oedipus’ father Laius was told by an oracle that his unborn son would be the death of him, and when his wife gives birth to a son, Laius, frightened by the prophecy and eager to preserve his own life and power, commands a shepherd to leave the child to die of exposure. Much like the hunter in “Little Snow-white,” the shepherd shows mercy and instead of being left to die in the wilderness Oedipus is taken to a king who raises him like a son (Bettelheim 197). As an adult Oedipus meets Laius, they quarrel and Laius is consequently killed by Oedipus who then becomes the king of Thebes and marries his own mother, thereby fulfilling the prophecy. The son has then replaced his father completely, as king and as a husband, winning the complete emotional and physical love of his mother.

Laius’ insistence to avoid the prophecy of the oracle led him to plan the murder of his infant son in order to preserve his own life, and by doing so setting in motion a chain of events that will ultimately fulfil the very prophecy he tries to thwart. The father resolving to murder his son instead of accepting him with the hope to defy the prophecy by giving his son a loving and supportive upbringing, only ends up destroying himself as well as his wife and son, as when they realise what they have done the mother commits suicide and Oedipus blinds himself. There is no happy ending in this myth, not for the parent to blame or the wronged child, but unlike many myths, fairy tales offer hope for the hero, even though the parent “cannot accept his child as such and be satisfied that he will have to be replaced by him eventually” (Bettelheim 198). If this is the case tragedy is ensured, but the final outcome in fairy tales differ from myths in the way that fairy tales more frequently offer a happy ending. Snow-white, for example, lives happily ever after with her prince while her stepmother suffers the consequences of her inability to deal with her oedipal conflicts and dies a horrible death. Freud’s Oedipus complex in psychoanalytic theory is based on the idea that children possess a sexual desire for the parent of the opposite sex, and feel the need to remove the same-sex parent from the picture (Barry 93).

“Little Snow-white” primarily deals with the oedipal conflicts of mother and daughter, mainly the issues the mother struggles with concerning her daughter. In the

Brothers Grimm's version of the fairy tale, Snow-white's widowed father remarries but Snow-white's troubles do not begin until she reaches the age of seven, out of the pre-oedipal stage, nearing the age of adolescence. Only then does the stepmother feel threatened, afraid of Snow-white surpassing her beauty and becoming the main object of the King's affection. In the Grimm's version of the tale the only mention of Snow-white's father is at the very beginning as he takes a new wife, and there is no mention of his and Snow-white's relationship at all. This means that "the oedipal problems – source of the story's conflict – are left to our imagination" (Bettelheim 201) as the Queen and her daughter are competing for the love and affection of a person who is hardly mentioned. In another version of the tale, Snow-white is taken in by a count, travelling with his wife after he wishes for a girl with skin as white as snow, hair as black as ravens, and cheeks as red as blood. He loves the girl instantly and dotes upon her but the jealous wife does not care for a rival to her husband's affection and plots ways to be rid of this new adversary. In this version, the relationship of the father and daughter figures is actually depicted as a loving one and the oedipal desires that pose a threat to the Queen are more obvious. She fears that her husband has more love for the young girl than herself, thus making the underlying motives of her actions and her hate for Snow-white clearer to the reader (Bettelheim 200).

Children can feel jealousy towards their parents' love for one another, and desire to be more loved by them than they love each other. Children are also jealous of their parents' freedom and privileges as adults. The child's own unresolved feelings of jealousy towards his or her parents can be projected in such a way that the child compensates by turning jealous thoughts into the "wishful thought: 'Mother is jealous of me.' The feeling of inferiority is defensively turned into a feeling of superiority" (Bettelheim 204). The adolescent child feels that he or she is better than the ageing mother and father, they do not have to compete with their parents, their parents have to compete with their children (Bettelheim 204). Even though the parents might be superior to their children, they should not try to assure their children of their superiority and dominance, therein undermining the child's sense of security and enforcing competition, benefitting no one. Some parents might respond to this attitude by attempting convince themselves and the child that they are "in all ways as good as their adolescent child: the father who attempts to keep up with the youthful strength and sexual prowess of his son; the mother who tries in looks, dress, and behavior to be as youthfully attractive as her daughter" (Bettelheim 204). The Queen in "Little Snow-

white” is guilty of intense narcissism and her reaction to Snow-white surpassing her leads her to view her relationship with her daughter as a competition to be won. Such competition damages the connection between parent and child and leads to the child resenting the parent, and wishing for independence and to be free from parental supervision.

