

# The Uses of Fairy Tales in Psychotherapy

Bette U. Kiernan, MFT

An exploration of fairy tales has special value for psychotherapy: Psychoanalysts such as Sigmund Freud, Otto Rank, and Carl Jung among others looked to fairy tales and myths to represent of the anatomy of the psyche. The deep truths embodied in fairy tales, which depict complex developmental processes and group dynamics, and afford the means for transforming the pain of psychological wounding into creativity, continue to offer much to the steadily expanding field of psychotherapy. Their very brevity, and arresting themes, and imaginative treatment of significant events allow them to be interpreted, reinterpreted, and expanded upon in an infinite number of ways to allow individuals to comprehend their environment and their personal difficulties and to construct guides to action through enhanced knowledge.

Close scrutiny of the patterns in fairy tales from such contemporary psychological perspectives as family systems, object relations, and cognitive frameworks can yield new insights. As Joseph Campbell stated, “The folk tale is the primer of the picture of the soul”. An understanding of the dynamics represented in the journey of the fairy tale heroine or hero that typically lead them from misery to their highest realization may reveal means for helping clients in their psychotherapy.

Stories are important in our lives. We gain a sense of who we are through narratives, the telling of stories to ourselves and others about what has happened to us. We form our identities through integrating our personal family histories with the legends of our culture. However, when our stories become habitually sad, rigid and repetitive, they may become the subject matter of the therapy hour.

Because fairy tales and myths follow the heroine or hero as they go through periods of darkness to transformation, these classic stories may be said to encode patterns that enable the restoration of vibrant functioning. Like the fairy tale protagonist, psychotherapy clients often begin a journey from a black mood of depression or personal crisis, onto a new path. Ultimately, through encounters with significant others and confrontation of challenging circumstances, both protagonist and therapy client may be led to higher development.

The path of the fairy tale hero or heroine has much in common with the ritual process of psychotherapy: Therapist and client tell and retell, interpret and reinterpret the story of the client. Both clients and heroes have typically had

difficulties in the family of origin: they have often suffered child abuse, shame and humiliation, parental rejection and /or abandonment. In place of a nurturing caretaker they must live with a tormentor or tormentors, such as Cinderella's wicked stepmother and evil stepsisters, or Snow White's cruel stepmother who plots to murder the beautiful girl in order to end the competition the girl's beauty poses to her fading beauty. Chance may also contribute to the woes of the protagonist. For example, in *The Girl Without Hands*, the father unwittingly makes a pact with the devil that ends in the sacrifice of his daughter's hands. In this story, the father dwells in poverty: his poorness can be viewed as a metaphor for a lack of emotional strength that can lead an actual father or mother to abuse a daughter or son. If a child is perceived by a parent as a potential resource to satiate his or her own unmet needs, then that child's development, like the hands in the story, may be sacrificed in the service of parental deficiency. Psychological wounding, such as symbolically expressed by the father in the fairy tale who destroyed his daughter's hands, is often at the core of psychotherapeutic treatment.

Both client and hero often encounter a nurturing other: For the fairy tale protagonist this may be a fairy godmother or other helping spirit; for the therapy client, it is the therapist, who becomes instrumental in a process of change. Client and hero enter a sad dark realm: for the hero or heroine, this is a dark forest that may be peopled by monsters and filled with dangerous obstacles to be overcome; their experience provides both an image and metaphor for disturbing emotions such as despair, depression, rage and anxiety. An individual in psychological pain, who is encouraged to identify with the fairy tale protagonist's mastery of the terrifying forest experience, may perceive possibilities for surviving his or her own inner turmoil.

In real life, dehumanization has murdered the souls of countless individuals, who live tormented lives. A disturbing family seems to cast a spell upon its members. Therefore, a deeper understanding of the of the journey of the hero or heroine, wherein they are shown as resilient in transforming the pain of abuse into creative action thus eventually thriving, may illuminate new pathways out of anguish to healing for those still suffering the pain of abuse.

Heroines are never ultimately done in by the abuse. The more Cinderella, Snow White, and Hansel and Gretel are victimized by powerful cruel others, the more sympathy they elicit. By encouraging clients who have been abused to identify with fairy tale heroines, the therapist may help them to attain empathy and compassion for themselves.

Spiritual growth is at the heart of every fairy tale: As the protagonist leaves the disturbing influence of the original family to enter the unknown forest and to face and eventually conquer difficult challenges, he or she is led to

develop her highest potential. During periods of suffering at levels deeper than the pain, lies a possibility that something sacred within may eventually emerge. Through the combination of fairy tales with psychotherapy, new sources of strength may surge from one's existential knowledge: Though life may be unfair and unjust, suffering is eased by an awareness that one is not alone. Hope is curative, and fairy tales especially have the power instill hope by the means of their happy story ending. According to Joseph Campbell, "Perhaps some of us have to go through dark and devious ways before we can find the river of peace or the high road to the soul's destination."

The symbolic figures and imagery in fairy tales such as the cruel stepmother, loving fairy godmother, winter darkness, or lost-in-the-forest, mirrors disturbing inner emotional states. As the protagonist overcomes trials in differing situations, an individual in psychotherapy is shown the ways to deal with his or her upsetting affects. For example, Hansel and Gretel leave a trail of breadcrumbs to mark their way, and trick the witch into not eating them, offering proof of sorts that strategic action serves to assure that one does not get overwhelmed by emotional upsets. For many psychotherapy patients, it is important to learn to comfort and soothe or to discover metaphorically their own inner "godmother" or "helpful animals" to transform emotional pain into growth. If a connection to these common symbols that can be perceived as representing possibilities for self care, then psychological improvement can follow. The discovery of an "inner prince" or "fairy godmother" that likewise, can rescue one can empower an individual at the deepest levels.

