

WHEN LOVE SHOWS ITSELF AS CRUELTY: THE ROLE OF THE FAIRY TALE STEPMOTHER IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE UNDER-AGED READER

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ABSTRACT

Stemming from the competition between the stepmother and the child for the husband/father's affection, the stepmother is stigmatised as the villain in fairy tales. When considering the stepmother-child relationship, it becomes apparent that even though the stepmother is usually associated with jealousy and cruelty, her character is two-sided. While she has subversive intentions, her actions lead the protagonist to identify and strengthen his/her best qualities.

It seems unacceptable to the reader that a natural mother would treat her child with the cruelty that the stepmother does in fairy tales, subjecting the child to the dangers and perils of the outside world. This article argues that the stepmother's portrayal in fairy tales can, with the help of psychoanalytical readings, be interpreted as a catalyst to enable the process of the child's enforced emancipation from the mother.

The article analyses the roles ascribed in fairy tales to the mother and child figures and the roles they play in the development of under-aged recipients. The behaviour of mothers and stepmothers in fairy tales is analysed to show how they act in the child's best interest, aiding the child's emancipation from the mother.

KEYWORDS

Fairy tale, psychoanalysis, stepmother, abjection, child development

1 THE GLOBAL POPULARITY OF FAIRYTALES

In 2005, *Time Magazine* ranked German youth book author Cornelia Funke as one of the 100 most influential people worldwide with ten million copies of her books sold (Barker 2005). In a survey done by the Forum for Libraries and Information in Germany on popular media characters among children (Heidtmann 2004:599), fantasy characters proved to be favourites amongst boys and girls alike. In 2004, the fictional character Harry Potter achieved the top position amongst both sexes, followed by Yu-gi-Oh and Spiderman amongst boys, and Bibi Blocksberg, an under-aged witch, and Hermione Granger, Harry Potter's friend, amongst girls. Fairy tales in particular, have enjoyed tremendous popularity worldwide.

As a result of their relevance to children and their global popularity, fairy tales, especially the Grimm brothers' versions, have been adapted for Disney movies and Hollywood teen movies, and have been translated into several languages, while also serving as the basis for popular romance novels. Their influence on young readers is not to be underestimated, as Marcia Lieberman (1972:384) argues persuasively: "We know that children are socialized or culturally conditioned by movies, television programs, and the stories they read or hear, and we have begun to wonder at the influence that children's stories and entertainments had upon us, though we cannot now measure the extent of that influence."

As Lieberman states further on, when examining traditional folk tales and fairy tales, it is important to keep in mind that they are not merely stories written by authors of the time. Originally, oral tales were transferred from generation to generation by word of mouth. They developed over the centuries before being set down in writing. As continuously changing and evolving products of culture, they were influenced by shifts in the way of people's thinking, and their moral and social development. Lori Baker-Sperry and Liz Grauerholz (2003:713) observe aptly the potential these stories might have to offer: "Cultural products embody societal values and provide a means to observe shifts in such values."

While it stands uncontested that children's fantasy literature is growing in popularity, it would be short-sighted to ignore the effect it may have on the child beyond the simple story. Not only could its effect be telling, but also what an avid observer might deduce about values and the changing society when closely examining children's literature as a cultural product. As established by sociologists Bernice Pescosolido, Liz Grauerholz and Melissa Milkie (1997:444), "the intended clarity and moral certainty with which adults provide children with tales of their world offer a fortuitous opportunity to examine social relations and belief systems". Folklorists have repeatedly opposed the premature dismissal of fairy tales as simple products of fantasy by insisting that rather

than being merely entertaining, fairy tales are “one of culture’s primary mechanisms for inculcating roles and behaviours” (Rowe 1979:238).

This article serves as an attempt, firstly, to establish where the fascination that children and adults show for the supernatural, especially in fairy tales, comes from; secondly, which roles fairy tales can play in the psychological development of a child; and, thirdly, it will specifically consider the role relationships between children and their mothers, why so few biological mothers feature in fairy tales and why stepmothers, who seem evil, may actually play an important role in the young reader’s psychological development into a mature, independent adult.

