

# WARNING

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976).

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## FEAR OF FANTASY

### WHY WERE FAIRY TALES OUTLAWED?

Why do many intelligent, well-meaning, modern, middle-class parents, so concerned about the happy development of their children, discount the value of fairy tales and deprive their children of what these stories have to offer? Even our Victorian ancestors, despite their emphasis on moral discipline and their stodgy way of life, not only permitted but encouraged their children to enjoy the fantasy and excitement of fairy tales. It would be simple to blame such a prohibition of fairy tales on a narrow-minded, uninformed rationalism, but this is not the case.

Some people claim that fairy tales do not render “truthful” pictures of life as it is, and are therefore unhealthy. That “truth” in the life of child might be different from that of adults does not occur to these

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

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

Some parents fear that their children may get carried away by their fantasies; that when exposed to fairy tales, they will come to believe in magic. But every child believes in magic, and he stops doing so when he grows up (with the exception of those who have been too disappointed in reality to be able to trust its rewards). I have known disturbed children who had never been told fairy stories but who invested an electric fan or motor with as much magic and destructive power as any fairy story ever ascribed to its most powerful and nefarious figure.<sup>37</sup>

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

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

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

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

This is true even when the child seems to ask for factual information. Piaget describes how a girl not yet four years old asked him about an elephant’s wings. He answered that elephants don’t fly. To which the girl insisted, “Yes, they do; I’ve seen them.” His reply was that she must be joking.<sup>38</sup> This example shows the limits of a child’s fantasies. The little girl was obviously struggling with some problem, and factual explanations were no help at all, because they did not address themselves to that problem.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Notes

36. J. R. R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965)

37. See, for example, the story of Joey in Bruno Bettelheim, *The Empty Fortress* (New York: Free Press, 1967).

38. Jean Piaget, *The Origins of Intelligence in Children* (New York: International Universities Press, 1952) and *The Construction of Reality in the Child* (New York: Basic Books, 1954).

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

## **“HANSEL AND GRETEL”**

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“Hansel and Gretel” begins realistically. The parents are poor, and they worry about how they will be able to take care of their children. Together at night they discuss their predicament, and how they can deal with it. Even taken on this surface level, the folk fairy tale conveys an important, although unpleasant, truth: poverty and deprivation do not improve man’s character, but rather make him more selfish, less sensitive to the sufferings of others, and thus prone to embark on evil deeds.

The fairy tale expresses in words and actions the things which go on in children’s minds. In terms of the child’s dominant anxiety, Hansel and Gretel believe that their parents are talking about a plot to desert them. A small child, awakening hungry in the darkness of the night, feels threatened by complete rejection and desertion, which he experiences in the form of fear of starvation. By projecting their inner anxiety onto those they fear might cut them off, Hansel and Gretel are convinced that their parents plan to starve them to death! In line with the child’s anxious fantasies, the story tells that until then the parents had been able to feed their children, but had now fallen upon lean times.

The mother represents the source of all food to the children, so it is she who now is experienced as abandoning them, as if in a wilderness. It is the child’s anxiety and deep disappointment when Mother is no longer willing to meet all his oral demands which leads him to believe that suddenly Mother has become unloving, selfish, rejecting. Since the children know they need their parents desperately, they attempt to return home after being deserted. In fact, Hansel succeeds in finding their way back from the forest the first time they are abandoned. Before a child has the courage to embark on the voyage of finding himself, of becoming an independent person through meeting the world, he can develop initiative only in trying to return to passiv-

ity, to secure for himself eternally dependent gratification. “Hansel and Gretel” tells that this will not work in the long run.

The children’s successful return home does not solve anything. Their effort to continue life as before, as if nothing had happened, is to no avail. The frustrations continue, and the mother becomes more shrewd in her plans for getting rid of the children.

By implication, the story tells about the debilitating consequences of trying to deal with life’s problems by means of regression and denial, which reduce one’s ability to solve problems. The first time in the forest Hansel used his intelligence appropriately by putting down white pebbles to mark the path home. The second time he did not use his intelligence as well—he, who lived close to a big forest, should have known that birds would eat the bread crumbs. Hansel might instead have studied landmarks on the way in, to find his way back out. But having engaged in denial and regression—the return home—Hansel has lost much of his initiative and ability to think clearly. Starvation anxiety has driven him back, so now he can think only of food as offering a solution to the problem of finding his way out of a serious predicament. Bread stands here for food in general, man’s “life line”—an image which Hansel takes literally, out of his anxiety. This shows the limiting effects of fixations to primitive levels of development, engaged in out of fear.

The story of “Hansel and Gretel” gives body to the anxieties and learning tasks of the young child who must overcome and sublimate his primitive incorporative and hence destructive desires. The child must learn that if he does not free himself of these, his parents or society will force him to do so against his will, as earlier his mother had stopped nursing the child when she felt the time had come to do so. This tale gives symbolic expression to these inner experiences directly linked to the mother. Therefore, the father remains a shadowy and ineffectual figure throughout the story, as he appears to the child during his early life when Mother is all-important, in both her benign and her threatening aspects.

Frustrated in their ability to find a solution to their problem in reality because reliance on food for safety (bread crumbs to mark the path) fails them, Hansel and Gretel now give full rein to their oral regression. The gingerbread house represents an existence based on the most primitive satisfactions. Carried away by their uncontrolled craving, the children think nothing of destroying what should give shelter and safety, even though the birds’ having eaten the crumbs should have warned them about eating up things.

By devouring the gingerbread house’s roof and window, the children show how ready they are to eat somebody out of house and home, a fear which they had projected onto their parents as the reason for their desertion. Despite the warning voice which asks, “Who is nibbling at my little house?” the children lie to themselves and blame it on the wind and “[go] on eating without disturbing themselves.”

The gingerbread house is an image nobody forgets: how incredibly appealing and tempting a picture this is, and how terrible the risk one runs if one gives in to the temptation. The child recognizes that, like Hansel and Gretel, he would wish to eat up the gingerbread house, no matter what the dangers. The house stands for oral greediness and how attractive it is to give in to it. The fairy tale is the primer from which the child learns to read his mind in the language of images, the only language which permits understanding before intellectual maturity has been achieved. The child needs to be exposed to this language, and must learn to be responsive to it, if he is to become master of his soul.

The preconscious content of fairy-tale images is much richer than even the following simple illustrations convey. For example, in dreams as well as in fantasies and the child’s imagination, a house, as the place in which we dwell, can symbolize the body, usually the mother’s. A gingerbread house, which one can “eat up,” is a symbol of the mother, who in fact nurses the infant from her body. Thus, the house at which Hansel and Gretel are eating away blissfully and without a care stands in the unconscious for the good mother, who offers her body as a source of nourishment. It is the original all-giving mother, whom every child hopes to find again later somewhere out in the world, when his own mother begins to make demands and to impose restrictions. This is why, carried away by their hopes, Hansel and Gretel do not heed the soft voice that calls out to them, asking what they are up to—a voice that is their externalized conscience. Carried away by their greediness, and fooled by the pleasures of oral satisfaction which seem to deny all previous oral anxiety, the children “thought they were in heaven.”

But, as the story tells, such unrestrained giving in to gluttony threatens destruction. Regression to the earliest “heavenly” state of being—when on the mother’s breast one lived symbiotically off her—does away with all individuation and independence. It even endangers one’s very existence, as cannibalistic inclinations are given body in the figure of the witch.

The witch, who is a personification of the destructive aspects of orality, is bent on eating up the children as they are demolishing her gingerbread house. When the children give in to untamed id impulses, as symbolized by their uncontrolled voraciousness, they risk being destroyed. The children eat only the symbolic representation of the mother, the gingerbread house; the witch wants to eat the children themselves. This teaches the hearer a valuable lesson: dealing in symbols is safe when compared with acting on the real thing. Turning the tables on the witch is justified also on another level: children who have little experience and are still learning self-control are not to be measured by the same yardstick as older people, who are supposed to be able to restrain their instinctual desires better. Thus, the punishment of the witch is as justified as the children's rescue.