Redemption becomes possible because of an individual's courage to leave the known world of a difficult family and to face inner pain as symbolized by the forest, in order to eventually discover more nurturing circumstances. A full encounter with one's emotions is frequently associated with recovery. Adrian, a twenty-five year old biologist had been reared in a home wherein emotional abuse from her mother was commonplace. She identified with the heroine in *Ender's Game*, a novel in which the youngest child in a family is chosen to save the world from destruction. Ultimately, the story hero creates a different home entirely. This tale provided the map for Adrian as she ultimately left the original family that had seemed to threaten her with destruction, and chose to live her life with a religious identity radically different from that of her original family. The compassion and support she experienced within that new culture provided her with an experience that seemed to her to compensate for the lacks she had felt from early childhood.

Frequently in fairy tales, a curse leads to a transformation, like that which befell the Beast in *Beauty and the Beast*, or the frog in *The Golden Ball*. Family therapists speak of the "family projection process," wherein the shadow sides of the entire family group are placed upon the scapegoated member or "identified patient". Clients who have been reared in disturbing

families often experience themselves as “bewitched” or as having had a “spell” cast upon them. When they establish a connection, or identification, with those fairy tale characters whose form has been symbolically changed from its original state into a despised outer appearance, but eventually becomes restored, they may experience a rebirth of hope. Stories of transmutation may further suggest, and hence reassure, that the family’s powerfully perverse spellbinding effects were superficial, and that the deeper, more significant and enduring personal qualities of the self remained intact.

The cognitive studies of contemporary psychological researchers, such as Albert Bandura at Stanford University, corroborate that when individuals approach difficult circumstances as challenges that can be mastered, their resilience is strengthened. Similarly, classic stories teach one not to shy away from difficult personal challenges and that it is through meeting them head-on that one grows emotionally and spiritually. A spirit of triumph and optimism runs through those stories that carry a positive frame of reference. For clients beset by inner turmoil, the fairy tale heroine or hero model one who struggles, yet eventually succeeds. As they meet each challenging task, their resilience grows into a core strength, for which they eventually become richly rewarded.

Psychological healing is often associated with the mastery of positive cognitive re-frames of disturbing situations. Fairy tales, with their powerful imagery of the protagonist as she overcomes destructive forces through creative action, lend themselves easily to the creation of new stories about the defeat of depression and anxiety. As the protagonists survive the dark forest and its attendant perils, destroy the witch or wicked stepmother, their resilience strengthens. The hero or heroine model one who struggles yet eventually succeeds by taking potent action, and by their example may stimulate others to do the same.

Weak and vulnerable, they eventually become powerful and strong, so clients can be reminded that painful periods are often fleeting. Fairy tales mirror natural processes of all kinds, and depict life as dynamic process that constantly moves between the opposites of darkness and light, summer and winter, weakness and strength, and poverty and wealth. By encouraging clients to accept one’s place within the naturally fluctuating universe, one is reminded that painful periods usually do not last, and that change for the better is likely to follow. Seasons, such as winter can both be “outside” and in the heart as well.

This deeper knowing was addressed by the Irish poet and playwright Padraic Colum, born 1881-1972, who wrote children’s stories based on folklore, “We have another past besides the past that history tells us about, a past which is

in us, in individuals, more livingly than the recorded past. It is a past in which men slowly arrived at self consciousness, while building up the community, the arts and the laws. Today we have advanced poets and novelists who are trying to find means to suggest the unrecorded past in our memories and in our attitudes and so give their work another dimension. Well, it is this long past, the past that merges with the time when men were comrades with the animals and personalized the powers of nature that comes to us in these and in other traditional stories. With it certain things are restored to our imagination. Wilhelm Grimm who knew much more about the inwardness of these stories than the philologists and the historians of culture who were to comment on them was aware of “fragments of belief dating back to most ancient times, in which spiritual things are expressed in a figurative manner.” The “mythic element” he told us “resembles small pieces of a shattered jewel which are lying strewn on the ground all overgrown with grass and flowers, and can only be discovered by the most far-seeing eye”. “Their significations has long been lost, but it is still felt” he says, “and imparts value to the story”.

The use of fairy tales as positive cognitive reframes may enable clients to view difficult life periods as prerequisites for the development of personal strength that may ultimately lead to great success. Thus, clients can establish expectations for positive changes. In classic stories, heroes and heroines embody the truth of the capacity for psychological wounds to heal. Life is unfair and unjust, yet compassion toward others may lead to escape from pain, and knowledge that others share this human condition is comforting. Contrast the beginning of the story of *The Ugly Duckling*, wherein “The ducks bit him, the hens pecked him, and the girl who fed him kicked him aside”....” Even his mother said I wish to goodness you were miles away” with the ending when “He thought of how he had been pursued and scorned, and now heard them say he was the most beautiful of all beautiful birds”.

The fairy story reveals the heroine as a model who calls upon using inner resources to solve problems. According to Carl Jung, we have a favorite story that goes with us throughout life. By connecting clients to their cherished early stories, the therapist can highlight the means for coping and problem-solving and suggest to one still struggling that she too can discover solutions to problems. Thus the stories serve as important reminders that can enable one to find inner resources beyond conscious awareness even when one is overwhelmed by states of anxiety or depression.

