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to move on to fiction with more plot to master and new literary conventions to recognise. Even so, between the ages of three and seven, children who have regularly come across books may already have learned a good deal in one way or another both from and about early fiction. In some cases, where a particular prose style is found to be especially congenial, children can get to know some stories almost off by heart. Later on, however, they will learn how to digest and remember only what seem like the most significant points of any story. If a child is asked whether he or she likes a piece of fiction during this stage, the questioner is quite likely to get in response a summary of the story itself. But this is, in fact, an early form of literary criticism, in that children are thereby demonstrating the extent to which any story may have got through to them and captured their interest, so that afterwards they are still able, or not, to recall most of it successfully. Any idea that comments can be passed *about* a story will normally have to wait until later; for the moment, stories will largely be confused with accounts of real happenings to someone, to be discussed or recalled in general terms by children, perhaps, but not to be thought about or judged as works of *fiction*. This acceptance of the essential truth of fiction will generally extend to fairy stories as well.²⁶ These stories are again an enormously rich source for the exploration of children's imaginative responses to literature, and as such deserve a chapter for themselves.

TAKEN FROM:

*The CHILD + the BOOK: A Psychological
and Literary Exploration*

NICHOLAS TUCKER

3 · Fairy stories, myths and legends

This chapter does not begin by suggesting a typical age-range during which children may most enjoy fairy-tales, since so much depends upon the story in question. In fact, there have always been arguments over the age at which children should be exposed to any fairy story, and though the terms of this dispute have changed over the years, controversy about timing and suitability still remains. For many early nineteenth-century critics, fairy-tales were self-evidently bad because they 'fill the heads of children with confused notions of wonderful and supernatural events'.¹ Although it is now common to deride such views, one should also remember that critics like Mrs Trimmer were writing against a background of widespread superstition, where witches and fairies were still often believed in as quite real. When such stories were passed on to children, in the case of middle-class homes very often by uneducated nursemaids, they might well come across not as fanciful tales but as real-life possibilities.

When belief in fairies and their tribes was finally pushed into odd country corners in nineteenth-century Britain, it then became possible to have a splendid revival of fairy-tales, with little idea that they might still deliberately foster ancient superstitions, and these stories have always retained huge popularity with children ever since. Yet some doubts remained. Although adults could now be trusted to take these stories with a pinch of salt (a true fairy-tale gesture in itself), others worried that children would not always be able to accept them with equal detachment. Notable amongst these was the Italian educationalist Maria Montessori, herself in revolt against the Froebel type of nursery education where exposure to fairy stories was considered an essential part of the kindergarten curriculum. For Montessori, fairy stories were suitable for children around the age of seven, but at the age of four could do serious or even permanent damage. Her main argument was that small children lack sufficient

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experience to be able to sort out fantasy from truth; early exposure to fairy-tales, therefore, may simply be confusing or even worse. There is little supporting evidence for some of her more alarming predictions, however. It is quite true that small children can become very disturbed by terrifying stories, which should certainly be avoided, whether in fairy-tales or elsewhere. As for the other bad influences upon the young discussed by Montessori, while a child may indeed have once jumped out of a window in misplaced emulation of Goldilocks, some children have always made injudicious jumps from heights, whether they have read particular stories or not. By the same token, one should also consider how many infants may have been saved from disaster by following more prudent examples gleaned from fairy-tales. As in Montessori's similarly fierce attack upon parents who foist the notion of Father Christmas on to their children, there seems a lack of balance in an argument that can seriously contemplate 'permanent damage' as one likely result, when one considers other competing and surely more fundamental social, economic and emotional influences also affecting the young.

Even so, there are good reasons for reserving at least the more complex fairy stories for late rather than early infancy. Small children do have a haphazard memory for order and logic, and may get lost in the elaborate conventions and extended plots of some fairy stories. Nursery rhymes offer the reader a quick dip into fantasy, often concentrating on situations which children soon recognise from their own experience. Fairy-tales and legends, however, stem from more complex myths that have meaning for older readers as well, and which sometimes demand a more sustained effort of concentration and imagination.

Some balance is always likely to be needed, therefore, between the amount and complexity of fantasy with which a child is presented at any age and other literature which concentrates more upon the here and now. But this need for balance has often been forgotten, as in the atmosphere in Russia after the revolution, when fantasy in literature was frowned upon. On one occasion when Kornei Chukovsky — himself a poet — tried to defend traditional fairy stories, he was told by an official, 'These are no use to us. We would rather have books about diesels and radio.'² One can understand how any new political order would want to make a clean sweep of traditional attitudes, whether in literature or elsewhere, but ultimately this attitude underestimates children themselves, as well as some of their favourite

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stories. As Chukovsky points out, most children enjoy playing with mud pies, but are generally too sensible to try to eat them as well. It is true that they may sometimes confuse explicit fantasy with literal truth, but if they are denied fantasy in their literature, they may simply go on to invent it for themselves. There is a nice story, told by Chukovsky, of a Russian educationalist who tried to protect her son from 'unrealistic literature', only to find that he was spinning the wildest fantasies for himself, involving a red elephant, a friendly bear and a hearth-rug that could also turn into a ship. At table he would converse with an imaginary companion, in this case a baby tiger, and insist that he himself, and even more gallingly, his mother, had the occasional capacity to transform themselves into little birds. As Chukovsky concludes, 'Although his mother observed that he literally bathed in fantasies as in a river, she continued to "protect" him from the ill effects of books of fairy tales.'³

On this argument, fairy stories simply recognise rather than suggest typical childhood daydreams. On the other hand, there can also be an over-reaction in favour of this need for fantasy — something criticised by another famous educationalist, Susan Isaacs, writing at the same time as Maria Montessori.

As soon as we came to realise what a rich fantasy life the young child has, and how inevitably he looks out upon the world from the centre of his own personal feelings, we have behaved as if he did this all the time, and wanted nothing *but* fairies and fantasies . . . The events of the real world are, indeed, often a joy to the child, as to us, just because they offer an escape from the pressures of fantasy.⁴

Or as G.K. Chesterton put it,

When we are very young children we do not need fairy tales. Mere life is interesting enough. A child of seven is excited by being told that Tommy opened a door and saw a dragon. But a child of three is excited by being told that Tommy opened a door. Boys like romantic tales; but babies like realistic tales — because they find them romantic.⁵

There is, therefore, something to be said for this point of view too, and it is interesting that both Chesterton and Montessori mention the age of seven as the best time for enjoying fairy-tales, since this also echoes the researches of Arnold Gesell, who found after exhaustive questioning of American children that they tended to like fairy stories and legends most at this age. By this time, after all, a child should have the intellectual competence to concentrate on a slightly longer story, and with practice should be able to predict most of the common patterns of action and behaviour that regularly crop up in early fiction. At the age of six, for example, 41 per cent of the chil-

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direct. The classic opening, 'Once upon a time', serves to launch a story straight into flight, with little of the exposition common to other narrative forms. It does not matter in fairy stories which country they are set in. If a king is dishonest, a brother jealous or a family starving, then this is simply stated rather than explained or justified.