The witch's evil designs finally force the children to recognize the dangers of unrestrained oral greed and dependence. To survive, they must develop initiative and realize that their only recourse lies in intelligent planning and acting. They must exchange subservience to the pressures of the id for acting in accordance with the ego. Goal-directed behavior based on intelligent assessment of the situation in which they find themselves must take the place of wish-fulfilling fantasies: the substitution of the bone for the finger, tricking the witch to climb into the oven.

Only when the dangers inherent in remaining fixed to primitive orality with its destructive propensities are recognized does the way to a higher stage of development open up. Then it turns out that the good, giving mother was hidden deep down in the bad, destructive one, because there are treasures to be gained: the children inherit the witch's jewels, which become valuable to them after their return home—that is, after they can again find the good parent. This suggests that as the children transcend their oral anxiety, and free themselves of relying on oral satisfaction for security, they can also free themselves of the image of the threatening mother—the witch—and rediscover the good parents, whose greater wisdom—the shared jewels—then benefit all.

On repeated hearing of "Hansel and Gretel," no child remains unaware of the fact that birds eat the bread crumbs and thus prevent the children from returning home without first meeting their great adventure. It is also a bird which guides Hansel and Gretel to the gingerbread house, and thanks only to another bird do they manage to get back home. This gives the child—who thinks differently about animals than older persons do—pause to think: these birds must have

a purpose, otherwise they would not first prevent Hansel and Gretel from finding their way back, then take them to the witch, and finally provide passage home.

Obviously, since all turns out for the best, the birds must have known that it is preferable for Hansel and Gretel not to find their way directly back home out of the forest, but rather to risk facing the dangers of the world. In consequence of their threatening encounter with the witch, not only the children but also their parents live much more happily ever afterward. The different birds offer a clue to the path the children must follow to gain their reward.

After they have become familiar with "Hansel and Gretel," most children comprehend, at least unconsciously, that what happens in the parental home and at the witch's house are but separate aspects of what in reality is one total experience. Initially, the witch is a perfectly gratifying mother figure, as we are told how "she took them both by the hand, and led them into her little house. Then good food was set before them, milk and pancakes with sugar, apples, and nuts. Afterwards two pretty little beds were covered with clean white linen, and Hansel and Gretel lay down in them, and thought they were in heaven." Only on the following morning comes a rude awakening from such dreams of infantile bliss. "The old woman had only pretended to be so kind; she was in reality a wicked witch. . . ."

This is how the child feels when devastated by the ambivalent feelings, frustrations, and anxieties of the oedipal stage of development, as well as his previous disappointment and rage at failures on his mother's part to gratify his needs and desires as fully as he expected. Severely upset that Mother no longer serves him unquestioningly but makes demands on him and devotes herself ever more to her own interests—something which the child had not permitted to come to his awareness before—he imagines that Mother, as she nursed him and created a world of oral bliss, did so only to fool him—like the witch of the story.

Thus, the parental home "hard by a great forest" and the fateful house in the depths of the same woods are on an unconscious level but the two aspects of the parental home: the gratifying one and the frustrating one.

The child who ponders on his own the details of "Hansel and Gretel" finds meaning in how it begins. That the parental home is located at the very edge of the forest where everything happens suggests that what is to follow was imminent from the start. This is again the fairy tale's way to express thoughts through impressive images which lead



the child to use his own imagination to derive deeper understanding.

Mentioned before was how the behavior of the birds symbolizes that the entire adventure was arranged for the children's benefit. Since early Christian times the white dove has symbolized superior benevolent powers. Hansel claims to be looking back at a white dove that is sitting on the roof of the parental home, wanting to say goodbye to him. It is a snow-white bird, singing delightfully, which leads the children to the gingerbread house and then settles on its roof, suggesting that this is the right place for them to arrive at. Another white bird is needed to guide the children back to safety: their way home is blocked by a "big water" which they can cross only with the help of a white duck.

The children do not encounter any expanse of water on their way in. Having to cross one on their return symbolizes a transition, and a new beginning on a higher level of existence (as in baptism). Up to the time they have to cross this water, the children have never separated. The school-age child should develop consciousness of his personal uniqueness, of his individuality, which means that he can no longer share everything with others, has to live to some degree by himself and stride out on his own. This is symbolically expressed by the children not being able to remain together in crossing the water. As they arrive there, Hansel sees no way to get across, but Gretel spies a white duck and asks it to help them cross the water. Hansel seats himself on its back and asks his sister to join him. But she knows better: this will not do. They have to cross over separately, and they do.

The children's experience at the witch's house has purged them of their oral fixations; after having crossed the water, they arrive at the other shore as more mature children, ready to rely on their own intelligence and initiative to solve life's problems. As dependent children they had been a burden to their parents; on their return they have become the family's support, as they bring home the treasures they have gained. These treasures are the children's new-won independence in thought and action, a new self-reliance which is the opposite of the passive dependence which characterized them when they were deserted in the woods.

It is females—the stepmother and the witch—who are the inimical forces in this story. Gretel's importance in the children's deliverance reassures the child that a female can be a rescuer as well as a destroyer. Probably even more important is the fact that Hansel saves them once and then later Gretel saves them again, which suggests to children that as they grow up they must come to rely more and more

on their age mates for mutual help and understanding. This idea reinforces the story's main thrust, which is a warning against regression, and an encouragement of growth toward a higher plane of psychological and intellectual existence.

"Hansel and Gretel" ends with the heroes returning to the home from which they started, and now finding happiness there. This is psychologically correct, because a young child, driven into his adventures by oral or oedipal problems, cannot hope to find happiness outside the home. If all is to go well in his development, he must work these problems out while still dependent on his parents. Only through good relations with his parents can a child successfully mature into adolescence.

Having overcome his oedipal difficulties, mastered his oral anxieties, sublimated those of his cravings which cannot be satisfied realistically, and learned that wishful thinking has to be replaced by intelligent action, the child is ready to live happily again with his parents. This is symbolized by the treasures Hansel and Gretel bring home to share with their father. Rather than expecting everything good to come from the parents, the older child needs to be able to make some contribution to the emotional well-being of himself and his family.

As "Hansel and Gretel" begins matter-of-factly with the worries of a poor woodcutter's family unable to make ends meet, it ends on an equally down-to-earth level. Although the story tells that the children brought home a pile of pearls and precious stones, nothing further suggests that their economic way of life was changed. This emphasizes the symbolic nature of these jewels. The tale concludes: "Then all worries ended, and they lived together in perfect joy. My tale is ended; there runs a mouse, who catches it may make himself a big fur cap out of it." Nothing has changed by the end of "Hansel and Gretel" but inner attitudes; or, more correctly, all has changed because inner attitudes have changed. No more will the children feel pushed out, deserted, and lost in the darkness of the forest; nor will they seek for the miraculous gingerbread house. But neither will they encounter or fear the witch, since they have proved to themselves that through their combined efforts they can outsmart her and be victorious. Industry, making something good even out of unpromising material (such as by using the fur of a mouse intelligently for making a cap), is the virtue and real achievement of the school-age child who has fought through and mastered the oedipal difficulties.

"Hansel and Gretel" is one of many fairy tales where two siblings cooperate in rescuing each other and succeed because of their com-

bined efforts. These stories direct the child toward transcending his immature dependence on his parents and reaching the next higher stage of development: cherishing also the support of age mates. Cooperating with them in meeting life's tasks will eventually have to replace the child's single-minded reliance on his parents only. The child of school age often cannot yet believe that he ever will be able to meet the world without his parents; that is why he wishes to hold on to them beyond the necessary point. He needs to learn to trust that someday he will master the dangers of the world, even in the exaggerated form in which his fears depict them, and be enriched by it.

