

# The Positive Impacts of Fairy Tales for Children

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Children's literature helps a young child make sense of what it is to be human and helps them understand the world around them. The fairy tale genre provides ways for children to receive important messages. Although there are some themes in fairy tales that are unrealistic, the overall effect is positive and offers fundamental elements for children's development. Based on the Jungian interpretation, fairy tales teach children how to deal with basic human conflicts, desires, and relationships in a healthy way; acquiring these skills can ultimately impact a child's health, quality of life, or even influence its values and beliefs in the future. The Jungian interpretation, developed by psychotherapist Carl Jung, is a symbolic approach that creates a dialectical relationship between consciousness and the unconscious. Those who use the Jungian interpretation do not perceive therapy as a typical client-therapist relationship wherein the client is treated, but rather perceive themselves as guides to help another person delve into the unconscious. Jungian therapy, also called analytical psychotherapy, treats essentially all unconscious sources such as dreams, fantasies, daydreams, even paintings and drawings.

One of the central reasons that fairy tales are important is that they aid in child development. Fairy tales are often shaped to test children's initiative. Not only is reading the story essential, but having the child act out the story is also just as important for developing a child's consciousness and for his or her moral development. L.I. El'koninova was interested in children's mental development and the types of behavior they displayed when acting out a fairy tale. The experimental results from this study in Moscow drew the conclusion that a vivid enactment of an integral story plot becomes possible when a child not only intuitively understands that what happens in make-believe stories is in fact make-believe, but also believes in the reality of the story. It was found that younger children (ages 3-4) cannot play out the part of a story completely because for them it is too real; nor are 6-7-year-olds able to do this because for them the story is too make-believe. Therefore, an integral and vivid enactment of a story occurs at about the age of five, because at this age children are best able to establish a balance between their experience of the reality of the story and their experience of the make-believe quality of what takes place in the story and the performance when it is acted out. In make-believe performances the child acquires the experience of being a subject (becoming something or someone else), which comes to him or her as an internal picture of an initiative-taking action. A child develops initiative through overcoming behavioral

stereotypes and through restraining impulsive actions. Although it was concluded that children are able to test out initiative extensively at about the age of five, this does not mean that fairy tales are not important before this age. In fact, the vocabulary characteristics of the semantics of a fairy tale begin to be part of a child's play performance at around age four (El'koninova 85-86). These findings are important, because it provides crucial information about developing children and how fairy tales are a valid part of learning, especially because there is a specific age in which children can differentiate reality versus make-believe.

Fairy tales not only aid in child development, but they also offer a rich source of material to draw from in a therapeutic manner. This provides a great way of accessing children's imagination by exploring memories of fairy tales and using them to address painful or unsettling issues in a nonthreatening, playful manner. For instance, the struggle between good and evil is a frequent theme among fairy tales all around the world. In a therapeutic sense, this can be interpreted as internal conflict or the tension between the id and ego. Many children and young people may suffer from internal conflict whether it is from bullying, teasing, problems at home, etc. Analyzing fairy tales where internal conflict is a major theme can help the therapist determine ways to help his or her client. For example, victims of abuse or neglect experience the triumph of evil over good; this is usually the other way round when it comes to fairy tales. Enabling a young person to identify with a fairy tale or allowing them to make up their own version could be a useful means of unlocking feelings of mistrust or guilt (Walker 81-84). This can be better appreciated through the analysis of a project titled "A Fairy Tale Workshop in a Pediatric Oncology Ward." This workshop is part of a more complex intervention at a Pediatric Oncology and Hematology Ward in Naples, Italy, which provides treatment for children suffering from cerebral neoplasia. An ill child is often unable to express his or her anxieties and ask for explanations about the situation that he or she is experiencing (Adamo 263).