3. Feminism and the Evil Stepmother

The Queen in “Little Snow-white” is blessed with great beauty and her social status yields her power and influence. She is capable of magic and transforming her appearance enough so that her own stepdaughter does not recognize her. Professors Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar see her as “a plotter, a plot-maker, a schemer, a witch, an artist, an impersonator, a woman of almost infinite creative energy” (38). She truly has the potential for greatness, but her arrogance, jealousy, haughty attitude and evil character bring about her own destruction, and therefore she is her own worst enemy. The Queen’s greatest crime is her all consuming hate for her young stepdaughter, and her willingness to murder in the name of vanity, for she cannot stand the thought of another woman being more beautiful than she. But where does this intense fixation on the importance of physical beauty come from? The reader must wonder how she came to be this way, and why a capable and powerful woman such as herself finds the need to rely on physical appearances for validation. She has so much to offer but as she fixates on her looks, she fails to understand how damning her behaviour towards her stepdaughter is.

Reading Grimm’s “Little Snow-white” from a feminist point of view, leads to an examination of the representation of women in the story. The Queen is praised for her beauty but her pride and haughtiness are listed as faults. Little Snow-white on the other hand is beautiful, kind and innocent, and takes on the role of a housekeeper for the men she seeks shelter with. Snow-white is meek and helpless, while the Queen is controlling and capable, which makes Snow-white the damsel in distress, the worthier female, destined to be saved by a handsome prince. This is ironic since the Queen’s greatest ambition is to be the most beautiful and desirable, presumably to men, but her goal leads her to actions of aggression that render her less attractive. The pressure to look beautiful, put upon her by the patriarchal society she lives in, causes the Queen great emotional troubles which expand into her murderous jealousy. Her happiness is completely dependent on her looking-glass, a magical object which tells her whether she is the most beautiful woman in the land or not. The Queen’s magical looking-glass can be seen as a symbol for the patriarchal society that values women for their appearances and submissive qualities above all else they have to offer. Her goal to gain the mirrors appreciation and validation of her superior beauty consumes her, and little Snow-white suffers for it.

Julia Kristeva's feminist theories suggest that language has two aspects: the symbolic and semiotic, the symbolic aspect being "associated with authority, order, fathers, repression and control," and the "semiotic aspect of discourse is characterised not by logic and order, but by 'displacement, slippage, condensation'" (Barry 123). Snow-white leaves the symbolic world of order in her father's castle and enters the semiotic as she flees into the dark woods and is brought closer to nature. She fears the forest and the creatures that inhabit it but they only run past her and do not harm her. The natural beasts of the wild seem to be at peace with the young girl, which suggests that she is connected to nature. This semiotic experience does not last for long though as Snow-white then finds the house of the dwarfs, who even though they live in a primal setting in the house in the woods, are still of the symbolic. Though they live in the woods, they are seven males that mine the earth for a living, take care of and strive to protect Snow-white, and put her in the traditional role of a housekeeper. They give her strict rules to go by in order to protect her from the evil Queen, and when she fails to follow them she is immobilized and perceived dead. Her body is then put for display and given to a prince who claims it will be his "dearest possession" (Grimm "Little Snow-white"). Snow-white is here literally turned into a decorative object, but waking up to a stranger carrying her off does not bother her, and she is content to marry this prince straight away.

These two women, the innocent Snow-white and the cruel Queen, fit nicely into Gilbert and Gubar's idea of the angel and the monster (17). They found that in 19th century literature, writers mostly depict women in two ways, which Gilbert and Gubar refer to as angels and monsters. The angels are women who possess typical "feminine" values, such as "modesty, gracefulness, purity, delicacy, civility, compliancy, reticence, chastity," as well as "submissiveness" (23), serve men and exist for their pleasure. A woman "should devote herself to the good of others" and "she should do this silently, without calling attention to her exertions" (24). She should be meek and submissive and put the needs of others above her own, and be content with being a secondary character in somebody else's story, only living to serve and oblige. The monster on the other hand is "a kind of antithetical mirror image of an angel" (28). This monster does not comply with the patriarchal requirements made of her. She is not meek and submissive but shows "masculine" characteristics such as aggressiveness, ambition and determination. She acts to improve her own situation and selfishly puts her own needs above others, thus behaving in a "masculine" way. Marina Warner discusses these kind of female

“monsters” in her essay collection *Six Myths of Our Time* (1995), and comes to the conclusion that there is “nowhere else for the story to take them but death” (6) which is eventually the case in the story of Snow-white and the Queen. Snow-white as the angel and the Queen as the monster cannot enjoy a functional, loving mother-daughter relationship, as patriarchy has set the Queen against her stepdaughter.