Readers of fairy tales can weave every day personal events intertwining their own inner processes to give more understandable forms to previously inexpressible painful emotions through the imagery of witches, cruel elder

brothers, and stepmothers. As the fairy tale heroine or hero escapes or defeats threatening destructive forces, they provide powerful images that can help point those still suffering towards transcendence. For example, in Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Match-Seller*, a poor child wanders the streets in freezing cold and darkness. "She did not dare to go home; for she had not sold any matches and had not earned a single penny. Her father would beat her and besides it was almost as cold at home as it was here". Lighting her unsold matches at Christmas time to warm herself, she has fantastic visions of herself as she is warmly nurtured in a warm dwelling enjoying a roast goose feast under a lovely Christmas tree whose candles are transformed into shining stars flying heavenward and the child interprets the star flying down to earth as the sign of someone dying, of a soul going up to God. Striking her last matches, she has a vision of her dead grandmother who takes the little girl in her arms and they fly, "in joy and splendor" to be with God. "Nobody knew what beautiful visions she had seen, nor in what halo she had entered upon the glories of the New Year". This tale considered by many to be a sad tale of want and death, also shows that old, painful patterns of living can die, so that more fruitful new ways of living can come into being.

During the process of therapy, the client encounters aspects of the self that were kept from conscious awareness. Sometimes these take the form of deep sadness, or rage. But as these parts of the self become known and assimilated into the personality, clients often discover new energies within that subsequently enable them to create new ways of living that bring new meaning. When clients are encouraged to consider the characters from their favorite fairy tales, such as the witch or fool as aspects of themselves, then the personality integration that is associated with psychological healing is encouraged.

Although the fairy tales take us into an imaginary realm, the world of reality is interconnected. In the same way that the dream world is intricately related to our waking lives, the fairy tale also gives expression to the unconscious by manifesting the contents through symbolic imagery. Through acceptance that within lies a possibility to be the vengeful stepmother, conniving dwarf, all loving godmother, sage or hero, comfort with the innate limitations of human nature expands. Frequently those who suffer anxiety and depression have unrealistically high expectations of themselves. And when they fail to live up these impossible standards, they punish themselves with harsh self criticism. Fairy tales teach acceptance of the "suchness" of life, that is, that there are many positive and negative possibilities within each individual and that all contribute to an integrated whole.

For example, a young father, a successful scientist was brain damaged in a fall. The traumatized client, stressed and depressed over the loss of mental acuity, was able to find renewed energy and hope for his future through recall of his favorite childhood story, Richard Adam's poetic novel, Watership Down. The pattern for his adaptation to extreme stress was already within him, accessible through identification with his special story.

In this lyrical tale, a group of rabbits leave their home, Sandleford Warren, at the urging of a young rabbit with the gift of clairvoyance, who foresees the destruction of their fragile dwelling place, which is soon to be destroyed by humans bent on urban development. The rabbits triumph in the face of extraordinary adversity and create a new warren. Ultimately, Hazel, their leader, is summoned by a stranger, Death, and together they slip away from the warren. At that moment, to quote from the novel's conclusion, "It seemed to Hazel that he would not be needing his body anymore, so he left it lying on the edge of the ditch, but stopped for a moment to watch his rabbits and to try to get used to the extraordinary feeling that strength and speed were flowing inexhaustibly out of him into their sleek young bodies and healthy senses". This story provided a powerful analogy for the client to use for he, too, had been suddenly forced from his known world into a strange new place that required great adaptation. His recall of the story enabled him to access his own resilient self, leading ultimately to his successful coping with his own changed environment.

Many individuals make great efforts to contain the emotional pain that manifests in relationship difficulties, eating disorders, alcoholism, drug abuse, sexual addictions and self-destructive behaviors of all kinds. Often the roots of these problems stem from within the early family experiences. The common denominator for these disorders is that they enable the individual to numb the underlying painful feelings. A better understanding of the characteristic dynamics found in fairy tales, wherein the protagonist is initially treated poorly in the family, yet ultimately finds redemption, may point directions to happier endings for those still suffering from the damaging effects of child abuse.

Upon closer examination of the fairy tale protagonist's path, we find that commonplace events befalling him or her may be instrumental in the creation of the eventual happy ending. As the heroine leaves home, she discovers more nurturing others that mediate the influence of the disturbing original family. Cinderella encounters the fairy Godmother, and Snow White finds the dwarves. From a psychodynamic perspective, the harsh introjects formed from the poor treatment she received in the family, are given a chance to transform through the compassionate responses of more nurturing others.

This is the same process that occurs in therapy: As the therapist responds with empathy, the patient learns to respond more kindly to herself.

As Joseph Campbell stated, “The tale survives....not simply as a quaint relic of days childlike in belief. The world of magic is symptomatic of fevers deeply burning in the psyche-permanent presences, desires, fears, ideals, potentialities, that have glowed in the nerves, hummed in the blood, and baffled the senses, since the beginning. The one psyche is operative in both the figments of this vision-made world and the deeds of human life. In some manner, then, the latter must stand prefigured in the former. History is the promise of *Marchen* realized through and against the obstacles of space and time. Playful and unpretentious as the archetypes of fairy tales appear to be, they are the heroes and villains who have built the world for us....all are working in order that the specifications of effective fantasy, the permanent patterns of the tale of wonder, shall be clothed in flesh and known as life”.