In the Italian study, children were offered the opportunity to get in touch safely with danger and death anxieties through the use of tale-telling. For example, *The Three Little Pigs* provides children a way of exploring the solidity and resistance of the intrapsychic container; the child's own internal *house* (Adamo 267). In this story each pig builds a house; one made of straw, one made of sticks, and the third made of bricks. The house resembles the child's own body and the big bad wolf resembles the sickness. The ill children experience little control, if any over their body due to their illness and this story helps them face their fears and explore their anxieties. In the story, the houses made of straw and sticks are too weak to defeat the wolf. This is similar to what the children are feeling within their own bodies; therefore they can relate their own experience to the story.

It is important to note that each child identifies with different characters, according to the anxieties that he or she is coping with and his or her defensive strategies. For instance, after listening to *Little Red Riding Hood*, Giacomo, who is three years old, imitates the wolf and draws it with its mouth wide-open. The identification with the bad wolf in the story enables the child to express his aggression towards a situation, which he fears may overwhelm him. In contrast, Marco, who is seven years old, reacts to the same fairy tale in a different way. He draws a wolf which is the size of an ant, showing in this way his attempt to deny the seriousness of his condition. In these examples, the children have read the same fairy tale, but their reactions are quite different. On the other hand, two children might read different books, but they both may have similar reactions. For instance, after listening to Hans Christian Andersen's *The Ugly Duckling*, Vittorio (10 years old) makes several attempts to draw a head. He never seems satisfied with the result and keeps on rubbing it out. The sense of dissatisfaction and rejection of the drawing may have a wide range of readings, such as Vittorio's difficulty in accepting his own body following the transformations caused by the illness. In *The Ugly Duckling*, the duckling is different from the others and no one wants to be around him, because they think he is ugly. The duckling feels helpless and unhappy. But when he looks at his reflection in the pond he finds that he is beautiful. Vittorio's continuous rubbing out of the drawing seems to express his wish to make his ill head magically disappear, and to substitute it with a new undamaged one. *The Ugly Duckling* is a story about accepting oneself. As children endure the illness that is taking control of their body, stories like this can help them find acceptance within themselves; just like the duckling did. Another boy named Alfredo also seems to be expressing similar anxieties about the deterioration of his body when, while doing a drawing related to the fairy tale *Puss in Boots*, he tries to rip up the sheet of paper and writes in one corner "throw away in the rubbish" (Adamo 268-269). The behaviors of these children show that they can utilize a fairy tale in order to express his or her anxieties, fears and defenses based on their own experiences.

A third example of a fairy tale, which children can identify with, is *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*. After reading the story the children seem alarmed by the character of the stepmother who carries out attacks on Snow White. None of the children draw the stepmother but instead depict both Snow White and the castle in which she lives. For the children, the stepmother might reflect their illness or perhaps the face of a particular doctor, nurse or even their parents who "torment" the children's bodies by putting them through painful treatments. The fairy tales used in this workshop allow children to express their feelings of aggression towards their illness, their parents, and/or the medical staff, without fear of retaliation. At times, the need to rebel against the constrictions imposed by the illness and by

hospital regulations drives the children to identify with characters who are bad or undisciplined. It is critical that children are able to release the anxieties and fears that come with illnesses. Even when the child identifies with the negative characters in the fairy tale, the child can learn to cope with threats, conflicts and their anxieties linked to the illness, and this has a positive impact on their quality of life (Adamo 268, 270).