2 PSYCHOANALYSIS AND CHILDREN’S LITERATURE

Youth literature and especially fairy tales are to a degree still frowned upon or seen as subordinate parts of literature, but their influence on readers is neither to be underestimated nor undermined. Some scholars prefer to take a canonistic approach to literature, but do not realise the impact that children’s literature, in particular fantasy literature, has. Fantasy literature forms an integral part of children’s psychological development and aids them in understanding certain aspects of life, morals and behaviour (Morison & Gardner 1978:642). The stage upon which these fairy tales are set, is not limited by strict, suppressive and suffocating societal norms and identity. It facilitates a platform where readers can visualise and embark on journeys of discovering and seeing life from other perspectives, especially of good and evil. It aids children’s development and this is explored in psychoanalysis. Kenneth Kidd (2004:109) poses two very valid questions, namely: “What can psychoanalysis tell us about children’s literature?” and “What, we should also ask, can children’s literature tell us about psychoanalysis?”

Psychoanalysis and children’s literature have a dynamic history that has progressed significantly over the years. Psychoanalysis is a viable tool that can be used and applied to understand the moral underpinnings of a fairy tale and its societal implications according to an individual’s position. Children can formulate or be exposed to links within a fairy tale to help them understand the changes, issues and complexities to which they will be exposed, or have encountered in their lives. The separation of good and evil is evident in every fairy tale and reinforces certain notions that children need to understand. Fairy tales, especially those with the mother/stepmother divide, are excellent examples of illustrating the process of abjection, or casting away of the child by the mother. The article will show how these fairy tales can help children to make sense of this process. Reflections on, and the questioning of, certain aspects of a fairy tale are important analytical tools for children and not just a method of escapism.

3 THE INFLUENCE OF FANTASY AND FAIRY TALES ON CHILDREN

In his article *Fantasy literature's evocative power*, John Timmermann (1978:533) suggests a rationalisation of people's fascination with fantasy literature:

However entertaining and impressive the figures, we have to look well past them to assess the significance and to grasp the meaning of fantasy literature. Fantasy literature as a genre has the capacity to move a reader powerfully. And the motions and emotions involved are not simply visceral as is the case of modern literature – but spiritual. It affects one's beliefs. One's way of viewing life, one's hopes and dreams and faith.

Apart from influencing readers' beliefs, however, fairy tales also have the ability to shape the under-aged recipients' perceptions of reality, society, and their own role in society. Alison Lurie (1970:42) praises traditional tales in regard to gender roles as

one of the few sorts of classic children's literature of which a radical feminist would approve . . . These stories suggest a society in which women are as competent and active as men, at every age and in every class. Gretel, not Hansel, defeats the Witch; and for every clever youngest son there is a youngest daughter equally resourceful. The contrast is greatest in maturity, where women are often more powerful than men. Real help for the hero or heroine comes most frequently from a fairy godmother or wise woman, and real trouble from a witch or wicked stepmother . . . To prepare children for women's liberation, therefore, and to protect them against future shock, you had better buy at least one collection of fairy tales.

While I tend to agree with Lieberman (1972:383), who insists that fairy tales as such cannot prepare children for women's liberation or for life in general, there is no doubt that they have a great impact on children and may subconsciously aid them in their development. Considerable research has already been done on the purpose of the fairy tale as a subgenre of fantasy literature. Three functions, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive, can be distinguished, namely the pure joy of storytelling; an improved outlook on life for the reader; and psychoanalytical functions, such as assistance in dealing with reality or in the identity formation of children (Wittmann 2008:15).

4 PSYCHOANALYSIS AND CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

From its beginnings, psychoanalysis was part of a greater movement towards a new interest in childhood, which drew from an evolutionary metaphor and the emergent social sciences (Kidd 2004:109). Jean-Jacques Rousseau's concept of childhood gradually replaced the eighteenth century view, which was largely influenced by John Calvin. Childhood was no longer seen as a necessary evil, with the "good child" being as adult-like as possible, but was now regarded by Rousseau and his followers as the

most “‘natural stage of human development’. It was a time to be enjoyed and savoured for as long as possible” (Gutek 1996:67). Psychoanalytic interest in children’s play, particularly as advocated by Melanie Klein, shifted further attention to the process of human symbolisation. Through her work with actual children, it was possible to gather knowledge about children’s symbolic activity. “In a sense, psychoanalysis ‘textualized’ childhood [. . .] such that the children’s story or work became just as legitimate an object of inquiry as the child herself” (Kidd 2004:111).

The new interest in childhood, displayed in the works of Rousseau and other psychoanalysts, transformed the scene of children’s literature over time. Juliet Dusinberre (1978:41) describes scholars’ new-found interest in childhood and some of its findings as follows: “When the late nineteenth century, round about the time when the Grimm brothers recorded their *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, found that its researches into origin and development focused attention on the child, it simultaneously produced for those children a literature which revealed as clearly as possible adult hopes for the new generation.”