The child views existential dangers not objectively, but fantastically exaggerated in line with his immature dread—for example, personified as a child-devouring witch. "Hansel and Gretel" encourages the child to explore on his own even the figments of his anxious imagination, because such fairy tales give him confidence that he can master not only the real dangers which his parents told him about, but even those vastly exaggerated ones which he fears exist.

A witch as created by the child's anxious fantasies will haunt him; but a witch he can push into her own oven and burn to death is a witch the child can believe himself rid of. As long as children continue to believe in witches—they always have and always will, up to the age when they no longer are compelled to give their formless apprehensions humanlike appearance—they need to be told stories in which children, by being ingenious, rid themselves of these persecuting figures of their imagination. By succeeding in doing so, they gain immensely from the experience, as did Hansel and Gretel.

## THE JEALOUS QUEEN IN “SNOW WHITE” AND THE MYTH OF OEDIPUS

Since fairy tales deal imaginatively with the most important developmental issues in all our lives, it is not surprising that so many of them center in some way on oedipal difficulties. But so far the fairy tales discussed have focused on the problems of the child and not those of the parent. In actuality, as the relation of a child to his parent is full of problems, so is that of a parent to his child, so many fairy tales touch also on the parents' oedipal problems. While the child is encouraged to believe that he is quite able to find his way out of his oedipal difficulties, the parent is warned against the disastrous consequences for him if he permits himself to get caught up in them.\*

In “Jack and the Beanstalk” a mother's unreadiness to permit her

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a fairy tells Jack that the giant's castle and the magic objects were once the possessions of Jack's father, which the giant took after killing him; and that Jack is therefore to slay the giant and gain rightful possession of the magic objects. This makes all that happens to Jack a moral tale of retribution rather than a story of manhood achieved.

The original “Jack and the Beanstalk” is the odyssey of a boy striving to gain independence from a mother who thinks little of him, and on his own achieving greatness. In the bowdlerized version, Jack does only what another powerful older female, the fairy, orders him to do.

One last example of how those who think they are improving on a traditional fairy tale actually do the opposite. In both versions, when Jack seizes the magic harp, it cries out “Master, Master,” awakening the ogre, who then pursues Jack with the intention of killing him. That a talking harp arouses its rightful master when being stolen makes good fairy-tale sense. But what is the child to think of a magic harp which was not only stolen from its rightful master, but stolen by the man who vilely killed him, and which in the process of being regained by his rightful master's son nevertheless arouses the thief and murderer? Changing such details robs the story of its magic impact, as it deprives the magic objects—and everything else that happens in the story—of their symbolic meaning as external representations of inner processes.

\*As with wishing, the fairy tale has full understanding that the child cannot help being subjected to the oedipal predicaments, and hence is not punished if he acts in line with them. But the parent who permits himself to act out *his* oedipal problems on the child suffers severely for it.

son to become independent was hinted at. “Snow White” tells how a parent—the queen—gets destroyed by jealousy of her child who, in growing up, surpasses her. In the Greek tragedy of Oedipus, who is of course undone by oedipal entanglements, not only is his mother, Jocasta, also ruined, but first of all to fall is Oedipus' father, Laius, whose fear that his son will replace him eventually leads to the tragedy that undoes them all. The queen's fear that Snow White will excel her is the theme of the fairy tale which carries the wronged child's name, as does the story of Oedipus. It may be useful, therefore, to consider briefly this famous myth which, through psychoanalytic writings, has become the metaphor by which we refer to a particular emotional constellation within the family—one that can cause the most severe impediments to growing up into a mature, well-integrated person, while being, on the other hand, the potential source of the richest personality development.

In general, the less a person has been able to resolve his oedipal feelings constructively, the greater the danger that he may be beset by them again when he becomes a parent. The male parent who has failed to integrate in the process of maturation his childish wish to possess his mother and his irrational fear of his father is likely to be anxious about his son as a competitor, and may even act destructively out of this fear, as we are told King Laius did. Nor does the child's unconscious fail to respond to such feelings in a parent, if they are part of his relation to his child. The fairy story permits the child to comprehend that not only is he jealous of his parent, but that the parent may have parallel feelings—an insight that can not only help to bridge the gap between parent and child, but may also permit dealing constructively with difficulties in relating which otherwise would not be accessible to resolution. Even more important, the fairy tale reassures the child that he need not be afraid of parental jealousy where it may exist, because he will survive successfully, whatever complications these feelings may create temporarily.

Fairy tales do not tell *why* a parent may be unable to enjoy his child's growing up and surpassing him, but becomes jealous of the child. We do not know why the queen in “Snow White” cannot age gracefully and gain satisfaction from vicariously enjoying her daughter's blooming into a lovely girl, but something must have happened in her past to make her vulnerable so that she hates the child she should love. How the sequence of the generations can account for a parent's fear of his child is illustrated in the cycle of myths of which the story of Oedipus is the central part.<sup>61</sup>

This mythic cycle, which ends with *The Seven Against Thebes*, begins with Tantalus, who as a friend of the gods tried to test their ability to know everything by having his son Pelops slain and served to the gods as dinner. (The queen in “Snow White” orders that her daughter be killed, and eats what she believes to be part of Snow White’s body.) The myth tells that it was Tantalus’ vanity which motivated his evil deed, as it is vanity which spurs the queen to commit her villainy. The queen, who wanted to remain fairest forever, is punished by having to dance to her death, in red-hot shoes. Tantalus, who tried to fool the gods with his son’s body as food, suffers eternally in Hades, by being tempted to satisfy his unending thirst and hunger with water and fruits which seem within his grasp but recede as soon as he tries to seize them. Thus, punishment does fit the crime in myth and fairy tale.

In both stories also, death does not necessarily signify the end of life, as Pelops is restored by the gods, and Snow White regains her consciousness. Death is rather a symbol that this person is wished away—just as the oedipal child does not really wish to see his parent-competitor die, but simply wants him removed from the child’s way of winning his other parent’s complete attention. The child’s expectation is that, much as he has wished a parent out of the way at one moment, the parent should be very much alive and at the child’s service in the next. Accordingly, in the fairy tale a person is dead or turned into stone at one moment, and comes to life in the next.

Tantalus was a father ready to risk his son’s well-being to feed his vanity, and this was destructive to him, and also to his son. Pelops, having been used thus by his father, later does not hesitate to kill a father to gain his goals. King Oenomaus of Elis selfishly wished to keep his beautiful daughter, Hippodamia, all to himself, and he devised a scheme by which he disguised this desire while making sure that his daughter would never leave him. Any suitor for Hippodamia had to compete with King Oenomaus in a chariot race; if the suitor won, he could marry Hippodamia; if he lost, the king gained the right to kill him, which he always did. Pelops surreptitiously replaced the brass bolts in the king’s chariot with wax ones, and in this deceitful way he won the race, in which the king was killed.

So far the myth indicates that the consequences are equally tragic if a father misuses his son for his own purposes, or if a father should, out of an oedipal attachment to his daughter, try to deprive her of a life of her own, and her suitors of their very lives. Next the myth tells of the terrible consequences of “oedipal” sibling rivalry. Pelops had

two legitimate sons, Atreus and Thyestes. Out of jealousy, Thyestes, the younger of the two, stole Atreus’ ram, which had a fleece of gold. As retribution, Atreus slaughtered Thyestes’ two sons, and fed them to Thyestes in a big banquet.

