

THE VALUE OF GRIMM'S FAIRY TALES*

In relating their collected fairy tales the Grimm brothers sought the purity of straightforward narration. They kept close to the original story, adding nothing of circumstance or trait. One of the brothers said: "Our first care was faithfulness to the truth. We strove to penetrate into the wild forests of our ancestors, listening to their noble language, watching their pure customs, recognizing their ancient freedom and hearty faith." Their aim was to preserve ancient wisdom which, during their lifetime, was still alive among some of the old people. The scientific age had come in full swing and many people had little or no understanding of those "old, superstitious and untrue tales." The Grimm brothers thought differently, and when they listened to old Frau Viehmannin, the wife of a cowherd, who told her stories with great exactness and no variations in repetitions, they penetrated into the imaginative dream world of a child and experienced the healthy, original strength that is inborn in these stories. They realized the educational value of the stories, and learned to read between the lines.

Luckily today we have passed that period of educational decline when fairy tales were banned from the schoolrooms and the homes of intellectuals. At least fairy tales are accepted today as a means of entertainment—"leaving a substantial by-product which has a moral significance." They are accepted today as a simple form of literature and thus have become again an everyday nourishment for many children.

Rudolf Steiner inspired teachers to make use of the fairy tale in a much deeper and more extensive way than it had been done heretofore. It is a well-known fact that fairy tales have their origin in the period of humanity's own childhood, in far-distant times when people lived in a naive dreamlike state of soul, before the unfolding of intellectual capacities. According to the principles of biogenetic law, children pass briefly through the different stages of mankind's evolution. Children between the ages of four and eight correspond approximately in their development with that period of humanity's childhood in which fairy tales originated. An unspoiled child absorbs fairy tales during this period of its life, with an eagerness similar to the hunger and intensity with which a baby absorbs its mother's milk.

I was deeply impressed when I heard of a mother in England who, in line with her honest belief in pure scientific thinking, deprived her little daughter of all fairy tales with the result that the child became seriously ill in spite of all the physical care that was given her, and it was said that the child recovered only on account of the fairy tales which her nurse was finally allowed to tell her.

It is interesting to read that the Grimm brothers advised the mothers to tell only one or two stories at a time because otherwise it would be harmful just as it is harmful to drink too much milk at a time.

*See also *The Importance of Fairy Tales in a Rudolf Steiner School* by Frederick Hiebel, *Selected Articles from the Bulletin*, Vol. I.

The fact that the contents of the most famous fairy tales are to be found, in one form or another, in legends, mythologies and folk lore of all nations seems to indicate that they all have the same origin. Whether they all came from Central Asia, as some authors claim, is to my mind questionable. I should rather imagine that fairy tales came into being in different localities much in the same way as today various people might relate the same dream. They are imaginative pictures of successive stages of human development and probably were perceived independently in different countries. It is a quite frequent occurrence in the history of inventions that the same idea springs up in different localities simultaneously.

It is easier today for the intellectually trained scientist, to make a technical invention than it is for the intellectually trained poet to create a real fairy tale. Many so-called "fairy tales", written in modern times, do not deserve this name. It would be more appropriate to call them fanciful tales. The name "fairy tale" deserves to be re-established in its old purity today and not be thought of as a phrase for things that are not quite true.

People often refer to "the golden age of childhood" or "childhood's paradise", and with great happiness they like to recall those unspoiled days of paradise. Play in the child's own created world is a sort of dream, and the dreaming is a manifestation of artistic union with the world about him. But the child in time must part from his paradise so as gradually to awaken to his own self-hood. This process of awakening, this gradual conquest of his own personality, is painted in the most vivid colors in true fairy tales and this is the reason why fairy tales are so much liked by children and make such a deep and lasting impression. Because the fairy tales are imaginative analogies of the inner development of humanity as a whole as well as that of the individual child, they are the best spiritual nourishment a child can possibly receive during the period of transition or awakening.

In ever so many of Grimm's fairy tales we find a prince and a princess in the center of events. In a great variety of ways the bewitched prince or the enchanted princess is finally set free. The ultimate marriage pictures the conscious union of the two, the prince—the human ego, and the princess—the soul, after many struggles and trials.

In the original edition of Grimm's fairy tales, the first fairy tale is "The Frog Prince" or "Iron Henry". I wonder whether this selection was made purposely or whether it came about accidentally. It is one of those stories that lend themselves beautifully to interpretation.

Most fairy tales start with "Once upon a time"—which means it can happen any time to anybody—and many end with the words "and if they have not died since, they are still alive." Who? The people or the happenings? In "The Frog Prince" it is told that the old king's youngest daughter played with a golden ball in a forest at the edge of a well. In the first two sentences an atmosphere of dreamlike phantasy is already created, and the youngest, most beautiful princess (no darkness, no evil as yet has spoiled the sunlike soul) plays in her childhood paradise. But one day the golden ball falls on the ground and rolls into the well. As in Richard Wagner's "Rhinogold" the pure innocent gold of ancient wisdom disappears in the water. The ugly frog takes pity on the princess, but he is not interested in pearls or precious stones for a reward; he wishes to participate in her personal affairs. She promises everything the frog asks for, but runs away as soon as she has recovered the ball. When next day the frog comes to the castle the princess is shocked and frightened, but the old king (the eternal conscience) commands her to fulfill her promise.

It affords a strong will impulse to give up her paradise and unite with the cold, intellectual ego. All at once she flings the frog with all her might against the wall, and a handsome prince stands before her. They are married and live happily ever after.

The fairy tale, "The Wolf and the Seven Kids" pictures the inquisitiveness of the awakening human being. Like little kids that jump about anywhere and everywhere, so the growing child senses his surroundings, without plan or organization. In spite of the warning of the wise, protecting mother goat, the kids open the door to lie and deceit. They lose their delightful paradise and experience darkness in the wolf's stomach. Only the smallest one escapes into the clock and thus is saved, and is able to save the others also.

The brave little tailor makes his appearance in a number of Grimm's fairy tales and is undoubtedly the personification of awakening intellectual cleverness. These few examples may suffice to bring out how in fairy tales spiritual truth and its relationship to human development are revealed.

William Harter