Many anecdotal stories have linked contact with nature with spontaneous healing from illnesses of all kinds. Time spent in nature, in solitude, has been identified as a prime factor in healing. Many European fairy tales especially emphasize the vital importance of nature to the transformational process. The setting of fairy tale stories is often within a dark forest. Perhaps intense encounter with the outer natural world, which symbolizes the place wherein inner darkness is confronted and worked through, plays the curative role. Hans Christian Anderson described the heroine’s forest experience in *The Wild Swans*, “She walked on into the thickest part of the forest. It was so quiet that she heard her own footsteps. She heard every little withered leaf which bent under her feet. Not a bird was to be seen. Not a ray of sunlight pierced the leafy branches, and the tall trunks were so close together that when she looked before her it seemed as if a thick fence of heavy beams hemmed her in on every side, The solitude was such as she had never known before”.

In cultures throughout the world that rely upon shamanic healing practices, the shaman is according by some scholars, a wounded individual restored to health through solitude, withdrawal, and experience with the natural world. These scholars view the shaman as an injured individual, who through contact with nature can transform to hold a role of power within his social group. Individuals in need of guidance and reassurance during a period of physical or emotional pain may identify with the shamanic healer and awaken to a realization that a more meaningful life can result from confrontation with the dark forces of illness, a sorting out of the good from the bad that may lead to the mastery of personal hardship. The common denominator that yields special skill development for both shaman and fairy tale protagonists is the prerequisite solitary time spent in nature. Therefore,



if one may extrapolate from this knowledge of apparent benefit to be found within pristine settings to clinical psychotherapy practice, then encouraging clients to spend time alone in nature might be an additional useful approach.

Our bodies mirror the same processes found in all of nature. Since fairy tales and myths frequently show the heroine as she goes through periods of darkness to transformation, classic stories may encode patterns for healthy physical function. We deeply know these means of change through the cycles of sleep and wakefulness, digestion, wound healing, menstruation, pregnancy and birth.

Thus an exploration of fairy tales may also be of special value for cancer patients and others with physical illnesses. Disease prognosis improves when patients respond to the illness with positive visualizations and spiritual growth. Since fairy tales contain powerful imagery of the heroine as she overcomes destructive forces through creative action, they lend themselves to the creation of new stories about the defeat of cancer. As the heroine destroys the witch or wicked stepmother, her resilience strengthens. She models taking potent action to save oneself, and by doing so, might stimulate those with cancer to also fight heartily.

After the heroine leaves home, often as a result of abuse, although sometimes on a quest, he or she masters the terrors of the dark forest, faces trials, completes daunting tasks and is ultimately led to a meeting with nurturing others in the guise of a giant, rabbit, bird, fish, king, queen, witch or wizard. Intense struggle follows. Magic powers in the form of fairy godmother, wand or healing potion enable his or her rescue and the final return in victory, celebration party or voyage to a new country. Sometimes, he or she may return to destroy the old family system, or to create a new, more compassionate grouping. One may thus conclude that fairy tale protagonists transform disturbing events into personal development.

Gina Higgins, clinical psychologist at Harvard extensively studied resilience in abused children. She found the factor that enabled them to transcend the abuse to live successful lives was the presence of a caring other. Classic stories contain these deep truths which convey the essential necessity of an encounter with a caring other if the injured child is to reach her potential and recover from the earlier damaging relationships. Similarly, Sociologist Lillian Rubin has shown in her book, The Transcendent Child, that an experience with a supportive person outside the family group is the defining factor that determines successful adaptation to life by those who have been abused.

Recent research in the new field of Positive Psychology has demonstrated that we have an emotional immune system, that highly disturbing events can foster personal growth and development. Like Carl Jung's theoretical framework wherein a disruptive period in one's life is viewed as key to the

eventual fulfillment of individual potential, personal strength has now been shown to develop from the most trying life circumstances. "Sweet are the uses of adversity, which, like the toad, ugly and venomous, wears yet a precious jewel in his head; And this our life, exempt from public haunt, finds tongues in trees, books in the running-brooks, sermons in stories, and good in everything." From *Shakespeare's As You Like It, II, I, 12*.

Typical motifs in fairy tales parallel the major points of the family life cycle and systemic events: threatening proceedings involving the mother, father, birth, stepmother, marriage, or death provide the banished hero or the troubled heroine impetus to escape into the metaphorical forest. Leaving home is the core of the action. Marriage symbolizes the reward for successful separation and accomplishment of the tasks of adulthood.

Underneath the repetitive family patterns often shown in fairy tales, lie the same group dynamics that produce and maintain contemporary dysfunctional families. The fact that the same stories appear in widely divergent cultures and eras, suggests that the tales evolved from stories of real-life deviants. Since the underlying system or group dynamics are the same regardless of culture, the same themes appear and reappear. All groups, when threatened by stress, focus attention on a deviant, or an individual communal scapegoat in order to bring a surface harmony to the group. The apparent accord, however, is achieved at the expense of the outcast one.

If we look to fairy tales as metaphors of discordant and abusive families who maintain their group cohesiveness through focus upon a co-created deviant or scapegoat, we may find pointers to helping individuals, cope with disturbing families.

The families in fairy tales resemble the families who most often seek psychotherapy: Often the fathers are absent or ineffective; there are stepmothers who are cruel, raging, lacking in empathy, and even murderous; and siblings are jealous, demeaning and emotionally abusive. Typically, fairy tale families scapegoat one member of the group-witness the case of Cinderella.