This was not the only instance of sibling rivalry in the house of Pelops. He also had an illegitimate son, Chrysippus. Laius, Oedipus’ father, as a youth found protection and a home at the court of Pelops. Despite Pelops’ kindness to him, Laius wronged Pelops by abducting—or ravishing—Chrysippus. We may assume that Laius did this out of his jealousy of Chrysippus, who was preferred to him by Pelops. In punishment for such acted-out rivalry, the oracle at Delphi told Laius he would be killed by his own son. As Tantalus had destroyed, or tried to destroy, his son, Pelops, and as Pelops had arranged for the death of his father-in-law, Oenomaus, so Oedipus would come to kill his father, Laius. In the normal course of events, a son replaces his father—so we may read all these stories as telling about the son’s wish to do this and the father’s trying to forestall it. But this myth relates that oedipal acting-out on the part of the fathers precedes oedipal acting-out on the part of the children.

To prevent his son from killing him, Laius on Oedipus’ birth had the infant’s ankles pierced and his feet tied together. Laius ordered a shepherd to take the child Oedipus and leave him in the wilderness to die. But the shepherd—like the hunter in “Snow White”—took pity on the child; he pretended to have deserted Oedipus, but gave the boy over to the care of another shepherd. This shepherd took Oedipus to his king, who raised Oedipus as his son.

As a young man, Oedipus consulted the oracle of Delphi and was told that he would slay his father and wed his mother. Thinking that the royal pair who had raised him were his parents, Oedipus did not return home but wandered off, to prevent such horror. At a crossroads he slew Laius, unaware that he was his father. On his wanderings Oedipus came to Thebes, solved the riddle of the Sphinx, and thus delivered the city. As reward, Oedipus married the queen—his widowed mother, Jocasta. Thus the son replaced his father as king and husband; the son fell in love with his mother, and the mother had sexual relations with her son. When the truth of it all was finally discovered, Jocasta committed suicide and Oedipus blinded himself; he destroyed his eyes in punishment for not having seen what he was doing.

But the tragic story does not end there. Oedipus’ twin sons, Eteocles and Polynices, did not support him in his misery, and

only his daughter Antigone stayed with and by him. Time passed, and in the war of the Seven Against Thebes, Eteocles and Polynices killed each other in combat. Antigone buried Polynices against King Creon's orders, and was killed for it. Not only does intense sibling rivalry devastate, as shown by the fate of the two brothers, but over-intense sibling attachment is equally fatal, as we learn from Antigone's fate.

To sum up the variety of death-bringing relations in these myths: instead of lovingly accepting his son, Tantalus sacrifices him to his own ends; so does Laius in respect to Oedipus; and both fathers end up destroyed. Oenomaus dies because he tries to keep his daughter all to himself, as does Jocasta, who attaches herself too closely to her son: sexual love for the child of the other sex is as destructive as acted-out fear that the child of the same sex will replace and surpass the parent. Doing away with the parent of the same sex is Oedipus' undoing, as it is that of his sons who desert him in his distress. Sibling rivalry kills Oedipus' sons. Antigone, who does not forsake her father, Oedipus, but on the contrary shares his misery, dies because of her too great devotion to her brother.

But still this does not conclude the story. Creon, who as king condemns Antigone to die, does so against the entreaties of his son, Haemon, who loves Antigone. In destroying Antigone, Creon also destroys his son; once more, here is a father who cannot give up ruling his son's life. Haemon, in despair over Antigone's death, tries to kill his father and, failing to do so, commits suicide; so does his mother, Creon's wife, in consequence of her son's death. The only one to survive in the family of Oedipus is Ismene, Antigone's sister, who has not attached herself too deeply to either of her parents, nor any of her siblings, and with whom no member of the immediate family had become deeply involved. According to the myth, there seems to be no way out: whoever by chance or his own desires remains too deeply entangled in an "oedipal" relation is destroyed.

Nearly all types of incestuous attachment are found in this cycle of myths, and all types are intimated also in fairy tales. But in fairy tales the hero's story shows how these potentially destructive infantile relations can be, and are, integrated in developmental processes. In the myth, oedipal difficulties are acted out and in consequence all ends in total destruction, whether the relations are positive or negative. The message is clear enough: when a parent cannot accept his child as such and be satisfied that he will have to be replaced by him eventually, deepest tragedy results. Only an acceptance of the child as child—neither as a competitor nor as a sexual love object—permits good

relations between parents and children, and between the siblings.

How different are the ways the fairy tale and this classic myth present oedipal relations and their consequences. Despite her step-mother's jealousy, Snow White not only survives but finds great happiness, as does Rapunzel, whose parents had given her up because satisfying their own cravings had been more important to them than keeping their daughter, and whose foster mother tried to hold on to her for too long. Beauty in "Beauty and the Beast" is loved by her father, and she loves him equally deeply. Neither of them is punished for their mutual attachment: on the contrary, Beauty saves her father and the Beast by transferring her attachment from father to lover. Cinderella, far from being destroyed by her siblings' jealousy as were Oedipus' sons, emerges victorious.

It is thus in all fairy tales. The message of *these* stories is that oedipal entanglements and difficulties may seem to be unsolvable, but by courageously struggling with these emotional familial complexities, one can achieve a much better life than those who are never beset by severe problems. In the myth there is only insurmountable difficulty and defeat; in the fairy tale there is equal peril, but it is successfully overcome. Not death and destruction, but higher integration—is symbolized by victory over the enemy or competitor, and by happiness—is the hero's reward at the end of the fairy tale. To gain it, he undergoes growth experiences that parallel those necessary for the child's development toward maturity. This gives the child the courage not to become dismayed by the difficulties he encounters in his struggle to become himself.

## "SNOW WHITE"

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"Snow White" is one of the best-known fairy tales. It has been told for centuries in various forms in all European countries and languages; from there it was disseminated to the other continents. More often than not, the story's title is simply the name "Snow White," although there are many variations.\* "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," the

\*For example, one Italian version is called "*La Ragazza di Latte e Sangue*" ("The Girl of Milk and Blood"), which finds its explanation in the fact that in many Italian renderings the three drops of blood which the queen sheds do not fall on snow, which is very rare in most parts of Italy, but instead on milk, white marble, or even white cheese.

name by which the tale is now widely known, is a bowdlerization which unfortunately emphasizes the dwarfs, who, failing to develop into mature humanity, are permanently arrested on a pre-oedipal level (dwarfs have no parents, nor do they marry or have children) and are but foils to set off the important developments taking place in Snow White.

Some versions of “Snow White” begin: “A count and a countess drove by three mounds of white snow which made the count say, ‘I wish I had a girl as white as this snow.’ A short while later they came to three holes full of red blood, at which he said, ‘I wish I had a girl with cheeks as red as this blood.’ Finally three black ravens flew by, at which moment he desired a girl ‘with hair as black as these ravens.’ As they drove on, they encountered a girl as white as snow, as red as blood, and with hair as black as the raven; and she was Snow White. The count immediately made her sit in the coach and loved her, but the countess did not like it and thought only about how she could get rid of her. Finally she dropped her glove and ordered Snow White to look for it; in the meantime the coachman had to drive on with great speed.”