With this type of cast, the story itself will usually proceed very quickly; even the passage of a long period of time may only take up a sentence or two. Elsewhere, events may follow hard upon each other with no particular logic, rather as children tell a story, the narrative kept going by casual rather than causal explanations — a succession of 'and then ... and then ...' rather than whys and wherefores. This is because at certain stages children will not generally be in a position to notice much pattern in what is happening around them, and events may simply be linked together in the young mind because they take place one after the other — a thought-process that Piaget once described as 'childish arbitrary syncretism'. Stories, therefore, that do not involve much more than a clear catalogue of events may be particularly suitable at an early stage, especially if they also include regular chunks of repetition, which can help to give any story a stable and memorable shape, like the giant's 'Fe! Fi! Fo! Fum!' in *Jack and the Beanstalk*. No one knows what this ominous slogan stands for, but like 'Nimmy nimmy not, my name is Tom Tit Tot' and many other catch-phrases, it sounds right and is good for audience participation. In one fairy story, a particular slogan even goes against common sense. 'No, No, by the hair of my chinny-chin-chin', chant each of the three little pigs, to the wolf's suggestion that he be admitted into their houses. Pigs, of course, do not have hair upon their chins, and the phrase is probably a carry-over from a previous version involving young goats. But as it is a rhythmic, catchy chant that is fun to anticipate, it obviously proved too good to drop. In the early stages it is sometimes hard for a child to remember any plot; easily memorised phrases, however, can quickly be recognised, and a certain amount of repetition may soon give children the chance to feel at home in particular stories. Later on, a young reader may also start to recognise and anticipate some of the more repetitive plot structures from one favourite fairy story to another, such as the rule of three, with three brothers, perhaps, who may have three tasks to perform, each one harder than the last. A child can soon learn to anticipate that it will almost inevitably be the third brother who will

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be the hero, and that he will usually win the prize at the third attempt and then possibly get married and live happily ever after — another excellent device for tidying up a story in quick time. A child, therefore, may soon feel at ease in this romantic but in other ways often clear-cut and predictable environment, with 'its brevity, its severe restraints on description, its flexible traditionalism, its inflexible hostility to all analysis, digression, reflections'.⁹ C. S. LEWIS

The belief in magic in various forms that runs through so many fairy-tales may also be in accordance with how younger children themselves think about certain events in the outside world. Later on, children will start moving on to more logical thought, when they have attained a certain age and have more experience. Until then, fairy stories in particular may be essentially in tune with earlier modes of thought; far from confusing children, they may help to build the intellectual confidence that usually comes when young people are given material especially adapted to their current capabilities. An intellect encouraged in this sense, even though by a pre-scientific way of thought that will eventually be rejected, may do better than an intellect balked by forcible exposure to more complex ideas at too early an age. This is not to say that children should always be addressed in ways they can very quickly understand: within reason, a certain continuous clash with more complex, adult thought is also healthy. But if children are always out of sympathy with what they are reading or hearing, this usually only serves to drive their more typically childish tastes underground, rather than out of their heads altogether.

Where belief in forms of magic is concerned, for example, children at an early age appear to go through what Piaget calls an 'autistic' stage of thought, which originates from their uncertain ability to differentiate the self from the external world, and establish clear boundaries between the 'me' and the 'not me'. In this situation, where their own feelings and wishes may sometimes be as real to children as anything in the objective world, they sometimes blur the difference between internal, psychological processes and external reality itself, with thoughts occasionally becoming confused with action, and wishes with fact. Small children, therefore, can sometimes imagine that they, or their parents, have the power to control physical events by the force of their wishes alone: a rhyme like 'Rain, rain, go away, come again another day', is a typical example of this fantasy in action. Linked with this omnipotent belief is the idea that

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everything in the universe is made solely for the use and convenience of man; as Piaget puts it, 'Organic life is, for the child, a sort of story, well-regulated according to the wishes and intentions of its inventor.'¹⁰ The inventor, of course, is man himself, upon whom — in this view — the sun shines for the express purpose of keeping him warm, and for whom night falls so that it can be dark enough for the purposes of sleep.

Within this sort of conceptual framework, it is easy to see how some of the conventions of myth and fairy-tales have become so acceptable to children. A number of stories, on topics like 'Why the sea is salt', for example, explain natural phenomena in terms of human intervention long ago — a mental process described by Piaget as 'artificialism' — which is certainly easier for the young to understand than any scientific explanation. In the same way, there are stories on how animals came to be shaped or coloured in their distinctive ways, again usually attributable to some particular action in the past. The same reasoning can also be found in local legends, for example those that seek to explain the shapes of certain mountains.

Ideas of magic both in life and in fairy stories also stem from a belief in the possibility of human omnipotence. As it is, almost anyone can perform magic in fairy-tales: Grimms' *Goose Girl*, for example, summons up a puff of wind at a moment's notice even for the trivial reason of blowing off her suitor's hat. It is true that on other occasions the same *Goose Girl* weeps and grieves with no magic to help her out, but neither fairy-tales nor children's early thought patterns are logically consistent. As Piaget has pointed out, a child's idea of magic is weak and discontinuous — and therefore different from the more organised magical beliefs that can be found in primitive adult thought systems.¹¹ As children get older, they will discover that their magical, omnipotent expectations of life will have to be modified to fit their growing understanding of reality, but this will be a piecemeal process of re-accommodation. Even small children can be quite objective in their outlook at times when they have had particular opportunity to test out fantasies against the demands of reality. But in other, untested areas, the same child may remain quite openly ignorant or superstitious. In this way, magic in fairy-tales and magical beliefs in children themselves can both be arbitrary processes, appealed to at one moment, and ignored in favour of a more recognisable reality in the next.

At the same time the child may continue to attribute human

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thoughts and feelings to most things within this magical universe; something reflected in Grimms' fairy stories, where sausages, straws, coats and beans may all on occasions have the power of speech and movement. Later, though, children may confine these animistic beliefs to objects which have the power to move by their own volition; an intellectual stage which is again reflected in stories, fairy or otherwise, where humanised animals play such an important part, as we have already seen in the previous chapter. These animal characters may have their own kings, queens, heroes and villains, and meet together in debate, as in Chaucer's *Parlement of Foules*. When faced with injustice, either to themselves or towards others, they often show strong feelings and take steps to rectify things. In this way their motivation, speech and goals will be indistinguishable from those of humans and indeed, these characters sometimes are human, but suffering under the temporary embarrassment of an evil spell.

