

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 meaning.^{9*}

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.¹¹

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.¹²

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 supernatural 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.

“THE THREE LITTLE PIGS”

PLEASURE PRINCIPLE VERSUS REALITY PRINCIPLE

The myth of Hercules deals with the choice between following the pleasure principle or the reality principle in life. So, likewise, does the fairy story of “The Three Little Pigs.”¹³

Stories like “The Three Little Pigs” are much favored by children over all “realistic” tales, particularly if they are presented with feeling by the storyteller. Children are enraptured when the huffing and puffing of the wolf at the pig's door is acted out for them. “The Three Little Pigs” teaches the nursery-age child in a most enjoyable and

dramatic form that we must not be lazy and take things easy, for if we do, we may perish. Intelligent planning and foresight combined with hard labor will make us victorious over even our most ferocious enemy—the wolf! The story also shows the advantages of growing up, since the third and wisest pig is usually depicted as the biggest and oldest.

The houses the three pigs build are symbolic of man's progress in history: from a lean-to shack to a wooden house, finally to a house of solid brick. Internally, the pigs' actions show progress from the id-dominated personality to the superego-influenced but essentially ego-controlled personality.

The littlest pig builds his house with the least care out of straw; the second uses sticks; both throw their shelters together as quickly and effortlessly as they can, so they can play for the rest of the day. Living in accordance with the pleasure principle, the younger pigs seek immediate gratification, without a thought for the future and the dangers of reality, although the middle pig shows some growth in trying to build a somewhat more substantial house than the youngest.

Only the third and oldest pig has learned to behave in accordance with the reality principle: he is able to postpone his desire to play, and instead acts in line with his ability to foresee what may happen in the future. He is even able to predict correctly the behavior of the wolf—the enemy, or stranger within, which tries to seduce and trap us; and therefore the third pig is able to defeat powers both stronger and more ferocious than he is. The wild and destructive wolf stands for all asocial, unconscious, devouring powers against which one must learn to protect oneself, and which one can defeat through the strength of one's ego.

"The Three Little Pigs" makes a much greater impression on children than Aesop's parallel but overtly moralistic fable of "The Ant and the Grasshopper." In this fable a grasshopper, starving in winter, begs an ant to give it some of the food which the ant had busily collected all summer. The ant asks what the grasshopper was doing during the summer. Learning that the grasshopper sang and did not work, the ant rejects his plea by saying, "Since you could sing all summer, you may dance all winter."

This ending is typical for fables, which are also folk tales handed down from generation to generation. "A fable seems to be, in its genuine state, a narrative in which beings irrational, and sometimes inanimate, are, for the purpose of moral instruction, feigned to act and speak with human interests and passions" (Samuel Johnson). Often sanctimonious, sometimes amusing, the fable always explicitly states

a moral truth; there is no hidden meaning, nothing is left to our imagination.

The fairy tale, in contrast, leaves all decisions up to us, including whether we wish to make any at all. It is up to us whether we wish to make any application to our life from a fairy tale, or simply enjoy the fantastic events it tells about. Our enjoyment is what induces us to respond in our own good time to the hidden meanings, as they may relate to our life experience and present state of personal development.

A comparison of "The Three Little Pigs" with "The Ant and the Grasshopper" accentuates the difference between a fairy tale and a fable. The grasshopper, much like the little pigs and the child himself, is bent on playing, with little concern for the future. In both stories the child identifies with the animals (although only a hypocritical prig can identify with the nasty ant, and only a mentally sick child with the wolf); but after having identified with the grasshopper, there is no hope left for the child, according to the fable. For the grasshopper beholden to the pleasure principle, nothing but doom awaits; it is an "either/or" situation, where having made a choice once settles things forever.

But identification with the little pigs of the fairy tale teaches that there are developments—possibilities of progress from the pleasure principle to the reality principle, which, after all, is nothing but a modification of the former. The story of the three pigs suggests a transformation in which much pleasure is retained, because now satisfaction is sought with true respect for the demands of reality. The clever and playful third pig outwits the wolf several times: first, when the wolf tries three times to lure the pig away from the safety of home by appealing to his oral greed, proposing expeditions to where the two would get delicious food. The wolf tries to tempt the pig with turnips which may be stolen, then with apples, and finally with a visit to a fair.