The Grimm's tale "The Juniper Tree" exposes these violent family processes. In this story, the stepmother hates the little boy, abusing him until he lives in a state of continual terror, and cares only for her small daughter Marlinchen.

Prompted by the devil, as the story says, she plots the boy's murder by arranging a chest so that it will fall on to his head when he reaches into it to grab an apple. The plot is successful, and the boy is decapitated. The

stepmother then places the boy's head back on his body, concealing the fact that it is severed by arranging a scarf around his neck, so that he appears to be sleeping. When his unsuspecting sister enters the house, she speaks to the boy, asking him for an apple. Of course, he is unresponsive and the girl's mother instructs her to cuff him on the head until he answers. The child does so, and the boy's head falls off. The terrified girl believes that she is responsible for her brother's death. Her mother continues the deception, admonishing her: "Marlinchen, what have you done? But be quiet and let no one know it, it cannot be helped now, we will make him into black puddings." The stepmother then chops the dead child into pieces, which she cooks in a stew for her husband-the boy's father. As she prepares the meal with her daughter, the grieving sister, the grieving sister's tears fall into the pan, adding salt to the dish.

Later, as his father eats the stew, he throws the bones onto the floor. The sister, who had loved her stepbrother, gathers his bones and carries them outside the door, weeping tears of blood and buries the bones beneath the juniper tree.

The Grimm's tale, *The Juniper Tree*, shows these violent family processes: In this story, the step mother hates the little boy and cares only for her daughter.

Soon the dead boy's spirit is transformed into a beautiful bird that flies high into the air, singing magnificently. Marlinchen awakens, as if from a slumber, as gay and happy as if her brother were still alive. The bird alights on the roof of a goldsmith's house and begins to sing, "My mother she killed me, my father she ate me, my sister gathered all my bones in a silken handkerchief, and laid them beneath the juniper tree.

His singing is so loved that the bird receives many gifts: a golden charm from the goldsmith, a pair of wonderful red shoes from the shoemaker, and a heavy stone from the miller. Flying to the roof of his father's house, he continues to sing his marvelous song, arousing the attention of the family, who go out of the house to observe him. The bird drops the golden chain around his father's neck, gives Marlinchen the wonderful shoes on the head of the cruel stepmother, killing her. The little brother assumes his human shape, takes the father and Marlinchen by the hand, and the story concludes, "All three were right glad, and they went into the house to dinner and ate." A loving family cycle was thereby restored.

Sadly, this story, like many others, depicts a cycle of violence within the family. The shadow side of many well-known stories depicts the abused who later becomes the abuser.

The characters and events in “The Juniper Tree” exemplify the defining characteristics of highly disturbing families: Abusive families are typically “enmeshed” or isolated from interactions with anyone in the outside world. All members play a role and thereby enable the abuse. The secrecy within fairy tale families reflects the same dynamics as those that enable incestuous, alcoholic, and other discordant families to carry on their injurious behaviors in “real life”.

The anthropologist Gregory Bateson developed the theories that demonstrated the systemic nature of group and family function, theories that became the underpinnings for the practice of family psychotherapy.

A basic tenet of systems theory as it applies to family and organizational behavior is that a system is self correcting in order to maintain itself. Systemic processes underlie such diverse movements as the environment of a marshland or a thermometer responding to temperature changes. In a family, systems processes manifest as follows: If the parental relationship becomes disturbed, and thereby threatens the security of the family group, a child may develop symptoms that become the focus of the family’s attention. For example, when parental arguments escalate, a child might have an asthma attack, or misbehave so as to divert the parents away from their bickering. As the parents shift their attention toward the problematic child, the argument subsides and the threat of escalating fighting is reduced. The discordant family group is maintained because because the child distracts the parents away from the distress of their relationship that could destroy the group if left unchecked.

Fairy tales provide a microscope for examining family and group dynamics. They highlight the systemic nature of group function as the story focuses upon one character who may be depicted in either in a positive or a negative aspect. Though the hero or heroine may progress from being the poorest to the richest, or the most foolish to the wisest, never do he or she become part of the ordinary social group.

Studies of disturbed families focus on black sheep and other remarkable characters. In a comparable way, the action in fairy tales revolves around the archetypal figures such as fools and heroes. In disturbed families, if the patient gets better, someone else in the family usually gets worse. Similarly in fairy tales, those abused and abandoned at the beginning of the tale, eventually change place with the original oppressors to become richly rewarded by the end of the story.

When we consider the recurrent patterns in fairy tales from a family systems perspective—for example, the group focus on a deviant in the form of stepchild, as representatives of the same underlying systemic processes that are associated with disturbed families, we discover other prevalent systemic dynamics as well. Triangles, double binds, distorted communication, and systems changes, in which seemingly new group patterns actually resemble the old, are all represented.

Although the stepmother planned and perpetrated the actual murder in *The Juniper Tree*, the sister inadvertently contributed by failing to recognize the trap that awaited the boy, provided salt for the dish through her tears, did not report the murder, and buried the bony remains. The father did not notice his son's absence from the dinner table, and even ate the dish that contained the dead body. The violence stays contained within the secret confines of the family and this story provides an exquisite example of the rule that maintains discordant groups: The rule that maintains discordant groups is one cannot either comment on the group, or leave. But this story continues with an account of transformation, which like many others shows that if one leaves, and/or comments, new and better ways of being will soon follow.