This whole idea of a pre-lapsarian paradise, where man and beast converse and live together in peace, is one that can be found in many myths and religions as well as in the Bible, and is obviously a vision that has strong appeal. In fairy stories, talking animals are popular because this is how young children imagine animals to be, and later on, perhaps when they know better, how they would still like animals to behave, at least in the imagination. Such humanised animals and magical human beings have a natural place in the personalised world of the fairy-tale, where all the elements work together. This idea of a morally coherent and humanly motivated universe is fundamental to a small child's outlook, and can be found, in essence, within most types of children's literature; acceptance of the possibility of a more fortuitously organised moral order of things, is one of the major steps between the thinking of a child and that of an educated adult. Piaget illustrates the first stages of this transition in an experiment where a group of children, between six and eleven years old, were told the following story:

Once there were two children who were stealing apples in an orchard. Suddenly a policeman comes along and the two children run away. One of them is caught. The other one, going home by a roundabout way, crosses a river on a rotten bridge and falls into the water. Now what do you think? If he had not stolen the apples and had crossed the river on that rotten bridge all the same, would he also have fallen into the water?¹²

When questioned afterwards, most of the six year olds seemed to believe that the bridge broke because it *knew* that the boy was a thief and deserved punishment. The same opinion was held by a

majority of the seven and eight year olds, but with older children the results were mixed. For the younger child, though, this evident belief in what Piaget calls 'immanent justice' presupposes a universe where things are ordered and intentional. When children ask 'why' questions about the causes of particular happenings, therefore, they may in fact be looking for moral explanations rather than for anything involving impersonal causal factors. The idea of chance, for example, will be very hard for a small child to accept since, in Piaget's words, this whole concept is something only gradually 'forced upon us by our own powerlessness to explain'. But before this stage has been reached, Piaget continues, the child 'will always look for the whys and wherefores of all the fortuitous juxtapositions he meets with in experience'.¹³ In the same way, young children find the idea of coincidence hard to understand, since for them everything must have a reason. Again, this is something that is often found in uneducated thought; it was only in the late seventeenth century that the word 'coincidence' first became current — a sign that semi-magical beliefs in a deterministic universe were beginning to give way. Up to this time the magical background to fairy-tales would have been accepted as true by the majority of both adults and children. With the growth of education, though, belief in fairy stories — at least in the Western world — gradually became relegated to the young or to the uneducated and in this century, simply to children on their own.

Even so, many adults in our own culture as well as elsewhere still preserve some vestiges of belief in a type of magical thinking, for example when it comes to popular superstition. Such magical beliefs, after all, can have the function of converting man from being a helpless bystander into thinking he is someone who is an active agent in forces normally beyond his control.¹⁴ But while educated adults are also capable of accepting more rational, scientific explanations for many things, children find these difficult when they are still naturally disposed to believe in something more like a fairy-tale world, where dreams, omens or prophecies about the ultimate success of the good and the doom of the bad can sometimes come true.

This sort of morally-charged universe does not always make for a cosy life in fairyland for those who transgress in however minor a way, but it does ensure a comprehensible existence, at least in a child's own terms. Time and again, where hero or heroine have respected the scenery and cherished animal life, they duly receive their reward, unlike the villain, who may find every beast, stone and

river ultimately ranged against him as a punishment for even within a behaviour en route. Children can easily accept the possibility of a pain-type of moral intervention from outside, not because it happens in real life, as they may even then be discovering, but because a child's world-view is subjective and moral, not objective, and constructed around what ought to be true, not what is. This does not mean that children are consciously deluding themselves, but anything like the 'agnosticism of everyday life' is altogether too sophisticated and demanding an outlook to suit young people still straining to make moral sense of things. So long as children at the egocentric stage believe that the world was created purely for man, with Fate or God as a type of super-parent, then they will look for the clear workings of human laws of morality in everything, both animate and inanimate.

Whilst this type of vision can be found in a great deal of children's literature, it is seen most clearly in fairy stories, where the endings, if not always happy, at least usually make firm moral sense; if a hero or heroine disobeys a prohibition, for example, he or she may have to expect stern retribution. Secure in this framework, the reader can more easily accept temporary disaster in fairy stories, since if an eye is lost, through unjust dealings by others, it will probably be restored via magic ointment by the end, and unwarranted death itself may be reversible.

But within this fairy-tale world organised along the acceptance of strict moral rules and general conventions that a child can soon understand, there can still be degrees of complexity and variety. Where animism is concerned, for example, while even pins and needles may have the power of speech in some stories, in others it may only be animals that can speak, and then horses, dogs or birds. Sometimes the human hero may be able to converse quite freely with these animals, but at other times may only be able to communicate with them after some special magical event, such as Siegfried's first tasting of dragon's blood. There will also be other stories where animals behave exactly like animals — dumb props for human actors, simply to be sold at market or ridden on a journey. The extent of this type of variation means that fairy-tales can cater for a considerable span of mental age. Fiction that reflects one consistently infantile level of thought and nothing else soon becomes boring to its young audience; fairy-tales, in their various collections, usually avoid this danger.

The same 'mixed-stage' pattern can also be found in the use of magic in fairy-tales. This can be very simple stuff, such as tables that

lay themselves, or scissors that cut out clothes from the air. But fairy-tale magic is not restricted to this level of mere wish-fulfilment; characters cannot always call upon supernatural powers to get them out of difficulties, and like Hercules, may have to labour hard as well. Sometimes magic even turns out badly, as in the Grimm story, *The Fisherman's Wife*. From living in a broken chamber-pot, later euphemised by English translators into 'a little hut', a fisherman is forced by his shrewish wife into winning favours from a magic fish. Soon house, palace and the Vatican itself are substituted for their original modest dwelling place, but the wife finally wishes to be God, and instead is returned to her former state. This is hardly a happy ending, but certainly in children's eyes a just one. Other stories suggest different moral lessons, as in the Grimms' tale, *The Master Thief* which, like other tales about cunning rogues, can show bad behaviour actually prospering, though admittedly at the expense of other people's folly. *The Cat and the Mouse in Partnership*, on the other hand, suggests a very harsh natural order indeed. 'This happens every day in the world', concludes this story, which describes how the perfidious cat finally swallows up the mouse, despite all their plans for friendship.

Attitudes can thus vary throughout the great collections, from optimism to cynical worldliness, with something to offer readers in all sorts of moods. Similarly, the 'beauty is good' convention can sometimes be dropped; every now and again there are characters who are both beautiful and bad, eventually spurned by the hero in favour of honest toil and tattered clothes. Again, normally reliable practices, such as granting the prize after three successful exploits, are occasionally broken, just as Hercules was once short-changed over his labours.

I rather doubt, therefore, the following generalisation from the Opies, who are usually so wise in their judgements on all matters of child-lore and literature. 'Characters in fairy stories', they write, 'are stock figures. They are either altogether good or altogether bad, and there is no evolution of character.'¹⁵ This may often be the case, but just as there is occasional variety in other fairy-tale conventions, so can there be variation in the presentation of hero and heroine. There may be brave figures, like Jack the Giant-killer, but there may also be coarse simpletons like Lazy Jack, not necessarily a bad character, but by no means an outstandingly good one, and little meriting the huge reward that comes his way through that fairy-tale equivalent to

winning the pools: success in making a princess laugh. Even within a story, characters may change, sometimes through learning some painful lessons. The proud young bride of King Thrushbeard, for example, is forced to discover that looks and riches are not everything, and ends her story a nicer person, just as Beauty comes to realise that she owes her true loyalty to the Beast, not to her father and family.