4. Abandonment and Separation Anxiety

Children in general suffer from very similar basic fears, one great fear being the deeply human fear of loneliness and abandonment. Young children who are completely dependent on their parents or guardians for sustenance and shelter are understandably terrified of the prospect of being torn from their parents and left to fend for themselves. The idea of being lost in the woods, alone and growing hungry is a terrifying one, for adults and children alike, and being deprived of the basic physiological need for food and water is especially grim. The story “Hansel and Gretel” actually deals with the dreadfully real issues of starvation and poverty, as poor and famished parents decide their only hope of survival is to leave their children out in the woods to die of hunger or exposure. As if this subject were not gruesome enough, the children are then faced with a terrible, cannibalistic witch who imprisons them with the intention to feed on them. This emphasis on people’s oral needs is therefore an important motif in the fairy tale so before diving into the subject of “Hansel and Gretel” and the terrors that plague the young siblings, it can be helpful to briefly look at Freud’s major ideas of psychoanalysis.

Freud based his work on the idea of the unconscious, a part of the mind that is hidden from the conscious, thinking part, and later divided the psyche into three parts: the *ego*, which correlates with the consciousness, the *super-ego*, correlating to the conscience, and lastly the *id*, or the unconscious. The Oedipus complex, which was introduced in chapter two, is concerned with the idea of infantile sexuality, and it deals with the child’s inmost desire to “eliminate the father and become the sexual partner of the mother” (Barry 93). Lastly the idea of the libido is divided into three stages; the oral, the anal and the phallic. The libido is “the energy drive associated with sexual desire” (Barry 93) and the oral stage relates to the infant child, whose main stimulant is the mouth, and according to Freud any disturbances in the child’s oral appetite during this developmental phase can result in oral-stage fixation which could reveal itself in neurosis and an obsession with oral satisfaction (Stevenson). Bettelheim’s interpretation of “Hansel and Gretel” is brimming with Freudian ideas, and he notes the siblings’ oral fixation and the way starvation anxiety affects their thinking and behaviour, for instance when Hansel uses the breadcrumbs as a way to find his way back from the woods, while he should know that the birds of the forest will pick them up to eat. His hunger and fear cloud his judgement, and as he seeks solutions to his problems he can only think of

food, and this, as Bettelheim puts it: “shows the limiting effects of fixations to primitive levels of development, engaged in out of fear” (160). Next Bettelheim focuses on the gingerbread house and Hansel and Gretel giving in to these primal infantile cravings as they devour the house, not thinking of the house as a shelter or home, focusing only on satisfying their appetite, lying to the voice who whispers “Who is nibbling at my little house?” (Grimm “Hansel and Gretel”) They are completely blinded by their greed, and their long awaited oral satisfaction blinds them to the imminent danger. The gingerbread house is such a tempting image to the child, and the knowledge of the murderous danger that lurks inside is not enough to scare the child from dreaming of a gingerbread house of its own, as “The house stands for oral greediness and how attractive it is to give in to it,” (Bettelheim 161) but as the story progresses it is clear that such uninhibited greed and gluttony can only lead to fall.

According to Bettelheim, the gingerbread house stands for more than oral greediness and the desire for oral satisfaction. He suggests that it can also “symbolize the body, usually the mother’s” (161). The house from which the children are finally able to feed is therefore a symbol of the mother’s body, a home and safe shelter for the child before it is born, and a source of nourishment from birth until it grows large enough. The house is “the original all-giving mother, whom every child hopes to find again later somewhere out in the world, when his own mother begins to make demands and to impose restrictions” (161). The carelessness and greed the siblings demonstrate while finally able to satisfy their hunger, by devouring this symbolically charged house represents the carelessness of infants suckling at their mother’s breasts, completely dependent and free of care and responsibility. Hansel and Gretel should be worried by the witch’s voice, asking “Who is nibbling at my little house?” but their preoccupation with the dream-like gingerbread house and their certainty that they will finally be all right cloud their judgement. “Carried away by their greediness, and fooled by pleasures of oral satisfaction which seem to deny all previous oral anxiety, the children ‘thought they were in heaven’” (Bettelheim 161), but as it turns out their troubles are just beginning. The idea presented by the gingerbread house and the wicked witch is that children have to give up their oral fixations, greed and destructive cravings or the outer world will force them to do so. The unreal wonders of a gingerbread house and a symbolic emotional return to the mother’s breast serve as a return to infancy, arresting the development of the child. This comforting lie the children construct is then quickly demolished as they are faced with the reality of the witch.