In *Alice to the lighthouse: children’s books and radical experiments in art*, Dusinberre takes note of the concurrent heightened interest in child development, child psychology and children’s books, which could be witnessed right through the modernist period and was influenced by scholars such as Sigmund Freud, but also Charles Darwin, Friedrich Froebel and James Sully (Kidd 2004:115). Psychoanalysis, which focused greatly on processes that take place during childhood, began in the German-speaking world. It was therefore to be anticipated that Freud and other scholars interested in fairy tales, would consult what was possibly the principal *corpus* of tales written in German, namely, Grimm’s *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (Dundes 1987:50).

I agree with Kidd (2004:115) that, even though there might not be a direct relationship between psychoanalysis and children’s literature, the insights of psychoanalysis and child analysis nevertheless had a profound influence on writing for children.

5 THE ROLE OF FAIRY TALES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHILD

Volker Klotz (1987:3), the German scholar on fairy tales, uses an example from *1001 nights* to explain the possible relevance of tales in psychoanalysis. The story of the beautiful Queen Scheherazade forms the outer frame of the collection of tales. Her husband, King Shahryar, was deeply hurt by a woman many years ago, which causes him to foster intense feelings of hatred towards women. He forms the habit of marrying beautiful young girls, only to have them executed straight after the wedding night. Scheherazade manages to heal her husband by telling him a different story every night, until he forgets about his hatred for women and is able to live with her happily ever after.

By simple story telling she manages to save herself from her husband's wrath and to heal him from his pain (Wittmann 2008:16).

This phenomenon can be explained convincingly by psychoanalysis, as Bettelheim (2002:102) did. In his theory, the king symbolises the human, who is ruled by his id, as his ego lacks the power to control the id due to intense disappointments in previous interactions with people. The young queen represents the ego, which is strongly influenced by the superego. She heals her husband from his impulsivity and gives him a stable identity. As Stefan Neuhaus (2005:33) demonstrates, the queen initiates a learning process that can be compared to the reading of a fairy tale.

Apart from purely psychoanalytical functions, fairy tales portray a range of conditions that seem worthy for young readers to strive toward (Wittmann 2008:16). These conditions counter today's world with its excesses in some places and unfulfilled needs in others. This is foreign to fairy tales as there are only direct relations between means and ends. I agree with Klotz (1987:4), that fairy tales are more than mere escapes into dreams, as some fantasy novels are.

On the contrary, fairy tales allow readers to notice anomalies in their surroundings and to make an effort to change them. The positive action of the fairy tale hero encourages the recipient to follow his example. His life is exemplary. He is never self-obsessed, but always willing to assist others whenever necessary. His actions are always productive, never destructive. He never wastes his powers. Even though he usually only masters his tasks with the help of others, he never compromises on his own values or opinions. He accepts unquestioningly that he is entitled to be happy, regardless of his heritage. However, he never achieves this happiness at the expense of others.

Fairy tales were often disregarded in the early twentieth century, until in the mid 1970s, when Bruno Bettelheim (2002:9) managed largely to rehabilitate them and to make people aware of their relevance, even for the present day. His aim was to help children to find meaning in life. According to Bettelheim (2002), children have to learn to understand themselves better during their development in order to understand themselves and others. Fairy tales also aid children in forming healthy, beneficial and normal relations with other people. Modern education makes this process difficult for children. Parents are often unwilling or too overprotective to tell their children that a large part of what is considered wrong in life has its origin in human nature. It is in every human being's capacity to act aggressively, unsociably or egoistically in times of anger or fear. Children are expected to believe that all humans are intrinsically good. However, they do know that there are times when they will not be good and even prefer to be bad, but their moral standing will direct them to the correct choice of action. Acting against the heed of their parents and society will have repercussions, and this is reinforced in fairy tales.

Bettelheim (2002:15) further asserts that suppressing the unconscious "bad" can damage the child's personality in the long run. On the other hand, if the unconscious

material is allowed to surface, within limits and in a controlled environment, it can be processed in the child's fantasy. The danger that children may harm themselves or others is hereby substantially reduced. The fairy tale allows children to process the inner conflict between good and bad in two ways. Firstly, the children identify with the victorious hero. This identification strengthens their self-image and sense of morality. The initial threatening situation is mellowed down by the happy end; the children learn to find themselves by working through the conflict. *Rapunzel*, for example, helped a little boy to understand that his own body could be his rescue. He learned to find safety in himself in threatening situations.