Even so, it is still true that it is stock figures who are the most popular character-types in fairy-tales, such as Jack the Giant-killer and Simple Simon, who crop up over and over again in chap-book literature and other early, catch-penny stuff. Two such diverse characters, hero and anti-hero, offer a truly contrasting choice of model, yet both may find an echo within the same reader's personality. Not surprisingly, most children enjoy occasional fantasies of omnipotence, either in their own games and daydreams or else in their favourite stories. As it is, children often

Feel powerless compared with adults. In a battle of wills, parents often take care to make it seem that they have won, even though in fact the child has carried the day. Adults' ability to foresee consequences must sometimes seem like magical powers to the child: 'Careful, you'll hurt yourself! — There, I told you you would', cries the mother — did she make it happen? Adults have a mental scheme of what is planned for the next few days; children, whose time sense is poor, are constantly astonished by the arrival of events, in a way which would seem intolerable to adults . . . Playing at being powerful, even though one's power may only be over dolls, teddy-bears and peg-men, redresses the balance of powerlessness and makes the child's limitations tolerable to her.¹⁶

In the same way, therefore, it can also be satisfying for children to identify from time to time with the many characters in their fiction who tend to carry everything before them. For other moments, though, when children may be more conscious of their own real-life lack of muscle, there are also favourite characters in fairy stories who achieve their ends not through brute force but through skill or their ability to appeal favourably to others. Such characters will often be 'the youngest son, the weakest, the least clever, the one whom everybody would judge as least likely to succeed'. But this character, in fact, often

turns out to be the hero when his manifest betters have failed. He owes his success not to his own powers, but to the fairies, magicians and animals who help him, and he is able to enlist their help because, unlike his betters, he is humble enough to take advice, and kind enough to give assistance to strangers who, like himself, appear to be nobody in particular.¹⁷

In other moods, however, children can also be very conscious of their own comparative impotence in most fields, and consequently impatient or uneasy with any type of compensatory daydream. One

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can therefore also find in fairy-tales, and indeed in all children's literature, stories which generally make mock of typical omnipotent fantasies. In these, heroes are no longer in control of what is happening around them, and attempts at magic generally go askew. Another popular literary technique for this sort of mood exaggerates particular favourite fantasies to such an extent that they finally look absurd rather than heroic, as in the tall story.

This occasional urge towards satire even of the most treasured daydreams can also be found in jokes as well as literature, and — it is often argued — may well be one of the ways in which human beings help preserve a good balance in the imagination between optimistic projections and stern reality. Like everyone else, children soon seem to develop a need to put particular daydreams into a more critical perspective from time to time, before reality itself pulls them up too sharply; it may only be the isolated, sometimes rather disturbed child who resists ever bringing their fantasy life down to earth in this way. For the rest, however, there are also other satisfactions available in stories where it is the anti-hero who tends to come out on top. In such stories, after all, the adult world is also frequently satirised, often pictured as a place run by capricious people who tend to disperse rewards and punishments accidentally and who themselves can easily be fooled. Younger readers, who may still want to work off resentment against adult authority in their imagination, can do so here by identifying this time with an anti-hero who although lacking in glamour still usually manages to do better than the equally ridiculous characters ranged against him. The same readers, though, may also appreciate other stories where inexperienced heroes are put right by altogether wiser, older authorities, for those moods when children are extra conscious of their own vulnerability and the consequent need for powerful, mature leaders in their lives.

This variety of approach, where the hero can range from Superman to buffoon, is especially evident in fairy-tales, and another reason, perhaps why they have lasted so long. There are many other ways, too, in which readers of these stories can find sometimes quite contrasting approaches within otherwise predictable conventions. When it comes to identifying with different levels of intellectual maturity, for example, the story of *The Three Little Pigs* mirrors the progress of a child's own thinking over a number of years, and readers will respond to it at whatever level of understanding they may have acquired. Smaller children may sympathise with the first two little

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pigs who, like them, live very much in the present, quickly building their inadequate houses and then getting on with their games. Older children, though, may immediately understand and approve of the more solemn third little pig, who shows that he is both able to learn from the past and to anticipate the future when he builds his safe house of brick.

The riddles and guessing games that crop up in fairy-tales can also act as introductions to more complex ways of thinking. This is illustrated in one of the Grimms' tales, *The Wolf and the Seven Kids*, where the wolf tries to trick his way into the house after the departure of the mother goat. The wolf wastes little time in getting down to the eternal business of the dishonest doorstep salesman, always very threatening to the young and inexperienced. 'Open the door my dear children, your mother is here and has brought you each something'. But the little goats perceived from the rough voice that it was the wolf. This is excellent reasoning from the particular to the general, something that an adult will take for granted, but a skill that the young may still have to learn. The wolf's next trick — to soften his voice — also fails, as the logical kids can still see his black paws on the window sill, but when the wolf whitens these with dough, they are properly fooled and pay the penalty. Within the limitations of concrete reasoning, however, based on the logical analysis of evidence taken only from the here and now, the seven little goats put up a good initial resistance. It should certainly interest children who themselves have just arrived at that stage of inductive reasoning, as well as those who have not yet got there, but are beginning to see what it is all about.

Even so, the way that fairy tales can both echo a child's thought patterns and in some cases take them a step further along, is by no means unique; all stories for the young have something of this function. For example, while children can understand absolute judgments, such as 'biggest' and 'smallest', younger ones may find it harder to understand concepts like 'the middle one' or 'medium' which depend upon an ability to make comparisons between one object and at least two others. Fairy stories, among others, are full of examples of these concepts — think of Mother Bear in *Goldilocks*, with her determined preference for the middle way, even reflected in the pitch of her voice. This same story also abounds in various quantitative terms and graduations: 'The three bowls of porridge are of different sizes, the porridge itself is at different temperatures, the

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beds are of different size and degrees of hardness . . . Children like to hear fairy tales again and again, in part at least, because they provide nourishment for the child's growing quantitative abilities.¹⁸

Possibilities for this type of intellectual practice and incidental learning occur in all manner of literature, but fairy-tales have so many ways of interesting young readers, and thereby holding their attention to a text which may contain more than merely a good story. Most children, for example, are fascinated by the exotic; when five year olds make up their own stories, they often prefer to set them in exciting locations such as foreign countries, the sea, sky, forests or mountains.¹⁹ Sceptics may see this as owing to the influence of fairy-tales and their settings, but it is not certain that all children always hear these stories. Their responses could equally be one more example of how fairy-tales follow, rather than trigger off, particular patterns in a child's imaginative development. The appeal of the exotic, in a sense, is the appeal of the imagination itself: a glimpse of a world more vivid, exciting and unpredictable than that offered by the children's own environment, once they have got to know their way round it. In fairyland, by contrast, there may be a multiplication of the rare and unlikely, such as jewels, gold coins and precious clothes, perhaps guarded by a soldier with a nose that grows over a mile long. One of the Grimms' most popular tales, *The Six Servants*, is in fact populated by a cast of such nonpareils, who can drain an ocean dry, shatter a mountain with one look, or sit in the middle of a fire and still freeze.

This vivid detail is an imaginative challenge and extension to the normal conditions in which we live, and popular perhaps for that very reason. Mention of Cinderella's glass slipper, for example, can be found even in some cultures that never wear shoes. Baba-yaga's hut that travels on giant chicken legs, Rapunzel's wonderfully long hair, Jack's amazing magic beans — such things have an intrinsic interest, whatever they may also happen to symbolise, simply because they are bizarre and therefore fascinating, whether heard today in the safety of suburbia, or hundreds of years ago in a tiny village. More homely details can also be memorable, as in the Grimms' version of *Snow White*. Even without accompanying illustrations, it is not difficult to picture vivid details like the three drops of blood that fall in the snow, and the child who is later born white as snow, red as blood and with hair as black as ebony. With the addition of other striking detail, such as the speaking mirror, the huntsman who cuts out the

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heart of a young boar instead of killing Snow White herself, the dwarves' little house and the heroine's transparent coffin, the imaginative appeal of this one story, put across in simple but very effective language, is surely no mystery. But even so, the argument must be taken further: children often remember particular details of any fairy story, but they are just as likely to recall the main plot, too. What is there about these stories as *narratives* that has made them so popular over such a long period?

