

CHOOSING FAIRY TALES FOR DIFFERENT AGES

Joan Almon

Deciding which fairy tales are appropriate for which age group is a problem which faces every kindergarten teacher as well as every parent who wants to offer fairy tales to children. Over the years, with the experience of actually telling the tales to children, one develops a "sense" for this, but in the beginning some guidelines may be of help.

Among the fairy tales, there are stories of varying degrees of complexity. At the simplest level there is the "Porridge Pot", while a considerably more complicated story is the beautiful French tale of "Perronik", the simpleton in quest of the grail who must overcome seven difficult obstacles. The latter is a tale for the elementary school child, perhaps just as he is leaving the world of fairy tales around age 9, while the former little tale is a delight to three year olds as their first fairy tale. They enjoy hearing of the little pot, so full of abundance, which overflows for lack of the right word. At this age the children themselves have a sense of life's eternal abundance which one child expressed to her mother in this way when her mother said she did not have enough time to take the child out to play: "But Mother, I have lots of time. I'll give you some."

In almost every fairy tale there is either a problem which must be solved, such as how to get the porridge pot to stop cooking, or a confrontation with evil, which can take many forms, such as the Queen in Snow-White or the various monsters which Perronik encounters. The milder the problem, the more appropriate the tale for younger children and conversely, the greater the evil, the more appropriate the tale is for older children.

Another aspect of fairy tales is that the hero or heroine must undergo certain trials or go on a complex journey before succeeding in his or her quest. In the original version of the "Three Little Pigs", the pig is nearly tricked three times before he is able to overcome the wolf. Three is a number which frequently arises in relationship to the challenges of the fairy tale.

In this case the tasks are not portrayed as very ominous, and the pig handles them with a good deal of humor, making it a tale well-loved by four year olds. In the "Seven Ravens", the daughter must first journey to the sun, the moon and the stars in order to restore her brothers to human form. This is a tale which speaks well to five and six year olds. An even more complex tale is the beautiful Norwegian tale entitled "East of the Sun and West of the Moon".

Here, too, the heroine must go on a great journey to redeem her prince, and the journey takes her first to the homes of three wise women. She is then aided by each of the four winds. Yet even when the north wind blows her to the castle east of the sun and west of the moon, her work is not yet completed and she is further tested before she is able to marry the prince. This is not a tale for the kindergarten, but rather one for the first grade or beyond, when children's own inner struggles grow more complex and when they are nourished by the more complex fairy tales.

With these thoughts in mind, I would like to divide some of the tales commonly told in Waldorf kindergartens into categories of complexity. This is a somewhat dangerous business, for the fairy tales are so alive that they do not rest comfortably in one category or another. Even as I divide them up, I find myself constantly switching tales from one category to another. In the end one makes one's decisions very much with a particular group of children or an individual child in mind. ***Please accept these divisions lightly as mere indications, and take the time to develop your own judgments in this area.***

You may find it helpful to read a few stories from each category as a means of understanding the different levels of complexity of the fairy tales.

1. The three year olds in the nursery or mixed-age kindergarten are very satisfied with little nature stories, or with a simple tale such as "Sweet Porridge". The older threes are often ready to hear the "sequential" tales such as the tale of the turnip. The turnip has grown so large that Grandfather cannot pull it out by himself, so one after another come Grandmother, grandchild, dog, cat and finally mouse. All together are then able to pull out the turnip. One finds many tales of this sort which have a strong pattern of repetition and order. There are also traditional songs which fall into this category such as "I Had a Cat and the Cat Pleased Me" or "Had Gad Ya", a song sung during the Jewish holiday of Passover. Such sequential stories have the added advantage of being relatively easy for a beginning story teller to learn. A collection of tales for this age group includes the following:

- Sweet Porridge (Grimm, 103)
- Goldilocks and the Three Bears (Russian)
- Little Louse and Little Flea (Spindrift)
- The Turnip (Russian)
- The Mitten
- Little Madam (Spindrift)
- The Gingerbread Man
- The Johnny Cake (English)
- The Hungry Cat (Norwegian, Plays for Puppets)

(Note: Grimm's fairy tales are numbered from 1 to 200, and their numbers are given here to help you locate the story in a complete edition of the Grimm's tales. A list of sources for most of the fairy tales mentioned here appears at the end of the article.)