A parallel version differs only in the detail that the couple drive through a forest and Snow White is asked to descend to gather a bunch of beautiful roses which grow there. As she does so, the queen orders the coachman to drive on, and Snow White is deserted.<sup>62</sup>

In these renderings of the story, the count and countess or king and queen are thinly disguised parents, and the girl so admired by a father figure and found by chance is a surrogate daughter. The oedipal desires of a father and daughter, and how these arouse the mother’s jealousy which makes her wish to get rid of the daughter, are much more clearly stated here than in more common versions. The now widely accepted form of “Snow White” leaves the oedipal entanglements to our imagination rather than forcing them on our conscious mind.\*<sup>63</sup>

\*Some elements of one of the earliest versions of the “Snow White” motif found in Basile’s “The Young Slave” make it clear that the heroine’s persecution is due to a(step)mother’s jealousy, the cause of which is not just the young girl’s beauty, but rather the real or imagined love of the (step)mother’s husband for the girl. The girl, whose name is Lisa, dies temporarily from a comb that gets stuck in her hair. Like Snow White, she is buried in a casket of crystal in which she continues to grow as the coffin grows with her. After she has spent seven years in the coffin, her uncle goes away. This uncle, who is her foster father really, is the only father she has ever had, since her mother was magically impregnated by the leaf of a rose which she had swallowed. His wife, insanely jealous because of what she views as her husband’s love

“Snow White”

Whether openly stated or only hinted at, oedipal difficulties and how the individual solves them are central to the way his personality and human relations unfold. By camouflaging the oedipal predicaments, or by only subtly intimating the entanglements, fairy stories permit us to draw our own conclusions when the time is propitious for our gaining a better understanding of these problems. Fairy stories teach by indirection. In the versions just mentioned, Snow White is not the count’s and countess’ child, deeply desired and loved though she is by the count, and jealous though the countess is of her. In the well-known story of Snow White, the jealous older female is not her mother but her stepmother, and the person for whose love the two are in competition is not mentioned. So the oedipal problems—source of the story’s conflict—are left to our imagination.

While, physiologically speaking, the parents create the child, it is the arrival of the child which causes these two people to become parents. Thus, it is the child who creates the parental problems, and with these come his own. Fairy tales usually begin when the child’s life in some manner has reached an impasse. In “Hansel and Gretel” the children’s presence creates hardships for the parents, and because of this, life turns problematic for the children. In “Snow White” it is not any external difficulty such as poverty, but the relations between her and her parents which create the problematic situation.

As soon as the position of the child within the family becomes a problem to him or to his parents, the process of the child’s struggle to escape the triadic existence has begun. With it, he enters the often desperately lonely course to find himself—a struggle in which others serve mainly as foils who facilitate or impede this process. In some fairy tales the hero has to search, travel, and suffer through years of a lonely existence before he is ready to find, rescue, and join one other person in a relation which gives permanent meaning to both their lives. In “Snow White” it is the years Snow White spends with the dwarfs which stand for her time of troubles, of working through problems, her period of growth.

Few fairy tales help the hearer to distinguish between the main phases of childhood development as neatly as does “Snow White.” The earliest, entirely dependent pre-oedipal years are hardly men-

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for Lisa, shakes her out of the coffin; the comb drops out of her hair, and she awakes.. The jealous (step)mother turns her into a slave; hence the story’s title. At the end, the uncle finds out that the young slave girl is Lisa. He restores her and drives away his wife, who, out of jealousy for his love for Lisa, has nearly destroyed her.<sup>64</sup>

tioned, as is true of most fairy tales. The story deals essentially with the oedipal conflicts between mother and daughter; with childhood; and finally with adolescence, placing major emphasis on what constitutes a good childhood, and what is needed to grow out of it.

The Brothers Grimm's story of "Snow White" begins: "Once upon a time, in the middle of winter when the snow flakes fell like feathers from the sky, a queen sat at a window which had a frame of black ebony. And as she was sewing while looking at the snow, she pricked her finger with the needle and three drops of blood fell on the snow. The red looked so beautiful on the white snow that she thought to herself, 'I wish I had a child as white as snow, as red as the blood, and with hair as black as the wood of the window frame.' Soon after she got a little daughter who was as white as snow, as red as blood, and had hair as black as ebony, and she was therefore called Snow White. And when the child had been born, the queen died. After a year had passed, the king took himself another wife. . . ."

The story begins with Snow White's mother pricking her finger so that three drops of red blood fall upon the snow. Here the problems the story sets out to solve are intimated: sexual innocence, whiteness, is contrasted with sexual desire, symbolized by the red blood. Fairy tales prepare the child to accept what is otherwise a most upsetting event: sexual bleeding, as in menstruation and later in intercourse when the hymen is broken. Listening to the first few sentences of "Snow White," the child learns that a small amount of bleeding—three drops of blood (three being the number most closely associated in the unconscious with sex<sup>65</sup>)—is a precondition for conception, because only after this bleeding is the child born. Here, then, (sexual) bleeding is closely connected with a "happy" event; without detailed explanations the child learns that without bleeding no child—not even he—could have been born.

Although we are told that her mother died when she was born, during her first years nothing bad happens to Snow White, despite the fact that her mother is replaced by a stepmother. The latter turns into the "typical" fairy-tale stepmother only *after* Snow White reaches the age of seven and starts to mature. Then the stepmother begins to feel threatened by Snow White and becomes jealous. The stepmother's narcissism is demonstrated by her seeking reassurance about her beauty from the magic mirror long before Snow White's beauty eclipses hers.

The queen's consulting the mirror about her worth—i.e., beauty—repeats the ancient theme of Narcissus, who loved only himself, so much that he became swallowed up by his self-love. It is the narcissis-

tic parent who feels most threatened by his child's growing up, because that means the parent must be aging. As long as the child is totally dependent, he remains, as it were, *part* of the parent; he does not threaten the parent's narcissism. But when the child begins to mature and reaches for independence, then he is experienced as a menace by such a parent, as happens to the queen in "Snow White."

Narcissism is very much part of the young child's make-up. The child must gradually learn to transcend this dangerous form of self-involvement. The story of Snow White warns of the evil consequences of narcissism for both parent and child. Snow White's narcissism nearly undoes her as she gives in twice to the disguised queen's enticements to make her look more beautiful, while the queen is destroyed by her own narcissism.

As long as she remained home, Snow White did nothing; we hear nothing about her life before her expulsion. We are told nothing about her relation to her father, although it is reasonable to assume that it is competition for him which sets (step)mother against daughter.

The fairy tale views the world and what happens in it not objectively, but from the perspective of the hero, who is always a person in development. Since the hearer identifies with Snow White, he sees all events through her eyes, and not through those of the queen. To the girl child, her love for her father is the most natural thing in the world, and so is his love for her. She cannot conceive of this being a problem—short of his not loving her enough, in preference to everybody else. Much as the child wants the father to love her more than her mother, she cannot accept that this may create jealousy of her in the mother. But on a preconscious level, the child knows quite well how jealous she is of the attention one parent pays to the other, when the child feels she should get that attention. Since the child wants to be loved by both parents—a fact which is well known, but in discussion of the oedipal situation is frequently neglected because of the nature of the problem—it is much too threatening for the child to imagine that love for him by one parent may create jealousy in the other. When this jealousy—as is true for the queen in "Snow White"—cannot be overlooked, then some other reason must be found to explain it, as in the story it is ascribed to the child's beauty.

In the normal course of events, the relations of parents to each other are not threatened by the love of one or both parents for their child. Unless the marital relations are quite bad, or a parent is very narcissistic, jealousy of a child favored by one parent remains small and well controlled by the other parent.

Matters are quite different for the child. First, he cannot find solace

for the pangs of jealousy in a good relation such as that his parents have with each other. Second, all children are jealous, if not of their parents, then of the privileges the parents enjoy as adults. When the tender, loving care of the parent of the same sex is not strong enough to build up ever more important positive ties in the naturally jealous oedipal child, and with it set the process of identification working against this jealousy, then the latter dominates the child's emotional life. Since a narcissistic (step)mother is an unsuitable figure to relate to or identify with, Snow White, if she were a real child, could not help being intensely jealous of her mother and all her advantages and powers.

If a child cannot permit himself to feel his jealousy of a parent (this is very threatening to his security), he projects his feelings onto this parent. Then "I am jealous of all the advantages and prerogatives of Mother" turns into the wishful thought: "Mother is jealous of me." The feeling of inferiority is defensively turned into a feeling of superiority.