Through the fairy tale, children learn to strengthen their own identity against adults, who seem to want to keep all the things which give them power, to themselves. Fairy tales give children the feeling that in the end, they will also be able to overpower the symbolic giant, like in *Jack and the beanstalk*. With this stance, Bettelheim is right *on par* with the anti-authoritarian attitude of his time. In the ideal scenario of childhood, an initial state of unhappiness caused by a feeling of fear changes into an overwhelming feeling of joy, when fear is overcome and success achieved.

Secondly, the fairy tale allows a personality to be split in two, so that a positive image may remain unaltered. Hereby, children are enabled to keep good and bad images apart. While they may sometimes foster feelings of resentment against their mother, for example, they may feel guilty at the thought of seeing her in a negative light. The fairy tale helps children to keep the good and the bad mother apart. They can hold on to the image of the good mother while acknowledging the presence of the bad mother. This is evident in the split into mother and stepmother in *Cinderella* and *Snow White*, or into mother and grandmother in *Little Red Riding Hood*. This separation gives the children stability, until they have overcome their dichotomous world view of good and evil.

To summarise, the fairy tale has a double function. It strengthens children's identity through simple patterns, while simultaneously showing that everything is not as easy as it seems. It gives children an idea of how they could organise their inner chaos. The real value of the fairy tale could thus lie precisely in what parents and adults deem to be unrealistic (Bettelheim 2002:46). Children do not draw a distinction between lifeless objects and living beings. This lack of separation enables children to let their fantasy run wild and to interpret the tale in such a way that it suits their current position. The real therapeutic value of the fairy tale lies in the fact that the patient arrives at his own solution by his own subjective interpretation (Wittmann 2008:19).

6 THE MOTHER/STEPMOTHER IN THE FAIRY TALE

In *Powers of horror*, Julia Kristeva (1982:4) deals with a concept she calls the "abject" and the process of abjection. While Kristeva does not necessarily see the "abject" as

physically repulsive, it is something which “disturbs identity, system, order” (1982:4). The process of abjection, or casting away, therefore, is simultaneously unnerving and confusing: “We may call it border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it – on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger” (Kristeva 1982:9).

According to Kristeva, the child first experiences abjection when he/she is separated from his/her mother. However, the first signs of abjection can already be seen at the onset of pregnancy, as Astore (2007:225) argues:

I believe that it is in the maternal, that the abject is most prominent. If we were to itemize this form of abjection, the cycle begins at the onset of pregnancy with the woman's 'nausea' – also known as morning sickness. There, the abject resides within the visceral substance of the lining of the womb for the duration of the pregnancy.

Keeping this in mind, Kristeva's idea of abjection is not only a one-sided process. It also represents a “revolt against that which gave us our own existence or state of being” (Pentony 1996). Even though several abjection processes take place during the child's development, one of the more significant ones coincides with the acquisition of language:

In effect, what Kristeva is saying is that the relationship between a preverbal infant's physical world, which constitutes its mother's body, and the infant's physical attempts at formulating language and entering the semiotic has to reach a state of crisis in order for the acquisition of language to occur. This crisis is abjection, and it is where the process of negating the maternal presence or separating from her becomes a prerequisite for the child's acquisition of language. (Astore 2007:226)

Abjection from and by the mother is a potentially painful and confusing state, yet necessary for the child in order to learn the skills required for him/her to develop into an independent, mature adult. Similarly, if adults are confronted with the abject, they are at once threatened by it, while unwillingly identifying with it. It prompts them to recall a state of being prior to signification and simultaneously a sense of helplessness (Pentony 1996).

If fairy tales are given careful consideration, it becomes apparent that the fairy tale hero's mother is frequently completely absent, predominantly deceased, and usually replaced by a stepmother, as is the case in *Cinderella* and *Snow White*. Returning to the idea of the splitting of personalities, which is facilitated in fairy tales, as mentioned earlier in the article, it seems obvious how the mother image is split in two to help the child make sense of reality.