In contrast, some people may think of fairy tales as being dangerous for children and young persons. For example, psychotherapist Susan Darker-Smith's research showed that girls who hear fairy tale classics such as *Cinderella* and *Beauty and the Beast* when they are children are more likely to stay in destructive relationships as adults. Many young children who grow up in homes where they are read fairy tales often identify with the book characters as role models. Opponents say that these characters provide them with a template for future submissive behavior. Darker-Smith interviewed domestic violence victims in Leicester, UK who repeatedly told her that they believe "if their love is strong enough they can change their partner's behavior" and many of them also identify with the characters in the stories (Darker-Smith 35). Thus, opponents could argue that victims of abuse who identify with fairy tales such as *Cinderella* or *Beauty and the Beast* are at risk for staying with an abusive partner if they believe that their love can change their partner's abusive behavior. Some opponents, such as Patsky Skeen et al., might also argue that *Cinderella* gives children and young people a negative connotation about stepfamilies. The stepmother and stepsisters who give Cinderella the dreadful household tasks and even try to prevent her from receiving the attention of a young prince are portrayed as evil, wicked, and coldhearted. Skeen argues that *Cinderella* adversely affects popular views about stepfamilies. The relationships portrayed in this fairy tale misrepresent the kinds of relationships that exist among many stepfamilies today. Stepfamily relationships are different from primary family relationships, but the chances for success are not as grim as they were in *Cinderella*. The nature of the stepfamily network is different from the unbroken family network and the transition from an unbroken family to a stepfamily is not an easy one, however, it is possible for most blended families to manage their lives with reasonable success. Although, the Cinderella fairy tale might cause children to misunderstand stepfamilies, this misinterpretation can be reduced with good communication and good role modeling (Skeen et al. 121). For example, if a young child has a new stepmom and/or stepsiblings and they have recently heard or read the story of Cinderella, they might perceive their stepfamily as being evil. Thus, it is important to be in tune with what books they are reading and the life situations they are experiencing, especially with younger children because they are especially susceptible to believing what they read or hear. It would also be beneficial for parents to talk with their child

about their readings.

Although opponents argue that fairy tales may be dangerous in terms of their underlying messages, the overall impact that fairy tales have on children's lives does more good than harm. A positive of fairy tales is they can help with disorders that most people wouldn't think are treatable by "reading a book," but in fact have positive effects. For instance, at the age of puberty, a young girl's confidence plummets and eating disorders often develop around this time. Eating disorders are developmental dysfunctions that occur when one's self is abandoned. People suffering from an eating disorder will become obsessed with what they eat, how much they eat, and focus their thoughts to one area: food. A study was done to show that fairy tales offer possible solutions for young people struggling with transitional problems and anxieties by allowing the eating-disordered client to project his or her desired identity onto the fairy tale and draw self-control from the process (Hill 584). Often what the clients cannot say about themselves, they can instead verbalize about fairy tale characters; in other words favorite fairy tales can function as mirrors of ourselves. In this study, one eating-disordered client stated that *Cinderella* was her favorite fairy tale because Cinderella overcame her social status. Used as a projective tool, this response would indicate that the client needed to overcome her sense of having an inferior status. She also stated that she liked how the animals helped Cinderella in the forest. Considering the client's response from a Jungian perspective, the forest scene is a representative of the unconscious. While, the animals are a metaphorical demonstration of the unconscious instinct to follow one's inner drive when reasoning fails. This means that the client was possibly projecting her own need to be supported and rescued through identification with Cinderella (Hill 585).

As part of this therapeutic process, the counselor should initiate opportunities for the client to connect parts of themselves to both the fairy tale characters and identified scenes in the fairy tale. This offers clients an opportunity to bond their sense of self, their anxieties, and their developmental fears by reflecting the story onto themselves. Transference often occurs in eating-disordered clients when unresolved self-control is directed at significant others. Transference is the redirection of feelings and desires (especially of those unconsciously retained from childhood) toward a new object or person. The fairy tale therefore becomes a substitute object of transference in which the clients can transfer their anger and fears onto the fairy tale rather than another person or loved one (Hill 585). Facing these conflicts with the use of the fairy tale will help the clients with their own problem resolution because in the process of helping the fairy tale character out of the conflict in the story, clients are also creating a method to rescue themselves. Thus, if connection is firmly established between the client and the fairy tale, the fairy tale figure (such as Cinderella) becomes a powerful tool for the counselor to use as a

motivational force (Hill 586). To put it briefly, the client can learn to identify and adopt resolutions to problems such as eating disorders with the use of fairy tales.