The family group in *The Juniper Tree*, like the families in many fairy tales and in actual disturbing families and groups, shows the characteristic solitary lives: At the beginning of the story, family secrecy is the key that makes it possible for the abuse to continue. Abusive families are isolated. Members play a role and thereby enable the abuse to continue. In the unfolding of the story however, the key to transformation is encoded.

Fairy tale family secrecy reflects the same dynamics which enable incestuous, alcoholic, and other extremely discordant families to carry on their injurious practices. If Marlinchen, the sister in *The Juniper Tree* had told the secret of the boy's murder, she most likely would have become the next in line to be the family scapegoat.

Family therapists have observed that whenever a relationship becomes discordant, that the process of triangulation comes into play. Or, a disturbed couple pulls another person into the interaction in order to shift attention away from their relationship problems that might otherwise threaten the relationship. Triangulation is similar to the disturbed family focus upon the scapegoat child. Couples, or any dyad, can engage another person in their conflict through an affair, or through an intense emotional bond between a parent and child, as opposed to the necessary primary emotional connection of one parent to the other. This enables interaction to continue about the third party. Without the other person, the relationship could deteriorate.

Although this is not a conscious process, it reflects the movement towards homeostasis which characterizes groups and systems of all kinds from a cell to a salt marsh to a city or state, or in Gregory Bateson's exotic analogy, "The fact of thinking in terms of stories does not isolate human beings as something separate from the starfish and the sea anemones, the coconut palms and the primroses. And rather, if all the world be connected—then thinking in stories must be shared by all mind or minds, whether ours, or those of the redwood forests and sea anemones". The destructive focus upon a different one is the way that families and other groups maintain themselves in troubled times.

We see intergenerational collusion—a pattern often observed when disturbed families seek treatment, and in *The Juniper Tree* when the stepmother's main emotional connection is to Marlinchen, the sister, rather than to her husband. This pattern is often observed when disturbed families come for treatment. Their bond is evidenced when the mother and daughter collaborate to prepare the stew which contains the dead child's body, and they further collude by not telling the father the truth of the boy's death. Recall too, that intergenerational emotional collusion was a key dynamic in *The Girl Without Hands*: In this story the more intense emotional bonding existed between the father and his daughter, whereas the wife played only a vague, peripheral role in the action of the story. When parents are not emotionally bonded, then children can be inadvertently wounded. Thus fairy stories such as *The Juniper Tree* and others can serve as cautionary tales about the family dynamics that need repair.

Double-binding communication is a characteristic feature in both disturbed families and in fairy tales: that is, when a direction is given at one level, and contradicted at another level, it can create inner disturbance. For example, if one person in a family says "do that" and another says "don't do that" or if one tells one to "come here" while the body language shows rage, the person will be disturbed by the inability to respond to the conflicting demands. Fairy tales especially underscore the usual impossibility of fulfilling double binding demands: In one such story, a heroine must gather strawberries in winter, in another, she is required to fill a bucket with holes in the bottom with water; and yet in another she is required to spin straw into gold. Extraordinary creative response is depicted as the means to redemption.

If the person can either comment on the discordant system, or leave it, then the emotional disturbance can be eradicated. And fairy tale protagonists model the movement towards psychological safety by commenting—like the boy in *The Juniper Tree* and or/ leaving the group. To avoid the devastating effects of the double bind, one must either be able to leave the system, or comment upon its disturbing nature. Fairy tale heroines are models for

breaking the rule of the double bind by leaving home and/or commenting. In *The Juniper Tree* the murdered boy comments on the abuse by singing about it. In another story, *The Singing Bone*, a murder is rectified as the remaining bone from a corpse also sings of the murder. Fairy tales often model the means to cope with abusive disturbing families by pointing out the ways to break the rules that maintain the double bind. Not only do heroes and heroines free themselves of double binds, they also successfully leave home.

Disturbed families characteristically trap maturing adolescents by complex dances that prevent full individuation and separation from the family. Although the focus of family therapy is the family unit, the psychodynamic observations of the impact of the family unit upon individual development are of course connected. If fairy tales are largely stories of abusive families, then the behaviors of the heroes can be expected to display the kinds of psychological syndromes produced by disturbed families.

Fairy tales provide the map out of snares unwittingly laid by the most well meaning parents, who because of their own impaired development and/or failed primary relationships, are unable to nurture their offspring through the necessary stages of separation and individuation. Tara, an eighteen year old client, experienced deep depression in her high school senior year. On the verge of leaving home for college, she alternated between despair and rage at parental intrusions. Simultaneously, she was closely connected to her parents and sister, and had an especially strong bond with her mother. Her father pushed her toward academic excellence, and mercilessly criticized her when she failed to live up to his impossibly high standards. Her dreams were violent, and filled with bloody wars and provided an image of the power of the conflict that raged within her between her attachment to her family, and rage at their control they kept over her.

Tara's favorite childhood story, *The Land Before Time*, tells of a dinosaur that experienced great sadness over the loss of his mother, but ultimately reaches a green land filled with joy. Tara, had long identified with the dinosaur's grief, and as she examined this story she realized that she too needed to face the loss of her family connection in order to develop her own unique identity. Deeply attached to her mother, she was sad at leaving the one aspect of her family that had nurtured her, but ultimately developed the necessary awareness that the key to her freedom from emotional pain was in the development of her own unique potential. Tara knew that she too, like the fairy tale protagonists, must face leaving home to heal the emotional wound engendered by the disturbing family dynamics. The story of the dinosaur provided a cognitive reframe to suggest to Tara, that even as upsetting as her situation felt to her, that she too might still eventually find an emotional dwelling place to have content and meaningful life.