2. The next category of tales is slightly more complex, but the overall mood is usually cheerful and without too much sorrow or struggle. The fours and young fives are usually quite comfortable with these tales.

- Billy Goats Gruff (Norwegian)
- Three Little Pigs (English;
- Wolf and Seven Kids (Grimm, 5)
- Pancake Mill (this Newsletter)
- Mashenka and the Bear (Russian, Plays for Puppets)
- The Shoemaker and The Elves (Grimm, 39)

3. In the next category come many of the tales which we normally associate with the term fairy tale and which we think of in relation to five and six year olds. These tales contain more challenge and more detail. The main character often sets out in the world with a simple task to perform such as in the "Miller Boy and the Pussy Cat". Although obstacles are encountered, they do not weigh too heavily on the soul of the individual.

Such tales include:

- Star Money (Grimm, 153)
- Frog Prince (Grimm, 1)
- Mother Holle (Grimm, 24)
- Little Red Cap (Grimm, 26)
- Bremen Town Musicians (Grimm, 27)
- Golden Goose (Grimm, 64)
- Spindle, Shuttle and Needle (Grimm, 186)
- Hut in the Forest (Grimm, 169;
- Queen Bee (Grimm, 62)
- Snow Maiden (Russian, Plays for Puppets)

The Seven Ravens (Grimm, 25)
Snow-White and Rose Red (Grimm, 161)
Little Briar Rose (Grimm, 50)
Princess in the Flaming Castle (this Newsletter)
The Donkey (Grimm, 144)
Rumpelstiltskin (Grimm, 55)
Snow-White and the Seven Dwarves (Grimm, 53)
Hansel and Gretel (Grimm, 15)

4. The final group which I will include here are those fairy tales which are well suited for the six year olds who are making the transition to first grade. This is a time of stress for children as they lose their baby teeth and sense a departure from the heart of early childhood. (Fortunately they still have a few more years before they make their final "fall" from Paradise.) Tales in which characters have a personal experience of suffering or sorrow meet this new phase of inner development in the children. Often these tales are not told in the kindergarten at all but are left for first grade.

Jorinda and Joringel (Grimm, 69)
Brother and Sister (Grimm, 13)
Cinderella (Grimm, 21)
Rapunzel (Grimm, 12)

A frequent problem which troubles kindergarten teachers is how to select tales for a mixed-age group. If there are three year olds present as well as six year olds, will the more advanced tales harm the little ones? My own experience and that of other teachers, is that this is not a problem provided the story is appropriate for some of the children in the group. This is an interesting phenomenon which seems to work as follows. In a mixed-age group from three to six, one can choose a tale for the five and six year olds and the three and four year olds will be attentive. They may seem less focused than they are with a simpler tale, but they rarely grow restless (though it sometimes helps to seat the youngest ones near the teacher or the assistant). On the other hand, if one would tell the same complex tale to a group of only three and four year olds, one would find that they do not attend to it well and easily lose interest. It is as if there is no one in the group who can "carry" the story for the others. In a mixed-age group one can also create a balance in the tales by telling some that are appropriate for the younger children. The older children generally do not get bored with the simpler tales, for they are now old enough to see the humor in the sequential tales or simpler fairy tales, and they will laugh at the humorous parts while the little ones listen with full seriousness.

When choosing a fairy tale, another factor to take into account is whether a fairy tale is generally well known in the society, even if it is known in an incorrect form. When a tale is well known, children often seem ready to hear it at a younger age than they otherwise might be.

The final consideration, and probably the most important one, is the story teller's own relationship to the story. Sometimes a story teller loves a tale so much that the story may be told to children who are generally too young for it. It is as if the story teller's love of the tale builds a bridge to it. Thus, I knew one teacher who loved "The Seven Ravens*" so much that she told it year after year to her class of three and four year olds, a feat which I would not undertake. When this love of fairy tales is coupled with an understanding of them on the part of the story teller, doors are opened to the whole realm of life in which fairy tales are true and live forever. In the telling of fairy tales we too are nourished and brought back into this realm. Rudolf Steiner describes the fairy tales very beautifully when he says, "Much deeper than one might imagine lie the sources whence flow genuine, true folk tales that speak their magic throughout all centuries of human evolution,"

• Rudolf Steiner, "Folk Tales in the Light of Spiritual Research", February 6, 1913. (This is presently out of print, but the Kindergarten Association is working to bring several lectures on fairy tales by Rudolf Steiner into print in the near future.)