Only after these efforts have come to naught does the wolf move in for the kill. But he has to enter the pig's house to get him, and once more the pig wins out, for the wolf falls down the chimney into the boiling water and ends up as cooked meat for the pig. Retributive justice is done: the wolf, which has devoured the other two pigs and wished to devour the third, ends up as food for the pig.

The child, who throughout the story has been invited to identify with one of its protagonists, is not only given hope, but is told that through developing his intelligence he can be victorious over even a much stronger opponent.

Since according to the primitive (and a child's) sense of justice only

those who have done something really bad get destroyed, the fable seems to teach that it is wrong to enjoy life when it is good, as in summer. Even worse, the ant in this fable is a nasty animal, without any compassion for the suffering of the grasshopper—and this is the figure the child is asked to take for his example.

The wolf, on the contrary, is obviously a bad animal, because it wants to destroy. The wolf's badness is something the young child recognizes within himself: his wish to devour, and its consequence—the anxiety about possibly suffering such a fate himself. So the wolf is an externalization, a projection of the child's badness—and the story tells how this can be dealt with constructively.

The various excursions in which the oldest pig gets food in good ways are an easily neglected but significant part of the story, because they show that there is a world of difference between eating and devouring. The child subconsciously understands it as the difference between the pleasure principle uncontrolled, when one wants to devour all at once, ignoring the consequences, and the reality principle, in line with which one goes about intelligently foraging for food. The mature pig gets up in good time to bring the goodies home before the wolf appears on the scene. What better demonstration of the value of acting on the basis of the reality principle, and what it consists of, than the pig's rising very early in the morning to secure the delicious food and, in so doing, foiling the wolf's evil designs?

In fairy tales it is typically the youngest child who, although at first thought little of or scorned, turns out to be victorious in the end. "The Three Little Pigs" deviates from this pattern, since it is the oldest pig who is superior to the two little pigs all along. An explanation can be found in the fact that all three pigs are "little," thus immature, as is the child himself. The child identifies with each of them in turn and recognizes the progression of identity. "The Three Little Pigs" is a fairy tale because of its happy ending, and because the wolf gets what he deserves.

While the child's sense of justice is offended by the poor grasshopper having to starve although it did nothing bad, his feeling of fairness is satisfied by the punishment of the wolf. Since the three little pigs represent stages in the development of man, the disappearance of the first two little pigs is not traumatic; the child understands subconsciously that we have to shed earlier forms of existence if we wish to move on to higher ones. In talking to young children about "The Three Little Pigs," one encounters only rejoicing about the deserved punishment of the wolf and the clever victory of the oldest pig—not

grief over the fate of the two little ones. Even a young child seems to understand that all three are really one and the same in different stages—which is suggested by their answering the wolf in exactly the same words: “No, no, not by the hair of my chinni-chin-chin!” If we survive in only the higher form of our identity, this is as it should be.

“The Three Little Pigs” directs the child’s thinking about his own development without ever telling what it ought to be, permitting the child to draw his own conclusions. This process alone makes for true maturing, while telling the child what to do just replaces the bondage of his own immaturity with a bondage of servitude to the dicta of adults.

THE CHILD’S NEED FOR MAGIC

Myths and fairy stories both answer the eternal questions: What is the world really like? How am I to live my life in it? How can I truly be myself? The answers given by myths are definite, while the fairy tale is suggestive; its messages may imply solutions, but it never spells them out. Fairy tales leave to the child’s fantasizing whether and how to apply to himself what the story reveals about life and human nature.

The fairy tale proceeds in a manner which conforms to the way a child thinks and experiences the world; this is why the fairy tale is so convincing to him. He can gain much better solace from a fairy tale than he can from an effort to comfort him based on adult reasoning and viewpoints. A child trusts what the fairy story tells, because its world view accords with his own.

Whatever our age, only a story conforming to the principles underlying our thought processes carries conviction for us. If this is so for adults, who have learned to accept that there is more than one frame of reference for comprehending the world—although we find it difficult if not impossible truly to think in any but our own—it is exclusively true for the child. His thinking is animistic.

Like all preliterate and many literate people, “the child assumes that his relations to the inanimate world are of one pattern with those to the animate world of people: he fondles as he would his mother the