Discordant families may impair the critical development of children. When young children defend themselves against perceiving the deficiencies of their parents, they turn the negative view they might have otherwise held against the parent against themselves and consequently see themselves rather than the parents as “bad”. To do otherwise might bring awareness that no adult was available to meet their needs and thereby force a worse, more frightening realization-that without a fully functioning caretaker their survival might be threatened. Unable, then, to stand up to painful feelings about themselves, they learn to project the negativity outside themselves resulting in splitting of affects so that others are seen as either all good or all bad. They thereby become unable to perceive the ambiguous nature of the human experience.

In that way, abusive families can engender borderline and narcissistic and other character disorders. Since reality becomes skewed from that perspective of those with character disorders, relationship problems also become a hallmark symptom.

These split good and bad perceptions of others who come for help in psychotherapy are mirrored in the good and bad images of fairy tales. Individuals with Borderline personality disorders for example, have a split reality wherein others are related to as either good or bad, with none of the ambiguity that characterizes actual human nature. Similarly, the beings in fairy tales are either supremely good, or else all bad. There are witches and godmothers, helpful animals, monsters and dragons. But there are no ordinary folks. Split positive and negative states are expressed in Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Angel*, “They all joined in the chorus or praise, both great and small-the good happy child and the poor field flower that once lay withered and cast away on a heap of rubbish in a narrow dark street. Then the child opened his eyes and looked into the glorious face of the angel, and at the same moment they found themselves in that heavenly zone where all is happiness and joy”.

Splitting, projection and idealization are the predominant symptoms of those with character disorders-and these dynamics are well represented in fairy tales. For Cinderella, the original family was viewed as “all bad”, yet she meets a “perfect” prince; for Hansel and Gretel, the splitting is manifest between the initial images of the seemingly all nurturing candy feeding good witch, who then shifts into the devouring cruel witch who schemes to kill them. The beings who heroes and heroines encounter in the forest experience, like the witch, often resemble their original experience with abusive or neglectful parents, and thereby may be viewed as depictions of their split reality.



Shifting ego shapes are major diagnostic criteria for character disorders. Fairy tales feature characters that frequently shift roles and change shapes: A frog can change into a prince, or a witch can cast a spell and change a woman into a bird. These changing forms are also seen in clients diagnosed with multiple personality disorder, post traumatic stress disorder and borderline personality disorder. They too can quickly shift shape as their internal moods change sometimes rapidly from fear, to rage, or to love.

The “Youngest Best” genre of fairy tales is found throughout the world. In these stories, such as Puss –N- Boots, The Biblical Joseph, and The Water of Life, the youngest child in a family is tormented by older siblings. Yet the youngest develops personality characteristics that ultimately enable him to succeed in life far beyond the elder brothers and sisters. Perhaps the elders obtain narcissistic gratification through their demeaning mistreatment of the younger brother or sister that may enable them to feel smarter and more powerful than they might have otherwise.

Fairy tales are often representatives of the abusing families that engender character disorders. Character disorders fall along a dimension of severity with borderline the most severe, ascending towards narcissism. The more traumatic the childhood, the more the unfortunate person may be developmentally impaired and subsequently defend against emotional pain by splitting into the borderline dynamics that separate positive and negative affects. Narcissists are characterized by their by their lack of empathy, which differentiates them from borderlines who are more typically deep feeling and caring for the distress of others. As a result of the additional abuse that the youngest child receives from his damaged older siblings, he may develop an added measure of compassion for the pain of others, and it is this capacity for empathy that becomes a major contributing factor in his ultimate high achievements in life. Early abandonment is frequently associated with the development of character disorders. For the Biblical Joseph, his brothers abandoning him into the pit and then selling him into Egyptian slavery may have cast him into intense contact with his own inner world which ultimately nurtured his gifts of prophecy and dream interpretation, and subsequent rise to greatness.

An abusive pattern of scapegoating can be found in the story of Hansel and Gretel: The parents focus upon the children and blame them for the conditions of poverty in which the family lives. By ridding themselves of the burden of the children by abandoning them to the forest, they hope for relief from life’s overwhelming burdens. Individuals and groups alike free themselves of inner pain by externalizing their emotional pain and then sacrificing the outer representation of that pain. These processes can be

observed in all groups, even at the level of international relations and global violence. During the stressful economic period of the 1930s, European Jews were singled out for persecution that led to the holocaust. The process of eliminating the source of stress as perceived within an innocent other, whether in the family or in a larger group, or reflected in a fairy-tale monster, exposes the root of violence.

The systems view to which I have referred to earlier postulates that all of nature is interconnected and self-organizing in order to maintain itself in a comparatively stable state of equilibrium. Organizational groups, families, and environmental processes of all kinds are viewed as self correcting if they are threatened by inner group tensions or outer world attack. In a family, for example, when a parental relationship becomes dysfunctional and threatens the security of the family system, a child may develop symptoms which serve the function of system maintenance by providing a focus which shifts attention away from the relationship problems. In fairy tales and myths, the parallels with family patterns emerge as we observe similar patterns in a few major archetypes such as death and rebirth, dual good and evil mother, marriage, and leaving home. Both archetypes and systems are characterized by duality, movements between opposites, the characteristics of hierarchies such as shifts between dominance and submission, so those abused at the beginning, in fairy tales and in disturbed families, may eventually change places with the oppressors to rearrange the original balance of power where the disturbance was created.