This lie, this dream of safety the children construct, is a way for them to deal with the rejection they experience because of their parents' abandonment. One of Freud's ideas that are very relevant to "Hansel and Gretel" is the one of defence mechanisms; that is the avoidance of distressing or uncomfortable realizations or admissions (Barry 94), as the siblings practise when they decide to return home after having been left in the woods for the first time. The fact that their parents, their primal caregivers, left them out in the woods to starve is not enough for them to try to seek other options, but instead they go right back home and hope to pretend that nothing is wrong, because the truth is far too disturbing for them to deal with it. This disregard of the problems at hand does not solve anything, neither the ignoring of their parents' plans to leave them, nor overlooking the witch's voice while they stuff themselves with gingerbread. The real issue is that Hansel and Gretel's mother betrayed them by sending them out to the forest, and though their father was reluctant he agrees to leave his children to die. As Hansel and Gretel return after having defeated the wicked witch and acquired riches, their mother has died and their father is overjoyed to have his children back. The evil mother figure is a clear motif in this story and it is important to note that while the mother's punishment for leaving her children is death, the children do not blame their father at all for his role in their abandonment. As in the stories of Cinderella and Snow-white, the evil mother figure is the source of all of the hero's problems, while the father is almost completely absent from decision making and absolved of his responsibilities. The father in "Hansel and Gretel" could have fought for his children's safety and showed their cruel mother the door instead of his helpless dependent son and daughter. In the brothers Grimm story, Snow-white's father is hardly mentioned and the reader does not know how he reacts to his daughter's disappearance, and Cinderella's father seems content with his daughter being treated like a slave.

In H.C. Andersen's tragic story "The Little Match Girl" on the other hand, the father is not presented as blameless, and the young reader or listener of the story is faced with abandonment and devastation on a painfully realistic level. Andersen begins the tale by painting an incredibly bleak picture of a young girl, out in the cold and darkness: "Most terribly cold it was; it snowed, and was nearly quite dark, and evening - the last evening of the year. In this cold and darkness there went along the street a poor little girl, bareheaded, and with naked feet" (Andersen). In these two sentences the mood has been set and three things children fear greatly have been imposed upon the young match girl: darkness, cold and being alone. The situation does not improve for

the poor young girl. The reader finds out that she is afraid to go home to her abusive father since she has lost her shoe and has not been able to sell any matches that day, and huddled for warmth she lights the matches one after another until she freezes to death, leaning against a house wall. This is a terrible reality to some and a story most parents would perhaps want to protect their children from, since it is so tragic. Instead of the happy ending of “Hansel and Gretel,” “The Little Match Girl” offers only the grim image of a young girl in bare feet, freezing to death on New Year’s Eve as people in the houses around her feast and celebrate with families and friends (Andersen). In the eyes of an adult, there is no magic, only death, cold and the comforting delusions of a dying child. Her visions of others enjoying the evening in a way she is unable to, only deepen the feeling of abandonment and hopelessness, and while the poignant apparition of her loving grandmother is heart warming, it cannot redeem the hardships the young girl faced in life. The precious life lost is a tragedy, and an illusion of happiness in death is not sufficient compensation for her struggles.

How does a child deal with this story? Does he or she find the ending satisfactory since the little girl gets to see her grandmother again in death? The child is most likely frightened by death, having not established a finite idea about it and therefore could be comforted by the happiness death brought to this little girl who had so little in life, as the narrator explains: “No one had the slightest suspicion of what beautiful things she had seen; no one even dreamed of the splendour in which, with her grandmother she had entered on the joys of a new year” (Andersen). Ultimately, the fact that a child should freeze to death out of fear of her father is terrible and depressing, as parents should protect their children and make them feel safe and loved. The little girl has only felt truly loved by her grandmother, and after she sees these beautiful magical pictures of Christmas trees and feasts, she is finally reunited with her loving grandmother, and in the end they are both blissful in heaven with God. A child would take this ending literally, and be consoled by the fact that the poor match girl is finally safe and happy with her grandmother, but an adult might focus instead on the events that led her to this place in life and social problems needing reform. This tale serves as a reminder to children that the world can be a cruel place in which many innocent people are unjustly treated and unjustly suffer, a fact that some parents would like to spare their children from hearing about, but by doing so they would be doing more harm than good. Max Lüthi has this to say about cruelty and suffering in children’s tales:

Games and fairytales strengthen and exercise the child's ability to set values, precisely as a result of the process of abstracting in black and white. He will learn later to distinguish between person and value; the early experiences with games and fairytales will not prevent the realization that one should not view an adversary as the representation of evil. Psychologists and psychiatrists consider a fantasy-level confrontation with dangers to be necessary. "Children who have not been exposed to fairytales are unprepared for the cruelty in life when they encounter it." This statement of psychiatrist Graf Wittgenstein seems too absolute to me, too exclusionary – there are other possibilities of preparation than the fairytale – but it shows that an important positive role can be attributed even to the cruelty in the fairytale. (*The Fairy Tale as an Art Form and Portrait of Man* 154)

This point of view, children benefiting from being subject to frightening situations and acts of cruelty in fairy tales, is shared by many, though Wittgenstein's proclamation might be an unnecessarily generalization. Surely children receive preparation for the trials of life from things besides bedtime stories, but the influence of these stories is indeed considerable. Children, being small and dependent on their guardians, having limited powers of action, and often feeling unimportant in the grand scheme of things, are comforted by reading these stories about other small, often disadvantaged children not only surviving the ordeals life throws at them but triumphing over their enemies. The abandonment felt by Hansel and Gretel as their parents leave them to die, and the doubt and terror they suffer when faced with a cannibalistic witch is overwhelming, but eventually they overcome these obstacles and emerge victorious. They return to their more trustworthy parent, but more importantly face their fear of abandonment and defeat the horrors they oppose. In comparison, the tragic tale of the "Little Match Girl" presents adversity too powerful to cope with: complete lack of parental guidance and care, loneliness, darkness and ultimately the cold hard elements that become the death of her. There is no magical solution for her problems, no fairy godmothers or talking animals come to her rescue, she simply dies. In death however, she is finally given the love and care she so sorely lacked, and so the message of the story gives children the hope that the downtrodden will find solace, in death if not in life. It also serves as a bleak reminder of the unfair suffering of innocents that takes place each day, and to urges the hearers to be kind to the unfortunate ones they meet along the way.

5. The Fall from Paradise

“The Little Match Girl” is laced with Christian undertones and very clearly states that because of God, the young girl will find the happiness in death she was deprived of in her life. The parents that failed her are replaced by her grandmother’s spirit and together they are safe in heaven, as “above was neither cold, nor hunger, nor anxiety-- they were with God” (Andersen). Many fairy tales are influenced by religion or send a religious message, as for example Grimm’s “Cinderella” when Cinderella’s dying mother tells her daughter: “Dear child, be good and pious, and then the good God will always protect thee, and I will look down on thee from heaven and be near thee” (Grimm “Cinderella”). Characteristics of the relationships of parents and children in fairy tales can also be attributed to the relationship of God and his children, the entirety of mankind, and when examining the common fears of abandonment and separation anxiety in fairy tales, the story of the first separation of father and his children comes to mind: Adam and Eve being forced to leave Paradise.

According to the Christian myth of creation God the father creates everything from the deepest oceans to the sun and stars and the animals that roam the earth, including man and woman in his own image (Fairchild). Adam and Eve end up disobeying their father, being tempted by the devil to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, and God’s punishment for them is to exile them from the lush and plentiful Paradise garden “to till the ground from which [they were] taken” (“Genesis”). This ultimate failure of Adam and Eve to do as their father bid them has dire consequences, but at the cost of being shunned they gain the power of knowledge of the difference of good and evil, and therefore move a step closer to God’s wisdom. For many Christian sects the original sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge is considered to have brought sin onto the entire mankind, so no one can reach heaven without living his life according to God’s rules, and even newborn children who died before being baptised were thought to be subject to dwelling in Limbo, a Latin word meaning boundary or edge, referring to the edge of Hell. One of Grimm’s fairy tales, “The Seven Ravens,” touches on the subject of disappointing the father and being shunned by him, as well as acknowledging the importance of baptism. A father sends his seven sons to fetch water for the baptism of their sickly and weak newborn sister, but in their eagerness to fill the container they drop it into the well. The fall of the jug into the well marks a turning point in the boys’ lives as their father, anxious and terribly afraid for the soul of his infant daughter,