There have been many possible explanations. For some nineteenth-century folklorists, fairy-tales were remnants of a once world-wide mythology, there to explain certain natural phenomena. George William Cox, for example, adhered to the 'solar theory' to explain fairy-tales, 'The story of the sun starting in weakness and ending in victory, waging a long warfare against darkness, clouds and storms, and scattering them in the end, is the story of all patient self-sacrifice.'²⁰ By the same reasoning, *Cinderella* was seen as a fable about night and day, where Cinderella herself is Aurora, the Dawn — hence the references to the brilliance of her hair. She is hidden from the sun by envious clouds (the ugly sisters), and finally is nearly extinguished in the dark cinders by her evil stepmother (the night). But rescue comes from the Prince (the morning sun), and Cinderella is restored to her true radiance — dawn breaks once again. Viewed this way, *Sleeping Beauty* symbolises the long sleep of winter, to be awoken by the Prince, who is Spring, while *Little Red Riding Hood* is the glow of sunset before it is devoured by the wolf — night.

Other scholars, notably Andrew Lang and the Grimms, could not accept that fairy stories were simply there to explain to primitive man night and day or the seasons in terms of symbolic stories. For them, these tales were anthropological survivals from once-primitive cultures. Thus Cinderella sleeps on the hearth because, as the youngest child who in some cultures inherited everything, she quite literally chose to sit upon her inheritance. Other details from the tales, it was thought, like magical beliefs, animal-worship and hints at cannibalism, similarly date back to primitive religions, and even dwarves were held to originate from memories of a prehistoric Mongolian race that died out after being driven into the mountains and forests by the Celts.

These arguments, which were conducted fiercely during the nineteenth century and produced many more equally ingenious interpretations, were never interested in explaining the continuing contempor-

ary popularity of fairy-tales. This however has become the concern of twentieth-century, post-Freudian commentators, who now take the line that 'Mythology is psychology, mis-read as cosmology, history and biography.'²¹ As for fairy stories, 'It is now fairly agreed that the general continuity, and an occasional correspondence in the detail, can be referred to the psychological unity of the human species.'²² Readers coming to these tales, therefore, are thought to find within them reflections of some of their own most vital personal fantasies, but disguised by fairy-tale imagery. In this way, as Freud once wrote, fairy stories can 'Enable us to enjoy our own day-dreams without shame or guilt.'

Those who still feel that psychoanalytic explanations of fairy stories are also exercises in imagination must admit, however, that such interpretations are occasionally endorsed by the stories themselves. In *Allerleirauh* from the Grimms' collection, for example, the father's incestuous design upon his daughter is openly stated, and the common psychoanalytic idea that animal characters often symbolise parents or siblings in the child's imagination is echoed in stories like *The Twelve Brothers* or *The Seven Ravens*, where whole human families are changed into animals during the process of the tale. Freudians would also claim, however, that there are many less overt references to vital areas of the unconscious in fairy-tales, particularly to the so-called Oedipus complex. This, for psychoanalysts, is the result of a stage when young children go through a period of possessive, erotic attachment to the parent of the opposite sex. They can also, at the time, become very jealous and resentful of their parental rival of the same sex. These 'Oedipal' feelings, Freud suggests, may later become too threatening for children to admit to, especially when they are developing a conscience which will make it more difficult for them to integrate such aggressive feelings along with the other, more positive emotions that they will also have for their would-be parental rivals. But when general anti-adult feelings are reflected in fairy stories, readers may then feel some measure of relief, as already seen in previous discussion of some of the rougher nursery rhymes also available to the young. The male and female adult characters who act as butts in these settings, it is argued, can often be made to stand in for the resented mother or father in the child's own imagination.

In orthodox psychoanalytic theory, therefore, fairy stories often portray a symbolic re-enactment and resolution of the reader's own

Oedipus complex, as in the common story where hero or heroine must overcome powerful enemies, very often witches or giants, in order to steal away the prize, usually a prince or princess. In this light, this story symbolises children's jealous attachment to the parent of the opposite sex, which they see as thwarted by the general family situation. By way of compensation, however, the child can go on to win his or her victory through the fantasy world of fairy-tales, by identifying with the hero or heroine who defeats the giant or witch — symbols of the resented side to parents in children's imagination — and wins the prince or princess, who stand for the idealised versions of the parent for whom the child may have strong erotic feelings.

Children's Oedipal feelings are only one aspect of a whole range of emotions, both positive and negative, which they can have towards their parents, but even so many adults find it hard to admit to the existence of any unconscious hostile fantasies in children. Freud's theory of inevitable Oedipal conflict, therefore, can still in itself cause considerable hostility — evidence, for psychoanalysts at least, of denial in the face of some unpalatable, personal truths. Expressed in stories, however, this type of charged Oedipal fantasy — it is claimed — can then become much more acceptable to everyone. Giants, for example, may not be taken seriously by adults, since they only occur in stories. But for a child, 'The conception of giants, with their clumsy stupidity and their alternations of kindness and ogreish devouring of children, is a projection of various infantile thought about grownups, particularly the parents.'²³ In fact, giants are nearly always male; their wives tend to be normal size, so supporting the psychoanalytic interpretation that giants symbolise the fantasy father, who seems to wish to dominate all those around him, even his spouse. It is the witch or evil stepmother who stands in for negative fantasies about the mother, and witches have been found in stories from almost every culture, again suggesting that they must be serving some important need in the imagination.

As Ernest Jones has written elsewhere

We observe that children commonly listen to fairy tales with an air of fascinated horror, or even with gusto, and demand the reading to be repeated. Yet the gruesome figures of these tales, e.g. cannibalistic giants, enter into the frightful nightmares which so many children have to endure. It would therefore seem plain sense to avoid such horror-raising stimulation. But the matter turns out to be not so simple. We find that young children spontaneously create in their imagination, both consciously and still more unconsciously, the same images of horror

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and terror, and that they suffer from nightmares without ever having listened to a fairy story.²⁴

Today, these witches and giants are sometimes joined or replaced in children's imagination by vampires or various types of monster often drawn from film, comic or television, but their symbolic meaning to the child probably remains very similar to that of the more traditional frighteners found in fairy-tales.

Parents who read aloud a story which takes up, say, typically childish fantasies of omnipotence or anti-adult aggression, however, may be reassuring their children at the same time that there is nothing terribly wrong with having or enjoying hearing about these fantasies — otherwise why should they — the adults — be reading aloud and also taking pleasure in such stories themselves? Going even further, though, parents may themselves become a temporary witch or giant in any story-telling session, when reading out villainous dialogue with appropriate relish. Children who at times resent their father or mother can go through considerable guilt and anxiety if normally equable parents never really behave in ways that can justify such occasionally strong emotions. A mother suddenly transformed into a witch, however, can for that moment be as feared and hated as it is possible to be; when her voice returns to normal, so will the child's ordinary, positive emotions, but for that moment before it may be no bad thing to allow children opportunity to experience without guilt the latent hostility that can co-exist in all of us towards our nearest and dearest.