Generally, fairy tale characters are at an age where a separation from the mother has to take place, as is evident in *Hansel and Gretel*. Hansel and Gretel are quite young, yet their stepmother sends them into the woods on their own because the family is so poor that the parents are no longer able to provide for the children. They are at an age at

which young children typically start attending school or preschool. Separation from the mother can be very traumatic, yet, as can be seen in *Hansel and Gretel*, it is necessary for the child to learn to find help from within him/herself. As the child separates from the mother and forms his/her own identity, the mother is no longer able to fulfil all his/her needs. Even though both parent and child might be hesitant to allow for this process at first, it is necessary for both of them to release each other in order to facilitate the development of separate identities: “Horror has no cathartic effect. Neither has the milder, more tolerable anxiety, but anxiety which has been overcome does have one” (Dégh 1979:99).

After the abjection process has successfully taken place, the child surprises him/herself when he/she realises how well he/she can cope without the mother, overcoming even seemingly insurmountable obstacles. This, as Bettelheim (2002:122) demonstrates convincingly, is one of the ways in which fairy tales might be applied in child-rearing: “The original displeasure of anxiety [provoked by the tale] then turns into the great pleasure of anxiety successfully faced and mastered.” After killing the witch, which can be read metaphorically for overcoming the dominant all-encompassing mother figure, the child returns home with treasures he has secured himself. As Hansel and Gretel are able to provide for their family, so is the young reader empowered to be an independent, valuable member of the family. Even though obstacles might seem great initially, they are never unconquerable to the child: “The tale symbolizes elementary reality with its dangers and struggles, and it demonstrates that cleverness, skill, courage and perseverance lead to victory” (Dégh 1979:99).

Cinderella and Snow White, on the other hand, are in their teenage years, close to reaching sexual maturity. Once again, their biological “good” mother is deceased. Whereas in *Hansel and Gretel* the mother is dead and replaced by the stepmother, the mother image is split even more completely in *Cinderella*. The evil stepmother is opposed by the good fairy godmother. In this version, the reader deals simultaneously with two mother images. Due to domination and mistreatment by the stepmother, the heroine is compelled to break away from the parental home in order to find happiness with a partner. If the conflict between parents and children during puberty is considered, this process seems to be closely mirrored in the fairy tale:

Kept a child rather than acknowledged as a developing woman and potential recipient of the father’s love, a young girl, like Cinderella or Snow-Drop, feels thwarted by her mother’s persistent, overpowering intervention. The authoritarian mother becomes the obstacle which seems to stifle natural desires for men, marriage, and hence the achievement of female maturity. Neither heroines nor children rationally explore such deep-rooted feelings; rather, the tales’ split depiction of mothers provides a guilt-free enactment of the young female’s ambivalences and a means through fantasy for coping with paradoxical impulses of love and hate. (Rowe 1979:242)

As is to be expected, adolescents are not completely left to their own devices in their search for identity. In the case of *Cinderella*, the fairy godmother appears when needed to aid her goddaughter, but allows her to function as autonomously as possible. “Frequently a good fairy, old woman, or comforting godmother (second substitution for the original mother) release the heroine from the stepmother’s bondage and enables her to adopt appropriate adult roles” (Rowe 1979:242).

The biological mother has to be seen, at least partly, as evil, to motivate the child to break away from her and become independent. In the Grimms’ version of the story, the splitting of personalities takes on an even more interesting form. When the mother knows that her death is near, she promises *Cinderella* that she will look after her and guide her, even after her death. Instead of a female fairy godmother, sexless pigeons sent by the mother take on the role of Cinderella’s guides. Even though Cinderella, or the young girl, can no longer see her mother and a certain distance is established, she knows that ultimately she can still rely on her for comfort and assistance if necessary.

7 SUMMARY

The article has shown how important fairy tales are to young readers. Children are not fascinated by fantasy literature, which includes fairy tales, for no reason. On the contrary, fairy tales can greatly aid them in their development, as a number of psychoanalysts have demonstrated. While conceding that fairy tales can be read as patriarchal and old-fashioned, their beauty lies in their openness to interpretation.

As discussed in the article, the young, especially female, reader feels a certain loyalty towards her mother, yet needs to break away from her. Similarly, even though the mother loves her child, she has to let him/her go to lead his/her own life. The fairy tale facilitates this process by demonstrating to the child how to make sense of this intricate process. “Fairy tales, therefore, do acknowledge traumatic ambivalences during a female’s rite of passage; they respond to the need for both detachment from childish symbioses and a subsequent embracing of adult independence” (Rowe 1979:243).

By splitting the mother image in two, the child is able to remain loyal towards her while understanding that the abjection process is necessary and healthy. Even though children might not be able to master this process by reading fairy tales on their own, the stories do have the power to assist them in strengthening their own identity and self-image and to make sense of otherwise perplexing developments in their world.

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