Here I digress: Bateson elaborated and extended concepts of recurring patterns in nature to become the basic tenets of systems theory, which he applied to social groupings, such as families. We can apply Bateson's work on systems to the patterns in fairy tales and myths, and by doing so; add understanding to our knowledge of their origins.

Bateson noted two basic naturally occurring patterns: symmetrical and hierarchical. These patterns are represented in world mythologies with symmetrical reflected in creation mythologies, and the hierarchical patterns are shown in many hero myths and fairy tales. Differing patterns of group relationships, like the symmetrically shared communal life of ancient agriculturally based societies, and our contemporary social structures are based upon hierarchical dynamics which are held in place by the wounding of low ones in the pecking order, are mirrored in fairy tales and myths. Thus, we can look to creation stories that tell of worlds that came to be through the natural processes of emergence, such as from golden eggs or above or below the ground as models for peaceful co-existence. Heroic tales, by contrast, suggest that more violent and controlling behaviors are the means to good

fortune. The core mythologies of a culture may hold the pattern for the structure of the society that develops.

Folkloric scholars have long noted that variants of the same stories appear in widely divergent cultures and eras. These repetitive themes can be explained by a realization that stories reflect the same underlying group dynamics that are the same in all cultures. Just as stories get told and re-told about real life deviants, classic fairy tales may have come into being in the same way.

Both psychoanalyst Carl Jung and anthropologist Gregory Bateson were concerned with the patterns that connect biological and psychological events. Bateson, sounding like Jung, said, “ I picked up a vague, mystical feeling that we must look for the same sorts of processes in all fields of natural phenomenon, that we must look for the same sort of laws at work in the structure of a crystal as in the structure of society”. Might Bateson and Jung have observed and focused upon the same processes and labeled them differently? Might Jung’s archetypes be Bateson’s systems? Might the Chinese Yin and Yang framework also reflect the same processes observed by Jung and Bateson? Could Masterson’s developmental theories of borderline and narcissistic personality disorders also explain the repetition of the “Youngest Best” tales wherein the elder siblings abuse the youngest child in the family as a means to defend against their own felt inadequacies?

Psychotherapy client and fairy tale heroine alike may be afflicted with woes, but both may find redemption if they find the courage to leave inharmonious relationships to find more nurturing others, or begin new more compassionate groupings.

Yet the most significant shift must occur within: The journey of the fairy tale hero or heroine provides opportunities for him or her to introject more positive states of being through their encounters with the kindly others that may serve to mediate their painful early experiences. If one learns to transform the energy contained within deep emotional wounds into empathy with others and creative works, then it becomes possible for him or her to contribute to a better world by manifesting their “inner fairy godmother”, “inner prince” and “forest calm” in relationships and wider social groupings.

## References

Bottigheimer, Ruth B.(1986). *Fairy Tales and Society*.Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Campbell, Joseph(1968) *Hero With A Thousand Faces*. Princeton, New Jersey.

Princeton University Press.

Girard, Rene(1977) Violence and the Sacred. Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Fromm, Erich (1951). The Forgotten Language. Introduction to the Understanding of Dreams, Fairy Tales and Myths. New York.

The Brothers Grimm The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales. Introduction by Pedraic Colum; Commentary by Joseph Cambell.

Heuscher, J. E (1974) A Psychiatric Study of Myths and Fairy Tales. Springfield, Illinois: Grove Press, Inc.

Higgins, Gina(1994) Resilient Adults: Overcoming a Cruel Past. San Francisco. Jossey Bass.

Hoffman, Lynn(1981). Foundations of Family Therapy: New York, New York: Basic Books, Inc.

Johnson, Robert A.(1986) Inner Work. San Francisco. Harper and Row Publishers.

Jung,C.G. "Archetypes of The Collective Unconscious". Collected Works, Volume 9 part 1 Princeton New Jersey, Princeton University Press. Bollingen Series 20.

Jung, C. G. (1965). Memories, Dreams and Reflections. New York, NY: Vintage Books.

Jung, C. G. (1964). Man and His Symbols. New York, NY: Doubleday.

Jung, C. G. (1984). Dream Analysis: Notes of the seminar given in 1928-1930. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Hall, James, A. (1983). Jungian Dream Interpretation: A Handbook of Theory and Practice. Toronto, Canada. Inner City Books.

May, Rollo. (1991). The Cry for Myth. New York. W.H. Norton.

Masterson, James(1976) Psychotherapy of The Borderline Adult:New York, New York. Brunner-Mazel, Inc.

Rossi, Ernest(2000). Dreams Consciousness Spirit. Malibu: Palisades Gateway Publishing.

Rubin, Lillian. (1997). *The Transcendent Child: Tales of Triumph Over the Past*. Perennial.

Stein, Murray (Ed.) 1984. *Jungian Analysis*. Boulder and London: Shambala.

Signell, Karen A. (1990). *Wisdom of the Heart*. New York. Bantam Books.

Suzuki, David(1997). *The Sacred Balance*. Toronto, Canada. Greystone Books.

Tatar. M.M. (1987) *The Hard Facts of The Brothers Grimm*. Princeton. Princeton University Press.

Von Franz, M.L.(1982). *An Introduction to The Study of Fairy Tales*. Texas: Spring Publications, Inc.