Fairy Tales: Critical Theory and Archetypal Interpretation

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The question of how to read and respond to a text has been asked and argued by audiences and theorists alike since the first work was offered for approval. Many different arguments have been made regarding what should be considered essential and negligible from the review process, the stronger of which have been developed into schools of criticism. The initial division in reading a text is over the precedence of form and content. Though Aristotle began this debate, it became popular again in the 20th century because of the cultural critic Susan Sontag. Taking a firm stance, Sontag argued first for the supremacy of form, and then, switched sides writing discourse arguing the primacy of content. Beyond Sontag's writing, scholars throughout the world have found legitimate and convincing rationale for either approach. The crux of each argument is that through understanding the form, or by going to great depth into the content, the full potential of meaning within the text will be revealed.

Extending from the dichotomy of form and content, many schools of criticism have emerged throughout the last century. T.S. Eliot headed the movement for New-Classicism, in which the meaning of the text is found by staying with the text. Stanley Fish has argued for Reader Response, where the reader's process of engagement decides the hermeneutic route of understanding. Sigmund Freud's development of psychoanalysis introduced a new way of understanding textual relationships through the differentiation of Self and Other. The move toward Psychoanalytic interpretation laid the foundation for specialized interpretation, as is found in Cultural, Deconstruction and Feminist criticism.   Critical theory focuses on analyzing text as a method for understanding society and culture with the the implied understanding that

consciousness allows for progress. These are only a small sample of the different types of interpretive methods that have entered the formal conversation regarding textual interpretations. Such conversations obtain new meaning as they are engaged in regard to Jungian analysis and the interpretation of fairy tales. By studying Marie Louise von Franz' interpretive method of fairy tales developed in *Introduction to the Interpretation of Fairy Tales*, we may use this understanding to compare strategic methods of interpretation in fairy tales introduced by von Franz in conjunctions with the strategies further explored by Walter Odajnyk in his article, "The Archetypal Interpretation of Fairy Tales: Bluebeard" with textual strategies of interpretations used in critical theory. Through understanding the variations in critical theory and archetypal interpretation, we may begin to recognize the role of form and content within the interpretation of cultural content as it relates to psychology and engages healing potential.

Marie-Louise von Franz' method of interpreting fairy tales is outlined in chapter three of her book *Introduction to the Interpretation of Fairy Tales.* Von Franz' developed a multi-faceted approach that begins by conducting a structural analysis of the fairy tale by observing the time, place, and setting. Next, the characters are identified and counted at the different stages of the story. Questions such as the following are asked. How many total characters are there? Are they male, female, animal, or other? What is lacking? If the story begins:

> 'The king had three sons' one notices that there are four characters, but the mother is lacking. The story may end with one of the sons, his bride, his brother's bride and another bride—that is, four characters again but in a different set-up. Having seen that the mother is lacking at the beginning and there are three women at the end, one would suspect that the whole story is about redeeming the female principle. (111)

Any dis-balance between the number of characters or gender is significant to the interpretation and understanding of the archetypal conflict taking place. Thirdly, a symbolic analysis is made. This involves looking up and amplifying the symbols within the tale. Preceding this process, psychological analysis processes the information and attempts to translate the story into psychological terms. This does not mean that the

tale is translated to promote a psychological agenda or to amplify psychological ideas (Freudian or Jungian), rather the goal of this step is to reiterate psychologically what takes place within the context of the fairy tale. Finally, personal and archetypal analysis may be attempted. This demands in-depth knowledge of the self and the cultural community in which the fairy tale is active. To verify that the interpretation is authentic and functional takes experience and intuition.

In comparing von Franz' method with other critical strategies of interpretation, we find that her approach is a fusion of critical strategies. However, a chief similarity is observed in relation to New Criticism. The importance of staying with the text, or staying with the image to be guided to interpretation is significant. Secondly, von Franz is working with a psychological model. A psychological model introduces a vocabulary in order to amplify dynamics inherent in the material. One of the challenges and pleasures of using psychological theory in relationship to text is that a text may be used as a case study to support and explore the foundation of theories—cultural and interpersonal. Texts are a reflection of the cultural zeitgeist and contain relevant material to understanding the identity and challenges of cultures. However, texts should not be used exclusively. When done thoroughly, von Franz' theory rejects usurpation of content for the service of theory. The key difference being that it is an interpretation, not a diagnosis. Cultural and structural perspectives may also be brought in to the discussion and analysis.