becomes increasingly frustrated by their lateness, and convinced they are simply goofing around, cries out “I wish that the youngsters were all turned into ravens” (Grimm “The Seven Ravens” 107). This wish then comes true and the boys fly away, not to be seen by their family for years to come. They are exiled from home until their sister finds out about their plight, and heads out to find them. She proves to be strong, brave and empathetic, as she finds great love in her heart for the seven brothers she never knew she had, and her compassion and worry for her lost brothers encourage her to head out on her dangerous journey. A reader might see the sister as a Christ figure, leaving home to save her brothers and bring them back to their forgiving father, as Christ was sent to earth to exonerate mankind, and her journey would then be symbolic for the life of Christ, sent to guide the mortals of this world towards the right path to God. While the sister is a representation of Christ, her father represents God sending the misbehaving Adam and Eve from Paradise, as he curses his own sons, albeit unintentionally, and sends them to exile. The seven brothers scorned by their father are then representative of Adam and Eve, as well as the rest of humankind, separated from their heavenly father and exiled from Paradise until the coming of the Son of God, willing to die for man’s sins. As Christ is willing to sacrifice himself for mankind, the sister is willing to risk her young life for the faint hope of finding her brothers, as her journey takes her to “the end of the world,” and brings her face to face with many dangers.

The father in “The Seven Ravens” regrets his angry outburst that loses him his sons, and God eventually decides that mankind is worth redeeming. God’s banishment is not accidental though, as his children disobey him and as a result are aware of their nakedness. The fruit of the Tree of Knowledge opens their eyes to that which their Father did not want them to see, and because of their newfound awareness, they have to leave. God cannot stand Adam and Eve having eaten of the Tree of Knowledge, since they have gained powers of understanding like those of God’s. He proclaims: “Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil” (“Genesis”), and instead of being content that his offspring is maturing and learning, his reaction is to renounce them. This puts God on level with the wicked Queen of “Little Snow-white” and this comparison touches on a very real notion that many parents struggle with, that is feelings of spite and envy towards their children.

Fairy tales such as “Little Snow-white” present this possibility of resenting your own children for their youth, vigour and limitless potential. As young children look up

to the adults of the world wishing they could be in their position of power and independence, free from oppressive and limiting guardians, the adults who have had experience with the world often feel nostalgic and wishful to return to their own childhood, free of the responsibilities of caring for a household and family. Nostalgia and appreciation of childhood are not taboo subjects, but parents who realise they are experiencing feelings of resentment and jealousy towards their children will feel guilty. Selfish and vindictive behaviour does not go unnoticed by the child, and parents who allow feelings of bitterness and jealousy to affect the bond with their child will cause damage to the relationship that might be irrevocable. The father in “The Seven Ravens” regrets his momentary burst of worried anger and is forgiven, but the parental fairy tale villains who act on their underlying resentment and show no remorse are punished, as the wicked Queen who is forced to dance in red hot iron slippers until she falls down dead, as well as the uncaring and cold-blooded mother in “Hansel and Gretel” who is dead as Hansel and Gretel return home. Evil will not prevail, and it must be made to answer for its crimes.

Conclusion

Fairy tales are indeed more than simple stories told to entertain children or lull them to sleep at night. The classic tales have been passed from generation to generation waking fear and excitement in children of all ages. If a child is haunted by insecurities and self-doubt he or she can find solace in tales of other small children who suffer worse fate, but still manage to emerge victorious, and it is especially inspirational for children to read stories of sympathetic child heroes who triumph against all odds. Should the listeners fear losing their parents and standing on their own, there are fairy tales that assure them that children are capable of taking care of themselves if their mother and father are not able to, such as in the story of "Hansel and Gretel." The relationships between parents and children represented in fairy tales often display exaggerated examples of real conflicts that aggravate or alarm children and parents alike, and the representation of parents or parental figures as the villains of the piece is interestingly used as a coping mechanism by children who deal with issues such as separation anxiety or a fear of growing up. Fairy tale heroes such as Hansel and Gretel and Little Snow-white, whose parental figures turn against them, survive the hardships they face and walk away more secure than before. The motif of a shunned child is also a prominent one in mythology, and the Fall of Man in Christian mythology can be taken as the ultimate example. The fairy tales told to children to entertain or lull to sleep are certainly many layered, the messages conveyed vary in their emotional depth and impact, but the exploration of the relationships of parents and children is undoubtedly truly important to the readers and the listeners of the stories.

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