Not only do fairy tales help children in hospitals with illnesses and young adolescents struggling with eating disorders, but they also have an influence on adults later in life based on what stories they read as a child. One study examined 264 students (80 men and 184 women) in the Educational Psychology sequence at Louisiana State University. The participants were asked to summarize their favorite childhood story, to report the circumstances of first encountering it, and to compare past and present impressions of it. The fairy tale category included the old, anonymously-composed folk tales, fables, myths, and epics, like *Little Red Riding Hood*, *The Grasshopper and the Cricket*, *Jason and the Golden Fleece*, as well as the so-called "new tales of magic" such as *The Wizard of Oz*, *B'r'er Rabbit*, and *Little Black Sambo*. The results showed that more than half of the women's preferences were fairy tales such as *Cinderella* (chosen by 32) and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (chosen by 17). Less than a third of the men named fairy tales and there was no one fairy story as popular with men as there was with women. It was also found that the male selections showed a contrasting taste for stories in which the chief characters were male or, sometimes, animal, as in *Jack and the Beanstalk* and *The Three Little Pigs* (Collier 98-99).

In the fairy tales most often chosen by the women, the heroines like Cinderella and Snow White tend to be naive, helpless, and persecuted by an older woman like a wicked stepmother, witch, or bad fairy. Rather than through their own actions, they were protected from their persecutors by unusual agents such as a fairy godmother, a good fairy, or dwarfs. Lastly, because of their beauty, virtue, or suffering, they were rescued by a prince with no other apparent function other than to rescue the damsel in distress and find true love. Furthermore, men chose fairy tales about half as often as women. Men usually selected tales with a dominant male or one that had animal characters who were threatened by giants or by impersonal physical dangers. In fact, when an older woman was present, she was likely to be benign or helpful as in *Jack and the Beanstalk* where the giant's wife protects Jack. The resolutions in the stories chosen by males were also less passive, less magical, and there was less physical attraction and suffering than those in the women's stories. Also, compared to the fairy tales that women generally chose the outcomes were achieved through physical daring, strength, or ingenuity, as in *The Gingerbread Man*, *Pinnocchio*, *Jason and the Golden Fleece*, *Robin Hood*, *The Story of Roland*, and *Hansel and Gretel*. These results demonstrate a major sex difference (Collier 99). Several factors might account for this sex difference such as the cultural emphasis on feminine passivity-dependence and on masculine activity-independence. Another factor could be of a greater cultural emphasis on "realism" for men than

for women; therefore men might have had a greater tendency to forget or conceal any interest in the stories of open make-believe. It can be concluded that the types of stories preferred and the manner of reporting them appear to reflect cultural sex-role expectancies.

In closing, children who are exposed to fairy tales can benefit greatly from them. Fairy tales are an important part of a child's development, especially in terms of their consciousness and moral development. On another note, counselors and therapists can use fairytales as a means of allowing children with illnesses to cope with their anxieties. It should be noted however, that those who are not trained and are inexperienced in treating persons should not do so. In those cases, one could make a positive contribution to recovery by making accurate referrals and providing educational assistance. Children usually don't know how to deal with basic human conflicts, desires, and relationships. Fairy tales offer a healthy way of dealing with these conflicts and finding a resolution to them, as demonstrated with eating-disordered patients. The sex differences seen in Collier's study demonstrate a cultural norm typically displayed among women and men. Sex differences are often learned in early childhood and this could have an impact on them later in life whether it is negative or positive. As a counselor or therapist, utilizing valuable tools such as fairy tales can have a major impact on children's health, their quality of life, or even influence their values and beliefs in the future. Thus, fairy tales provide a way of expressing oneself within the confines of a text and a story and helps one reach a resolution in times of conflicting states of mind. These situations are intrinsic to the individual's emotional and social development which can represent complex problems or inhibiting obstacles.

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