But even if it is allowed that literature has a special, symbolic meaning for its readers, there is little agreement over what various common fairy-tale symbols represent. Most orthodox Freudian approaches to fairy stories are concerned with their possible sexual symbolism; but not all psychoanalytic thinkers see them in this way, with the emphasis necessarily always upon children's fantasies about the primal, family situation. Followers of Jung, for example, explain fairy stories as having more to do with an individual's struggle with himself, rather than with those around him. Carrying off the bride, or marrying the prince at the end of the story does not, in this view, represent a child's fantasy of finally possessing the loved parent against the claims of more powerful rivals. Instead, this victory may stand for a child's desire to reach more general maturity, both sexual and economic, and very often fairy-tale marriages are, in fact, accompanied by golden handshakes, such as the addition of half a kingdom.

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On the long journey towards this goal, the defeat of monsters and victory over physical obstacles like high mountains and thick forests, may represent a young person's victory over his own dark, animal side in favour of what Jung calls the upper world of light. In this sense, the fairy adventure story symbolises the ascent of consciousness, and the reader, identifying with the heroic figure in these stories,

can be liberated from his personal impotence and misery and endowed (at least temporarily) with an almost superhuman quality. Often enough such a conviction will sustain him for a long time and give a certain style to his life. It may even set the tone of a whole society.²⁵

Jung and Freud became estranged over their differences about the significance of sexual repression in the growth of personality, with Jung increasingly giving greater importance to mystical and religious experience. This variation in approach, when it comes to interpreting fairy-tales, becomes more striking when critics from both camps try analysing the same story, as in the case of the Grimms' *The Frog Prince*. Here, a frog does a favour for a princess on condition that they live afterwards as man and wife. The princess rather casually agrees to this, and the frog later takes up her promise. He insists on sharing her table and bedroom, but when he tries to hop into bed, enough is enough and she dashes him against a wall, although in other versions this only happens after the frog has spent three nights with her. Gratifyingly, the frog then changes into a handsome prince, who has been under the spell of a witch, and under these more auspicious circumstances, the princess has no further objections to matrimony.

For a Freudian, the symbolic meaning to the story of *The Frog Prince* could lie in a young girl's mixture of fascination and horror over the sexual act. As in another fairy tale, *Beauty and the Beast*, sex is represented at a base, animal level: the frog, with its 'thick ugly head', who wants to sleep in the princess's 'beautiful, clean bed', is here a negative symbol for the male sexual organ. But when the princess finally dashes away her old disgust, she is then enabled to see sex in a new, positive light, possibly after the act of love itself.

Jungians, by contrast, tend to see this story in wider terms. The frog here represents not simply sex but the whole 'unconscious deep' of any individual, filled with hidden treasures but like serpents, dragons or other traditional animal frighteners, loathsome in its initial appearance. But if the heroine can accept these riches, and break through the taboos and fears that sometimes stop us from

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embracing unconscious fantasies, hitherto inaccessible because they deal with various 'forbidden' topics and feelings, then she may end by realising the richness of her total personality. With soul no longer split off from body, there will be no further need to continue living only at half strength.

But even within one particular psychoanalytic approach, there is no necessary uniformity of interpretation over details. In *Jack and the Beanstalk*, for example, one critic sees Jack as an 'oral dependent' type, immature and incapable of competing successfully with his contemporaries in the market place. The magic beanstalk represents the masturbation fantasy of this depressed, inferior being, and cutting it down symbolises self-castration as a way of escaping the pursuing Oedipal hostility of the father-giant, on his way to punish Jack for his sexual presumption. But another critic views chopping down the beanstalk as a symbolic castration of the father, with the active collusion of two mother-figures: the giant's wife, who hides Jack away and helps him in his thefts, and Jack's own mother, who hands him the hatchet at the crucial moment. In this context, it is Jack's Oedipal designs which are the main focus of interpretation, with the giant-father chanting words to the effect, 'Fe! Fi! Fo! Fum!, Here's Jack who wants to marry Mum!'²⁶ Like Aladdin's lamp, the beanstalk has proved too tempting a phallic symbol for psychoanalytic critics to pass over, just as Cinderella's slipper is nearly always interpreted in female sexual terms. But after this, agreement generally ends. 'The analysts do agree that the beanstalk is a penis. The question is whose?'²⁷

Little Red Riding Hood is another story that has attracted much psychoanalytic speculation. For Erich Fromm, the heroine is a girl on the verge of puberty — her red hood symbolising the onset of menstruation — and so presented with the problems of her budding sexuality. Her mother forbids her to stray into the woods, which for Fromm is a veiled warning about not losing her virginity. The wolf, however, is male sexuality rampant; his desire to eat Red Riding Hood is symbolic of sexual intercourse. Little Red Riding Hood — for all her show of demure innocence — co-operates with the wolf, following his suggestions that she go 'deeper and deeper into the woods'. But, as Fromm concludes, 'This deviation from the straight path of virtue is punished severely.'²⁸ Ideas of devouring and loving here have often been linked, both in lovers' vocabulary and children's

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fantasy, and Red Riding Hood's unhappy end also symbolises the loss of her virginity.

Dr Bruno Bettelheim has brought a more Oedipal interpretation to this sexual symbolism. The wolf, for him, is the father's sexuality. Red Riding Hood, like all little girls in the family, is half-attracted by this, and therefore helps the wolf when he wants to know the way to the grandmother's house. Once the grandmother, who here stands for the child's own mother, is got out of the way, then everything is free for the wolf-father to attain his true desire: the sexual devouring of his own adolescent daughter. If the woodcutter intervenes before this, as he does in some later versions, then this represents the higher-conscience, superego of the father, anxious in his better moments to kill off his bestial 'id' forces that urge him on to such prohibited desires.²⁹

Other fairy stories, it has been argued, also carry within them complementary characters of the same sex who can symbolise different aspects of the parent in the reader's imagination, but split into two contrasting personalities: the idealised hero and the wicked villain. This process, according to the psychoanalytic writings of Melanie Klein, particularly reflects the feelings of the child about the mother who, from the first few months, represents 'the whole of the external world; therefore both good and bad come in his mind from her, and this leads to a twofold attitude towards the mother even under the best possible circumstances'.³⁰ Eventually a child will learn to accept that the same parent — or person — can be both giving and denying, or in Melanie Klein's phraseology, both a good as well as a dangerous object, but before this stage has been reached, infantile moods may frequently swing from extreme affection to equally definite resentment. In children's imagination, however, the extremes of these mood-swings can be represented by the splitting of parent-figures into both good and bad fantasy objects. In this way, one such figure can then be loved and admired and the other detested and feared, without the child having to solve the emotional and intellectual problem posed by the fact that both figures symbolise aspects of the same person. Thus the habitual coupling of extremes in the imagination and in fairy-tales: the idealised princess and the fearful witch; the kind father and the savage ogre; the rampant wolf and the benign woodcutter. By this splitting, Melanie Klein argues, children's fantasy image of the 'good mother', necessary for their