At this point, it is important to distinguish between the different types of text. While critical theory has opened up the canon to embrace texts from diverse authorship and from innumerable types of media, von Franz' method focuses exclusively on fairy tales. She argues, "[f]airy tales are the purest and simplest expression of collective unconscious psychic processes. Therefore their value for the scientific investigation of the unconscious exceeds that of all other material" (1). Here, it is stressed that von Franz sees her strategy as a scientific method that is researched, observed, interpreted,

and reassessed. While critical theory has been known to assert a similar function in structuralism, it is not always the goal. Typically, theorists strive to achieve new strategies of engagement and understanding and are welcomed to them by the countless flexibility of form and content. In focusing solely on fairy tales, von Franz has changed the conversation by isolating the form and content of the text to a set number of variations. The isolated environment is essential for the success of experimentation. When the text is open up to infinite abstractions, it is difficult to observe the innately abstract nature of the unconscious. Similar to dreams, fairy tales enable a specific context and allow the unconscious to be observed.

An important distinction in relation to archetypal interpretation in fairy tails is raised in Odajnyk's article, "The Archetypal Interpretation of Fairy Tales: Blue Beard." In the introduction, Odajnyk distinguishes between the "personalistic approach" and "archetypal interpretation." Instead of representing human beings and their neurosis, specifically fairy tales personify archetypes, which in turn are the language of the unconscious. The characters in a fairy tale behave "stereotypically and appear to have hardly any inner psychic life […]. We may conclude, von Franz writes, that the characters in fairy tales represent archetypes, not human beings, and that the stories address transpersonal difficulties, developments, and dangers and not neurotic complications of an individual" (10). This statement is continued to assert that in the personalistic approach there is no healing potential. In archetypal interpretations, the possibility of healing comes from recognizing the archetypal interactions that are unbalanced and then witnessing their realignment. Unconscious elements become conscious and the complex is understood within an attainable context. Just as von Franz narrows the scope of content and form to a contained continuum, so do fairy tales make the unconscious accessible.

Odajnyk argues that "[t]he 'personalistic approach' has become the dominant form of fairy-tale interpretation among Jungians and non-Jungians alike" (11). Why is

the personalistic approach dominant and how does it nullify the healing potential? One way of observing these questions is to look at the experience of children engaging in fairy tales in comparison to adults and critical theory. As noted above, the challenge of critical theory is to enable engagement with a text. This engagement should lead to some revelation that relates to human experience. Through archetypal interpretation, the psyche is engaged and the individual and, in the case of fairy tales, the community have a healing experience. In observing adults, it is difficult to distinguish what is archetypal engagement and what is critical processing because everything is being processed by a mature intellect. In reading fairy tales, an adult may either interpret a fairy tale in relation to a critical theory, personal identification, or, ideally, an archetypal interpretation. However, a child does not have the context for critical theory, or the developed ego for complex identification, therefore, the clarity and appeal of archetypes is made more visible. Though a child is not typically in need of the type of healing that an adult may need, the fairy tale serves as a method of emotional and psychological instruction. A recognition of unbalance between binaries, such as good and evil, positive and negative, feminine and masculine, and light and dark, are made. For the child, an early education in archetypal structures facilitates adult interpretations and healing. This education begins with simple imagist representations that are depicted by cartoons like Pokémon and Disney films and extends to complex fantasy world's, such as Harry Potter, Twilight, and the numerous tales navigated by video games.

The archetypal nature of fairy tales makes them appealing to children and adults, and transcends cultural boundaries. Fairy tales may be engaged with as a means of education, entertainment, and healing. However, they may also be activated within a critical context to explore theoretical and interpretive methods of perception. Personalistic approaches enable creative re-visioning and engagement in a variety of critical theorizing, however it is important to distinguish between what is a projection of

personal or cultural experience and the archetypal representation of the Self, Other, and

World that may be recognized by engaging in archetypal interpretation.

Work Cited:

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