The prepubertal or adolescent child may say to himself, "I do not compete with my parents, I am already better than they are; it's they who are competing with me." Unfortunately, there are also parents who try to convince their adolescent children that they are superior to them—which the parents may well be in some respects, but for the sake of their children's ability to become secure, they ought to keep this fact to themselves. Worse, there are parents who maintain that they are in all ways as good as their adolescent child: the father who attempts to keep up with the youthful strength and sexual prowess of his son; the mother who tries in looks, dress, and behavior to be as youthfully attractive as her daughter. The ancient history of stories such as "Snow White" suggests that this is an age-old phenomenon. But competition between a parent and his child makes life unbearable for parent and child. Under such conditions the child wants to free himself and be rid of the parent, who forces him either to compete or to buckle under. The wish to be rid of the parent arouses great guilt, justified though it may be when the situation is viewed objectively. So in a reversal which eliminates the guilt feeling, this wish, too, is projected onto the parent. Thus, in fairy tales there are parents who try to rid themselves of their child, as happens in "Snow White."

In "Snow White," as in "Little Red Riding Hood," a male who can be viewed as an unconscious representation of the father appears—the hunter who is ordered to kill Snow White, but instead saves her life.

Who else but a father substitute would seem to acquiesce to the stepmother's dominance and nevertheless, for the child's sake, dare to go against the queen's will? This is what the oedipal and adolescent girl wishes to believe about her father: that even though he does as the mother bids him, he would side with his daughter if he were free to, tricking the mother as he did so.

Why are rescuing male figures so often cast in the role of hunters in fairy tales? While hunting may have been a typically masculine occupation when fairy stories came into being, this is much too easy an explanation. At that time princes and princesses were as rare as they are today, and fairy tales simply abound with them. But when and where these stories originated, hunting was an aristocratic privilege, which supplies a good reason to see the hunter as an exalted figure like a father.

Actually, hunters appear frequently in fairy tales because they lend themselves so well to projections. Every child at some time wishes that he were a prince or a princess—and at times, in his unconscious, the child believes he is one, only temporarily degraded by circumstances. There are so many kings and queens in fairy tales because their rank signifies absolute power, such as the parent seems to hold over his child. So the fairy-tale royalty represent projections of the child's imagination, as does the hunter.

The ready acceptance of the hunter figure as a suitable image of a strong and protective father figure—as opposed to the many ineffectual fathers such as the one in "Hansel and Gretel"—must relate to associations which attach themselves to this figure. In the unconscious the hunter is seen as the symbol of protection. In this connection we must consider the animal phobias of which no child is entirely free. In his dreams and daydreams the child is threatened and pursued by angry animals, creations of his fear and guilt. Only the parent-hunter, so he feels, can scare these threatening animals away, keep them permanently from the child's door. Hence the hunter of fairy tales is not a figure who kills friendly creatures, but one who dominates, controls, and subdues wild, ferocious beasts. On a deeper level, he represents the subjugation of the animal, asocial, violent tendencies in man. Since he seeks out, tracks down, and defeats what are viewed as lower aspects of man—the wolf—the hunter is an eminently protective figure who can and does save us from the dangers of our violent emotions and those of others.

In "Snow White" the pubertal girl's oedipal struggle is not repressed, but acted out around the mother as competitor. In Snow



White's story the father-huntsman fails to take a strong and definite stand. He neither does his duty to the queen, nor meets his moral obligation to Snow White to make her safe and secure. He does not kill her outright, but he deserts her in the forest, expecting her to be killed by wild animals. The hunter tries to placate both the mother, by seemingly executing her order, and the girl, by merely not killing her. Lasting hatred and jealousy of the mother are the consequence of the father's ambivalence, which in "Snow White" are projected onto the evil queen, who therefore continues to reappear in Snow White's life.

A weak father is as little use to Snow White as he was to Hansel and Gretel. The frequent appearance of such figures in fairy tales suggests that wife-dominated husbands are not exactly new to this world. More to the point, it is such fathers who either create unmanageable difficulties in the child or fail to help him solve them. This is another example of the important messages fairy tales contain for parents.

Why is the mother outright rejecting in these fairy tales while the father is often only ineffectual and weak? The reason the (step)mother is depicted as evil and the father as weak has to do with what the child expects of his parents. In the typical nuclear family setting, it is the father's duty to protect the child against the dangers of the outside world, and also those that originate in the child's own asocial tendencies. The mother is to provide nurturing care and the general satisfaction of immediate bodily needs required for the child's survival. Therefore, if the mother fails the child in fairy tales, the child's very life is in jeopardy, as happens in "Hansel and Gretel" when the mother insists that the children must be gotten rid of. If the father out of weakness is negligent in meeting his obligations, then the child's life as such is not so directly endangered, although a child deprived of the father's protection must shift for himself as best he can. So Snow White must fend for herself when she is abandoned by the hunter in the forest.

Only loving care combined with responsible behavior on the part of both parents permits the child to integrate his oedipal conflicts. If he is deprived of either by one or both parents, the child will not be able to identify with them. If a girl cannot form a positive identification with her mother, not only does she get stuck in oedipal conflicts, but regression sets in, as it always does when the child fails to attain the next higher stage of development for which she is chronologically ready.

The queen, who is fixated to a primitive narcissism and arrested on

the oral incorporative stage, is a person who cannot positively relate, nor can anybody identify with her. The queen orders the hunter not only to kill Snow White, but to return with her lungs and liver as evidence. When the hunter brings the queen the lungs and liver of an animal to prove he has executed her command, "The cook had to cook them in salt, and the bad woman ate them and thought she had eaten Snow White's lungs and liver." In primitive thought and custom, one acquires the powers or characteristics of what one eats. The queen, jealous of Snow White's beauty, wanted to incorporate Snow White's attractiveness, as symbolized by her internal organs.

This is not the first story of a mother's jealousy of her daughter's budding sexuality, nor is it all that rare that a daughter in her mind accuses her mother of such jealousy. The magic mirror seems to speak with the voice of a daughter rather than that of a mother. As the small girl thinks her mother is the most beautiful person in the world, this is what the mirror initially tells the queen. But as the older girl thinks she is much more beautiful than her mother, this is what the mirror says later. A mother may be dismayed when looking into the mirror; she compares herself to her daughter and thinks to herself: "My daughter is more beautiful than I am." But the mirror says: "She is a thousand times more beautiful"—a statement much more akin to an adolescent's exaggeration which he makes to enlarge his advantages and silence his inner voice of doubt.

The pubertal child is ambivalent in his wish to be much better than his parent of the same sex because the child fears that if this were actually so, the parent, still much more powerful, would take terrible revenge. It is the child who fears destruction because of his imagined or real superiority, not the parent who wishes to destroy. The parent may suffer pangs of jealousy if he, in his turn, has not succeeded in identifying with his child in a very positive way, because only then can he take vicarious pleasure in his child's accomplishments. It is essential that the parent identify strongly with his child of the same sex for the child's identification with him to prove successful.

Whenever the oedipal conflicts are revived in the pubertal child, he finds life with his family unbearable because of his violently ambivalent feelings. To escape his inner turmoil, he dreams of being the child of different and better parents with whom he would have none of these psychological difficulties. Some children even go beyond such fantasizing and actually run away in search of this ideal home. Fairy tales, however, implicitly teach the child that it exists only in an imaginary country, and that when found, it often turns out to be far

from satisfying. This is true for Hansel and Gretel and also for Snow White. While Snow White's experience with a home away from home is less scary than Hansel's and Gretel's, it does not work out too well either. The dwarfs are unable to protect her, and her mother continues to have power over her which Snow White cannot help giving her—as symbolized by Snow White's permitting the queen (in her various disguises) entry into the house, despite the dwarfs' warnings to beware of the queen's tricks and not let anybody in.