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psychological security, is in no way threatened, since all really negative impressions of her can instead be projected on to a convenient, hateful villain, who may come back in nightmares, where dreams about witches still tend to be very common, especially at a young age. At the same time, children may sometimes be very conscious of their own capacity for more general, violent, aggression, which for Melanie Klein goes far beyond mere bad temper, and can involve what she terms 'infantile sadism', with its desire to bite, maim and generally 'mess up'. In this sense, fairy-tale characters, like cannibalistic ogres, or devouring wolves, can reflect a child's own sadistic anger against others, as may other rough characters in children's fiction discussed in previous chapters, but once again in a form where readers can deny to themselves the personal origin of such fantasies. Indeed, the appeal of violence in fairy stories can sometimes be very great, especially amongst deprived or frustrated children, as the American author Richard Wright describes in his autobiography. As an unhappy small boy, he writes that after hearing the story of Bluebeard, 'I hungered for the sharp, frightening, breath-taking, almost painful excitement that the story had given me, and I vowed that as soon as I was old enough I would buy all the novels there were and read them to feed that thirst for violence that was in me, for intrigue, for plotting, for secrecy, for bloody murders.'³¹

The same psychological process of splitting between the good and bad may also occur in the reader's possible identification with the hero and with the villain in fairy-tales. The two brothers or sisters common in such stories, where one has all the virtues and the other all the faults, may represent children's own alternating views — the idealised and the negative — of themselves as well as of others around them. Once again, it may be more comfortable and comprehensible to see these contrasts represented in two distinct figures rather than in one person. Most readers, for example, prefer to hate and condemn the wolf and to excuse Red Riding Hood from any responsibility for what happens, even going to the extent of idealising her. As Dickens himself once declared, 'Little Red Riding Hood was my first love. I felt that if I could have married Little Red Riding Hood, I should have known perfect bliss.'³² Although tongue in cheek, this is a revealing statement from a great author who was apt to think in terms of over-idealised heroines, both in his fiction and in his own life, not always with the happiest results.

Kleinian theory would probably interpret *Little Red Riding Hood*

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again in Oedipal terms, where the wolf would represent children's fantasy of their own potential for destructiveness in the family situation, while Jungians would no doubt see the wolf as symbolic of our whole instinctive nature, which can threaten to devour us unless we can first recognise it and then draw upon its great animal strength. But by now the point will have become obvious: psychoanalytic interpretations of fairy-tales are often ingenious, but mutually inconsistent. All such interpretations — especially when they claim to be exclusive — should therefore be treated with caution, but to rule them out altogether would be to abandon the only type of explanation which has gone anywhere near accounting for the world-wide popularity of fairy-tales. As it is, these traditional stories *do* often seem to get near to particular, personal fantasy: themes like the slaying of monsters, sibling rivalry or Oedipal conflict, for example, where a child may be the subject of dispute between parents, are common to all folk stories, and to have lasted so long, they must have a significance at levels beyond mere entertainment. But because individual readers react to these stories according to their own particular needs, the various psychoanalytic interpretations already discussed may always seem much more valid in some cases than in others. A Freudian interpretation, for example, may be extremely pertinent when it comes to describing readers who react positively to certain stories because of strong Oedipal pressures in their own lives. As the most exhaustive survey so far conducted on individual responses to literature finally concludes, 'A reader responds to a literary work by using it to re-create his own psychological processes.'³³ Those who try to claim their own interpretations of literature as appropriate for every reader, therefore, simply risk reproducing personal reactions under the guise of a universal literary truth. But it is also likely that particular interpretations will be highly relevant in the case of some readers, whilst also applying at a less urgent level to other readers who only retain vestiges of the same type of response within themselves.

All psychoanalytic interpretations of fairy-tales, however, have sometimes spoilt their case, by their penchant for overstatement, either for the merits of their particular theory, or for the whole psychological approach to fairy stories, as if to exclude the possibility of any other alternative or complementary explanations for their popularity. C.S. Lewis, himself steeped in fairy literature, was perhaps justifiably irritated by a typical example of this from Freud

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himself who once wrote, 'Does it not begin to dawn upon us that the many fairy-tales which begin with the words, "Once upon a time there were a king and a queen" simply mean "Once upon a time there were a father and mother"?'³⁴ As C.S. Lewis himself went on to point out, of course kings and queens may sometimes symbolise parents to a child, but they may also stand for power and exoticism — the palaces they live in, in some ways an excuse for the description of opulent detail. Their princes and princesses are usually beautiful, and the rest of the population properly respectful. It would not be surprising, therefore, that at a simple level of daydreaming, kings and queens, princes and princesses, may also be fantasy objects in more material respects.

This particular type of appeal seems to have little to do with family dynamics, but this only qualifies Freud's previous interpretation; it does not rule it out altogether. The imagination does not necessarily work in any unitary fashion; different appeals may register at different levels. Returning to *Little Red Riding Hood*, the forest — for Dr Bettelheim — is really our unconscious, where we expect to find crude, sometimes disturbing fantasies dressed up in the form of wild animals. But a forest can also be something that is frightening in its own right, whether it stands for the unconscious or not, just as children may be scared of large animals for quite realistic reasons, whatever else they may also possibly symbolise for them. Red Riding Hood's coloured cloak may have associations with puberty for some readers, but it also creates a powerful visual image — the red cloak in the dark forest — that over the years has appealed to numerous illustrators as well as to children looking at such pictures. The wolf in the bed, whatever else he may mean, also provides listeners with the delicious suspense that goes with any nursery rhyme or fairy story that ends on a sudden note of shout and grab, producing its usual chorus of terrified squeals and requests for more of the same.

The genius of fairy stories lies in the combination of this type of vivid, imaginative detail with those immemorial plots and themes, handed down over the generations, which touch on matters of eternal interest. Many fairy stories deal with human aspirations that seem reasonably common in most societies, such as the desire to win the prize and defeat the enemy, to test oneself and learn some vital lesson, or to ward off danger and achieve final security. These plots are peopled by figures who are usually nameless, stateless and often without strong individual characteristics, so that identification — for

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all readers — can be an easy matter. Some of the individual or family tensions that fairy stories seem to resolve in the imagination may indeed be of universal application. At other times, however, fairy stories illustrate visions of the world, and an individual's hopes and fears for his own future within it, which reflect cultural norms that are more parochial. In Western society, emphasis in fairy stories is often, though not always, on worldly success, where 'The rewards sought after are wealth, comfortable living and an ideal partner.'³⁵ Other cultures, however, may produce folk-tales which reflect a more fatalistic view of an individual's hopes of happiness within a hostile, less malleable environment. Writing about Andrew Lang's nineteenth-century selection of fairy-tales, for example, Matthew Hodgart declared that 'You could even have predicted the future from these stories.'³⁶ Tales chosen from East Europe, for example, with its unsettled history and tradition of political tyranny, tended to contain plots where everything seemed to go wrong most of the time, with danger still threatening at the end of each story. Selections from Scandinavia, on the other hand, although full of solid terrors always managed to end on a note of cosiness, with trolls safely turned into stone and no other peril in sight.

But despite this evidence of cultural diversity, there are also other compensatory fantasies in fairy stories that seem to be more or less universal. *Cinderella*, for example, is the classic story of the sudden reversal of fortune, and one Victorian scholar collected 345 variations on this basic plot throughout the world. The attraction of such plots, both in fairy stories and in popular novels over the centuries, has been described by John Buchan as the appeal of 'The survival of the Unfittest, the victory against odds of the unlikeliest people', with a ubiquity which reflects 'the incurable optimism of human nature'.³⁷ This seems overstated, however; the vicarious satisfaction provided by an optimistic story may be very different from a belief that such things will one day actually happen. Indeed, readers sometimes turn to this type of literature because it offers more rewards than they have come to expect from their real existence. Even young children, with the rest of their lives in front of them, will soon realise that their more extreme infantile fantasies of omnipotence are never going to come true. They can still enjoy these daydreams when they are reflected in fairy stories, however, where

Fantasies of omnipotence are and remain the dominating ones. Just where we have most humbly to bow before the forces of Nature, the fairy-tale comes to

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our aid with its typical motives. In reality we are weak, hence the heroes of fairy-tales are strong and unconquerable; in our activities and our knowledge we are cramped and hindered by time and space, hence in fairy-tales one is immortal, is in a hundred places at the same time, sees into the future and knows the past. The ponderousness, the solidity, and the impenetrability of matter obstruct our way every moment; in the fairy-tale, however, man has wings, his eyes pierce the walls, his magic wand opens all doors. Reality is a hard fight for existence; in the fairy-tale the words 'little table, be spread' are sufficient. A man may live in perpetual fear of attacks from dangerous beasts and fierce foes; in the fairy-tale a magic cap enables every transformation and makes us inaccessible. How hard it is in reality to attain love that can fulfil all our wishes! In the fairy-tale, the hero is irresistible, or he bewitches with a magic gesture. Thus the fairy-tale, through which grown-ups are so fond of relating to their children their own unfulfilled and repressed wishes, really brings the forfeited situation of omnipotence to a last, artistic presentation.³⁸

This is to stress the compensatory nature of fairy-tale fantasy; other stories, however, may stimulate more philosophical, sometimes fatalistic insights into the human condition. While the unconscious fantasies that Freud claimed to have found in children may seem unrelievedly crude and violent, other schools of psychology have suggested a more positive aspect to unconscious wishes, reflected in the optimistic, heroic side of fairy stories. A case could also be made for fairy stories sometimes setting goals and suggesting aspirations rather than forever taking on the function of imaginative consolation. Heroic fantasy for one reader may provide an escape from the problems of living; for another it may act as a positive inspiration. Reactions will depend on personality, prevailing attitudes and situations in life. A story that describes a hero who triumphs over various obstacles may principally appeal to one reader because it appears to illustrate the resolution of an Oedipal situation; for another reader, for whom family conflicts may not be such an individual preoccupation, the same story may appeal in quite different terms.

In this way, fairy stories act as a mirror wherein different members of an audience can see a vivid reflection of some of their deepest and most important areas of the imagination. At the same time, this mirror can also become a crystal ball, reflecting images which may offer a good fit to a reader's own future aspirations. The fact that individuals within this audience react in different ways is only to be expected; if fairy-story imagery is particularly powerful, it will naturally tend to get through to the most personal, private areas of any reader's imagination. Evidence for this type of variety in response has always been there. Hitler, for example, was enthusiastic about the Grimms' tales, seeing them as part of a Teutonic heritage teaching

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valuable lessons about bravery and the necessity of cruelty, although fairy-tale editions brought out by Nazi educators deliberately exaggerated such aspects in the original versions, including their occasional anti-semitism.³⁹ Dr Bettelheim, on the other hand, who was at one period imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp, views the Grimms' stories as 'a priceless source of aesthetic pleasure and emotional and moral sustenance'. It would seem unlikely on the surface that both could be right, but once again fairy stories get through to different individuals in quite different ways, and even where one reader is concerned, they may convey more than one single meaning at a time. The imagination, once stimulated, is quite vast and complex enough to find a whole range of identifications within these stories, though possibly at different levels of consciousness and personal significance.

When children look at their own contemporary books it may occasionally be hard for them to find any adequate reflection in them of the more aggressive parts of their fantasy life. Stories about a few, fairly innocuously 'naughty' children are not enough, and one reason for turning to the knockabout humour and violence of comics may be because they go some way towards representing the more primitive aspects of a child's personality and imagination. Nursery rhymes and fairy stories, however, depict for a child a world that is sometimes savage and cruel. There are fairy stories, for example, where parents who are themselves starving to death abandon their children to wild animals as in *Hansel and Gretel*, or where within families, the struggle for power or for the father's inheritance may be brutal or murderous, as in the Grimms' story *The Singing Bone*. Outside the family, sudden death may alternate with torture as punishment for misdeeds or bad judgement, as with all those suitors who doom themselves by unsuccessfully putting in a bid for the princess's hand.

Thus, more than most other literature, fairy stories provide the child with the 'knowledge that he is born into a world of death, violence, wounds, adventure, heroism and cowardice, good and evil'.⁴⁰ Children will probably not yet know this to be true from their own experience, but this knowledge may still strike a chord within them, possibly even from memories of their own more violent fantasies and nightmares. It may also start providing them with some sort of mental preparation for those more violent aspects of adult society which they will soon also notice, for example by watching television news bulletins. In much children's literature, we often

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prefer to portray a world that is lacking in any serious problems or dangers; if this is overdone, however, there may then be a risk of presenting a picture which, however safe, may eventually seem a little dull. Fairy-tales, on the other hand, offer a universe of imaginative extremes, where the hero may and generally does get his heart's desire, but sometimes only after running fairly terrifying risks. All this may be put forward in quasi-magical terms, which reflect a type of wish-fulfilment, and may also keep close to a child's own intellectual formulations at this stage. In many senses, therefore, the fairy-tale world is one of unique meaning to young readers, and as such, something always to be treasured.

4 · Early fiction (ages 7 – 11)

By now, children with experience of books may have learned to recognise the typical conventions of early fiction so that, for example, they will normally expect certain stereotyped characters to act in certain stock ways, and will feel cheated if popular heroes or heroines are not finally rewarded with happy conclusions to their various adventures.¹ This firm preference for the predictable is not really surprising for children still feeling their way through stories, and even so readers aged between six and eight years often continue to find it hard to have any idea how a stereotyped story will end, even when they have heard the first half of it.² This is a reminder that however predictable early, simple patterns and conventions in fiction may seem to adults, they may still come across to children as something new, to be learned about gradually through repetition of the same story or of other similar stories.

This early need for the safe and predictable can explain why small children sometimes disappoint ambitious parents by appearing to prefer writing that is full of clichés. Where fantasy is concerned, for example, Enid Blyton's stories about Noddy, an animated wooden doll living in a cosily suburban version of Toyland, are often as popular with infants as they are detested by adults. Here again, nothing very surprising happens in these stories, where the Golliwog is always naughty and Noddy regularly behaves like a perpetual innocent, but this is the type of trouble-free, fictional world where small children, never quite sure what may happen once a page has been turned, can soon relax and enjoy. There are also other attractions for children in these mini-adventures: for Enid Blyton herself, Noddy 'is like the children themselves, but more naive and stupid. Children like that — it makes them feel superior.'³ What she did not point out, though, is that Noddy also generally receives far more praise than blame from other characters, and it is not at all unusual