One cannot free oneself from the impact of one's parents and one's feelings about them by running away from home—although that seems the easiest way out. One succeeds in gaining independence only by working through one's inner conflicts, which children usually try to project onto their parents. At first every child wishes that it would be possible to evade the difficult work of integration, which, as Snow White's story also shows, is fraught with great dangers. For a time it seems feasible to escape this task. Snow White lives a peaceful existence for a while, and under the guidance of the dwarfs she grows from a child helpless to deal with the difficulties of the world into a girl who learns to work well, and to enjoy it. This is what the dwarfs request of her for living with them: she can remain with them and lack nothing if “you will take care of our household, cook, make the beds, wash, sew and knit, and will keep everything clean and in good order.” Snow White becomes a good housekeeper, as is true of many a young girl who, with mother away, takes good care of her father, the house, and even her siblings.

Even before she meets the dwarfs, Snow White shows that she can control her oral cravings, great as they are. Once in the dwarfs' house, though very hungry, she eats just a little from each of the seven plates, and drinks just a drop from each of the seven glasses, so as to rob none of them too much. (How different from Hansel and Gretel, the orally fixated children, who disrespectfully and voraciously eat up the gingerbreadhouse!)

After having satisfied her hunger, Snow White tries out all seven beds, but one is too long, another too short, until finally she falls asleep in the seventh bed. Snow White knows that these are all some other persons' beds, and that each bed's owner will want to sleep in his bed, despite Snow White's lying in it. Her exploration of every bed suggests she is dimly aware of this risk, and she tries to settle into one where no such risk is involved. And she is right. The dwarfs on coming home are very much taken with her beauty, but the seventh dwarf, in whose bed she is sleeping, does not claim it but instead “slept with his com-

panions, one hour with each, until the night had passed.”

Given the popular view of Snow White's innocence, the notion that she may have subconsciously risked being in bed with a man seems outrageous. But Snow White shows, by permitting herself to be tempted three times by the queen in disguise, that, like most humans—and, most of all, adolescents—she is quite easily tempted. However, Snow White's inability to resist temptation makes her all the more human and attractive, without the hearer of the story becoming consciously aware of this. On the other hand, her behavior in restraining herself in eating and drinking, her resisting sleeping in a bed that is not just right for her shows that she also has learned to control to some degree her id impulses and to subject them to superego requirements. We find that her ego too has matured, since now she works hard and well, and shares with others.

Dwarfs—these diminutive men—have different connotations in various fairy tales.<sup>66</sup> Like the fairies themselves, they can be good or bad; in “Snow White” they are of the helpful variety. The first thing we learn about them is that they have returned home from working as miners in the mountains. Like all dwarfs, even the unpleasant ones, they are hard-working and clever at their trade. Work is the essence of their lives; they know nothing of leisure or recreation. Although the dwarfs are immediately impressed by Snow White's beauty and moved by her tale of misfortune, they make it clear right away that the price of living with them is engaging in conscientious work. The seven dwarfs suggest the seven days of the week—days filled with work. It is this working world Snow White has to make her own if she is to grow up well; this aspect of her sojourn with the dwarfs is easily understood.

Other historical meanings of dwarfs may serve to explain them further. European fairy tales and legends were often residuals of pre-Christian religious themes which became unacceptable because Christianity would not brook pagan tendencies in open form. In a fashion, Snow White's perfect beauty seems distantly derived from the sun; her name suggests the whiteness and purity of strong light. According to the ancients, seven planets circle the sun, hence the seven dwarfs. Dwarfs or gnomes, in Teutonic lore, are workers of the earth, extracting metals, of which only seven were commonly known in past times—another reason why these miners are seven in number. And each of these seven metals was related to one of the planets in ancient natural philosophy (gold to the sun, silver to the moon, etc.).

These connotations are not readily available to the modern child.

But the dwarfs evoke other unconscious associations. There are no female dwarfs. While all fairies are female, wizards are their male counterparts, and there are both sorcerers and sorceresses, or witches. So dwarfs are eminently male, but males who are stunted in their development. These “little men” with their stunted bodies and their mining occupation—they skillfully penetrate into dark holes—all suggest phallic connotations. They are certainly not men in any sexual sense—their way of life, their interest in material goods to the exclusion of love, suggest a pre-oedipal existence.\*

At first sight it may seem strange to identify a figure that symbolizes a phallic existence as also representing childhood before puberty, a period during which all forms of sexuality are relatively dormant. But the dwarfs are free of inner conflicts, and have no desire to move beyond their phallic existence to intimate relations. They are satisfied with an identical round of activities; their life is a never-changing circle of work in the womb of the earth, as the planets circle endlessly in a never-changing path in the sky. This lack of change or of any desire for it is what makes their existence parallel that of the prepubertal child. And this is why the dwarfs do not understand or sympathize with the inner pressures which make it impossible for Snow White to resist the queen’s temptations. Conflicts are what make us dissatisfied with our present way of life and induce us to find other solutions; if we were free of conflicts, we would never run the risks involved in moving on to a different and, we hope, higher form of living.

The peaceful pre-adolescent period Snow White has while living with the dwarfs before the queen again disturbs her gives her the strength to move into adolescence. Thus she enters once more a time of troubles—now no longer as a child who must passively suffer what Mother inflicts on her, but as a person who must take part in and responsibility for what happens to her.

Snow White and the queen’s relations are symbolic of some severe difficulties which may occur between mother and daughter. But they

\*Giving each dwarf a separate name and a distinctive personality—in the fairy tale they are all identical—as in the Walt Disney film, seriously interferes with the unconscious understanding that they symbolize an immature pre-individual form of existence which Snow White must transcend. Such ill-considered additions to fairy tales, which seemingly increase the human interest, actually are apt to destroy it because they make it difficult to grasp the story’s deeper meaning correctly. The poet understands the meaning of fairy-tale figures better than a film maker and those who follow his lead in retelling the story. Anne Sexton’s poetic rendering of “Snow White” suggests their phallic nature, since she refers to them as “the dwarfs, those little hot dogs.”<sup>67</sup>

“Snow White”

are also projections onto separate figures of tendencies which are incompatible within one person. Often these inner contradictions originate in a child’s relationships with his parents. Thus, the fairy-tale projection of one side of an inner conflict onto a parental figure also represents a historical truth: this is where it originated. This is suggested by what happens to Snow White when her quiet and uneventful life with the dwarfs is interrupted.

Nearly destroyed by the early pubertal conflict and competition with her stepmother, Snow White tries to escape back into a conflict-free latency period, where sex remains dormant and hence adolescent turmoils can be avoided. But neither time nor human development remains static, and returning to a latency existence to escape the troubles of adolescence cannot succeed. As Snow White becomes an adolescent, she begins to experience the sexual desires which were repressed and dormant during latency. With this the stepmother, who represents the consciously denied elements in Snow White’s inner conflict, reappears on the scene, and shatters Snow White’s inner peace.

The readiness with which Snow White repeatedly permits herself to be tempted by the stepmother, despite the warnings of the dwarfs, suggests how close the stepmother’s temptations are to Snow White’s inner desires. The dwarfs’ admonition to let nobody enter the house—or, symbolically, Snow White’s inner being—is to no avail. (The dwarfs have an easy time preaching against adolescent dangers because, being fixated to the phallic stage of development, they are not subjected to them.) The ups and downs of adolescent conflicts are symbolized by Snow White’s twice being tempted, endangered, and rescued by returning to her previous latency existence. Snow White’s third experience with temptation finally ends her efforts to return to immaturity when encountering adolescent difficulties.

While we are not told how long Snow White lived with the dwarfs before her stepmother reappeared in her life, it is the attraction of stay-laces which induces Snow White to let the queen, disguised as a peddler woman, enter the dwarfs’ dwelling. This makes it clear that Snow White is by now a well-developed adolescent girl and, in line with the fashion of times past, in need of, and interested in, laces. The stepmother laces Snow White so tightly that she falls down as if she were dead.\*

Now, if the queen’s purpose was to kill Snow White, she could easily

\*Depending on the custom of time or place, it is not stay-laces but another piece of clothing which tempts Snow White—in some versions it is a shirt or a cloak which the queen wraps so tightly around Snow White that she collapses.

have done so at this moment. But if the queen's goal was to prevent her daughter from surpassing her, reducing her to immobility is sufficient for a time. The queen, then, stands for a parent who temporarily succeeds in maintaining his dominance by arresting his child's development. On another level the meaning of this episode is to suggest Snow White's conflicts about her adolescent desire to be well laced because it makes her sexually attractive. Her collapsing unconscious symbolizes that she became overwhelmed by the conflict between her sexual desires and her anxiety about them. Since it is Snow White's own vanity which seduces her into letting herself be laced, she and the vain stepmother have much in common. It seems that Snow White's adolescent conflicts and desires are her undoing. But the fairy tale knows better, and it continues to teach the child a more significant lesson: without having experienced and mastered those dangers which come with growing up, Snow White would never be united with her prince.

On their return from work, the good dwarfs find Snow White unconscious and unlace her. She comes to life again; she retreats temporarily into latency. The dwarfs warn her once more, and more seriously, against the tricks of the evil queen—that is, against the temptations of sex. But Snow White's desires are too strong. When the queen, disguised as an old woman, offers to fix Snow White's hair—"Now I will comb you properly for once"—Snow White is again seduced and lets her do it. Snow White's conscious intentions are overwhelmed by her desire to have a beautiful coiffure, and her unconscious wish is to be sexually attractive. Once more this wish is "poisonous" to Snow White in her early, immature adolescent state, and she again loses consciousness. Again the dwarfs rescue her. The third time Snow White gives in to temptation, she eats of the fateful apple which the queen, dressed up as a peasant woman, hands to her. The dwarfs can no longer help her then, because regression from adolescence to a latency existence has ceased to be a solution for Snow White.

In many myths as well as fairy tales, the apple stands for love and sex, in both its benevolent and its dangerous aspect. An apple given to Aphrodite, the goddess of love, showing she was preferred to chaste goddesses, led to the Trojan War. It was the Biblical apple with which man was seduced to forswear his innocence in order to gain knowledge and sexuality. While it was Eve who was tempted by male masculinity, as represented by the snake, not even the snake could do it all by itself—it needed the apple, which in religious iconography also

symbolizes the mother's breast. On our mother's breast we were all first attracted to form a relation, and find satisfaction in it. In "Snow White" mother and daughter share the apple. That which is symbolized by the apple in "Snow White" is something mother and daughter have in common which runs even deeper than their jealousy of each other—their mature sexual desires.

To overcome Snow White's suspicion of her, the queen cuts the apple in half, eating the white part herself, while Snow White accepts the red, "poisonous" half. Repeatedly we have been told of Snow White's double nature: she was as white as snow and as red as blood—that is, her being has both its asexual and its erotic aspect. Eating the red (erotic) part of the apple is the end of Snow White's "innocence." The dwarfs, the companions of her latency existence, can no longer bring her back to life; Snow White has made her choice, which is as necessary as it is fateful. The redness of the apple evokes sexual associations like the three drops of blood which led to Snow White's birth, and also menstruation, the event which marks the beginning of sexual maturity.

As she eats of the red part of the apple, the child in Snow White dies, and is buried in a transparent coffin made of glass. There she rests for a long time, visited not only by the dwarfs but also by three birds: first an owl, then a raven, and last a dove. The owl symbolizes wisdom; the raven—as in the Teutonic god Woden's raven—probably mature consciousness; and the dove stands traditionally for love. These birds suggest that Snow White's deathlike sleep in the coffin is a period of gestation which is her final period of preparing for maturity.\*

Snow White's story teaches that just because one has reached physical maturity, one is by no means intellectually and emotionally ready for adulthood, as represented by marriage. Considerable growth and time are needed before the new, more mature personality is formed and the old conflicts are integrated. Only then is one ready for a partner of the other sex, and the intimate relation with him which is

\*This period of inertness may further explain Snow White's name, which stresses only one of the three colors that account for her beauty. White frequently symbolizes purity, innocence, the spiritual. But by emphasizing the connection with snow, inertness is also symbolized. When snow covers the earth, all life seems to stop, as Snow White's life seems to have stopped while she is lying in her coffin. Then her eating of the red apple was premature; she had overreached herself. Experiencing sexuality too soon, the story warns, can lead to nothing good. But when it is followed by a prolonged period of inertia, then the girl can recuperate fully from her premature and hence destructive experiences with sexuality.

needed for the achievement of mature adulthood. Snow White's partner is the prince, who "carries her off" in her coffin—which causes her to cough up or spit out the poisonous apple and come to life, ready for marriage. Her tragedy began with oral incorporative desires: the queen's wish to eat Snow White's internal organs. Snow White's spitting out of the suffocating apple—the bad object she had incorporated—marks her final freedom from primitive orality, which stands for all her immature fixations.

Like Snow White, each child in his development must repeat the history of man, real or imagined. We are all expelled eventually from the original paradise of infancy, where all our wishes seemed to be fulfilled without any effort on our part. Learning about good and evil—gaining knowledge—seems to split our personality in two: the red chaos of unbridled emotions, the id; and the white purity of our conscience, the superego. As we grow up, we vacillate between being overcome by the turmoil of the first and the rigidity of the second (the tight lacing, and the immobility enforced by the coffin). Adulthood can be reached only when these inner contradictions are resolved and a new awakening of the mature ego is achieved, in which red and white coexist harmoniously.

But before the "happy" life can begin, the evil and destructive aspects of our personality must be brought under our control. The witch is punished for her cannibalistic desires in "Hansel and Gretel" by being burned in the oven. In "Snow White" the vain, jealous, and destructive queen is forced to put on red-hot shoes, in which she must dance until she dies. Untrammelled sexual jealousy, which tries to ruin others, destroys itself—as symbolized not only by the fiery red shoes but by death from dancing in them. Symbolically, the story tells that uncontrolled passion must be restrained or it will become one's undoing. Only the death of the jealous queen (the elimination of all outer and inner turbulence) can make for a happy world.

Many fairy-tale heroes, at a crucial point in their development, fall into deep sleep or are reborn. Each reawakening or rebirth symbolizes the reaching of a higher stage of maturity and understanding. It is one of the fairy tale's ways to stimulate the wish for higher meaning in life: deeper consciousness, more self-knowledge, and greater maturity. The long period of inactivity before reawakening makes the hearer realize—without consciously verbalizing it—that this rebirth requires a time of rest and concentration in both sexes.

Change signifies the need to give up something one had enjoyed up to then, such as Snow White's existence before the queen became

jealous, or her easy life with the dwarfs—difficult and painful growing-up experiences which cannot be avoided. These stories also convince the hearer that he need not be afraid of relinquishing his childish position of depending on others, since after the dangerous hardships of the transitional period, he will emerge on a higher and better plane, to enter upon a richer and happier existence. Those who are reluctant to risk such a transformation, such as the two older brothers in "The Three Feathers," never gain the kingdom. Those who got stuck in the pre-oedipal stage of development, such as the dwarfs, will never know the happiness of love and marriage. And those parents who, like the queen, act out parental oedipal jealousies nearly destroy their child and certainly destroy themselves.