



RE-PRESENTING FORESTS IN FAIRY TALES: DO WE NEED TO LOOK AT WOODS DIFFERENTLY?

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Abstract

The physical setting of fairy tales, while supplying a fitting atmosphere to the theme and action, also provides a landscape for the execution of the plot. The forest— a recurrent image in many of the fairy tales— continues to be read and interpreted in a million possible ways. This paper attempts an exploration of the forest archetype and the impact of its repeated presentation as the enchanted place hiding the unknown, the seemingly tame façade of a wild face and the arena for the confluence of all things and beings above and beyond the real, and, analyses whether the representation of the forest impresses upon young minds— the primary consumers of fairy tales— constructively or destructively. Does not such an image leave a lasting impact on children’s psyche and draw them farther away from nature, which they see as a force that cannot be controlled and one which exposes them to dangers unknown? Piaget’s theory of intellectual development is referred to and employed in deliberating upon the topic. The paper takes into account, some well accepted and established interpretations of the archetype, but argues for newer narrative structures to significantly alter subsequent readings.

Keywords: Fairy Tales, Forest, Piaget, Representation.

From time immemorial, man has shared stories with each other, finding ways, methods and media to surprise, inform, shock, persuade and entertain curious minds; and minds – irrespective of identity, affiliations, societal and familial traditions, beliefs and value systems, level of education or demographic status – have forever been receptive of tales that have followed different structures, themes, styles and codes of expression. As children, stories have been the source of wonder and awe. Every individual would have a childhood anecdote to share, of bedtime stories being read out by his/ her mother in the dim light of a night lamp, or a newly





collected tale whispered by a dear friend during class in the kindergarten days when waiting for the recess never crossed one's mind, of a particularly interesting fairy tale book hidden stealthily at the back of a bookshelf away from the all-seeing eyes of a librarian, of trying to read a story book hidden under the blanket in the light of the torch in the dead of the night. "We can remember" writes Francis Spufford in his exquisite memoir *The Child that Books Built*, "readings that acted like transformations. There were times when a particular book like a seed crystal, dropped into our minds when they were exactly ready for it like a super saturated solution, and suddenly we changed" (9). Offering more than just a presentation of forms of fiction or a collection of the arts of illustration, children's literature chronicles the makings of the literate imagination. It addresses the changing milieu, of family life and human growth, schooling and scholarship, environment and environmental concerns, politics and social issues, in which children – at times suddenly, at times subtly – find themselves changed by literature.

Fairy tales hold a special charm for children, and, even adults would vouch for the effect they have on one's sensibilities and senses. With the right blend of narrative, dramatics, imagery, fantasy, morality and realism, fairy tales have deeply impacted and influenced young minds that have received these tales whole heartedly, allowing them to mould their thought processes, cement their comprehension, alter established belief systems and design new conclusions. This quality of fairy tales to leave a lasting impression on eyes that see, ears that hear and minds that form pictures makes the production, distribution and study of, and the debate and discourse on fairy tales, an issue that calls for serious deliberation. And rightly so, for, childhood itself is a complex concept with research and ongoing studies altering established and accepted definitions of this period. Flexible in their interpretations of text, open to multiple dimensions of narrative, with playfulness being an inevitable dimension of their outlook, children cannot easily be understood which makes the task of one studying the impact of stories on these highly impressionable beings taxing and laborious. Having little knowledge of language, language structures, narrative genres and story framework; the unstable distinctions between fantasy and fact and between the desirable and the actual, that they find in books, may leave them susceptible to misguided and misread messages. They have tendencies to forge emotional attachments to mature figures, to be incapable of abstract thought, to have less of a concentration span than adults and to be at the mercy of their immediate perceptions. In such a scenario, a detailed exploration of characteristic patterns and structures within stories and tales becomes imperative to analyse the far reaching consequences they have in moulding the understanding and perspectives of children on the one hand, and, to comprehend deliberate attempts by the producers of children's literature to reinforce various power structures, levels of authority and prevalent beliefs.





Irrespective of the age or genre that a tale belongs to, its theme and plot are supplied with a fitting atmosphere by the physical setting, that while adding to the significance also provides a landscape for the execution of the action. One of the most intriguing aspects of the setting of a fairy tale, is the ease with which it assumes an emphasized and heightened significance, consequently leading to the imparting of multiple dimensions of comprehension and interpretation. The setting can thus be read as a manifestation of the fairy tale's ongoing dialectic between the real and the magical, between the material world and the fantastic forces that transcend it. The forest is a recurrent image in many of the fairy tales and continues to be read and interpreted in a million possible ways. Such repeated images/ concepts/ ideas are born out of the elemental and universal patterns in the human psyche which when embodied in narrative and literary creations evoke a profound reciprocity from the reader/ listener who shares the psychic archetypes expressed by the author. The presence of law regimented jungles, dark woodlands that hold secrets, coppices untouched by civilization or overgrown thickets in tales, since the ancient times, bears testimony to the fact that probably no landscape is so automatically associated with fairy tales as forests. Untamed, uncivilised and uncontrolled, forests are at times portrayed as absolute opposite co-ordinates to the civilised and wise race of mankind. While evoking awe and amazement for its vibrancy and chaste purity of flora and fauna, the fact cannot be overlooked that it also gives birth to an apprehensive discomfort and – if the term may be used – fear. The Encyclopaedia of Magic and Superstition states:

The uncanny quality of woods is part of the lore of childhood. In the forest, you are far from home, from fireside warmth and kindness and a settled, accustomed order of things. In the forest, you are lost. In the forest, the trees put out roots to trip you and reach out for you with crooked skinny fingers. In the forest, very often, lives the witch. (60)

As the historian Roger Chartier puts it, "Reading is not just an abstract operation of intellect: it is an engagement of the body, an inscription in space, a relation of oneself and others" (20). A close examination would reveal that, in stories, no constituent is included by chance – each bit that contributes to the overall effect has been placed there after significant contemplation and with specific objectives expected to be derived from their successful understanding. Mere entertainment has never been the sole impetus/ inspiration behind the relating and sharing of fairy tales; for, fairy tales contribute immensely to a child's intellectual and moral development. It becomes imperative then, to explore the stages of intellectual development that would shed light on the impact of fairy tales on young minds. The most





systematic and comprehensive theory of cognitive development is popularly believed to be the one propounded by the Swiss biologist Jean Piaget. Piaget's approach known as genetic epistemology holds that the development of human intellectual abilities take place as a result of the organisation and reorganisation of certain patterns of behaviour called schema. Schemas, which constitute the cognitive structural units of the human mind undergo the process of organisation or adaptation through three activities: assimilation which is the process of altering experiences to make them congruent with existent cognitive structures; accommodation which is the modification of existing schemas to facilitate comprehension and proper interpretation of new information; and, equilibration, which is a balance between the aforementioned two activities.

Cognitive structures and cognitive functioning contribute immensely to the intellectual development which has been divided by Piaget into the following major stages:

- a) Sensory- motor stage (birth to 2 years)
- b) Pre-operational Stage (2 to 7 years)
- c) Concrete Operational Stage (8 to 11 years)
- d) Formal Operational Stage (12 to 15 years)

At the pre-operational stage, children do not understand concrete logic, cannot take the point of view of other people and are heavily influenced by their perceptions. Among the characteristics of this developmental stage that Piaget explains are representational thoughts and animistic thinking. While the former implies the child's tendency to demonstrate make-believe play, in which he uses signs and symbols in place of real objects, the latter concept signifies the habit of children, of attributing human feelings and motives to inanimate objects. Artificialism too is a part of this stage, which states that pre-operational children consider natural phenomena such as rain and thunder as having been designed and made by people. It is at this age that children are provided with access to fairy tales and other stories, many of which portray the forest as a dark, unknown and dangerous place. This would lead to an association of the emotion of fear with the symbol forests that would have adverse effect on the development of the child's view on nature and natural resources. The archetypal symbols are significant not only because they are functional literary conventions but because like dreams and myths, they express and appeal to universal human impulses, anxieties and needs. An important question that surfaces then, is whether the forest image is utilised to impart physicality to the fear in children's minds? Does it not become the element employed to represent the evil, dark and fearful aspects of the child's world and understanding?





An exploration and unbiased examination of these questions reveal how such an image leaves a lasting impression on children's psyche drawing them away from forests – and subsequently nature – which they see as a force that cannot be controlled and exposes them to dangers unknown. Such a distancing may not be visible or active in some, yet its presence cannot be denied. This, when combined with the fact that there are relatively few children's books that propound or exhibit affinities with the environment and concepts of environment conservation, becomes a matter of serious concern. A critic and scholar of children's literature, Anthony Pavlik, supports this argument in his essay titled Children's Literature and the Ecocritics when he focuses on the representation of the forests in stories and tales in the archetypal fashion as: "...providing a strange or fantastic world to be explored by the protagonists in contrast to the apparent safety of home or known locale, a dark and dangerous setting..."(421). Exposed to such interpretations and readings in childhood, there lies in the depths of their mind, an unconscious yet strong attitude towards forests, that is in some way associated with negative emotions of fear, unfamiliarity, strangeness and the like. While this paper is not an exhaustive or all-inclusive study incorporating the complete and absolute impact of employment of the forest archetype, it vouches for the need for alternative forms of representation and a modification of the current image and interpretation that the forest impresses upon young minds. Thus, it is imperative to re-present the woods and forests that form an inevitable part of stories that children grow up reading and listening to.

In Envisioning Literature J. Langer states:

Inherent in the act of literacy understanding, is the promise of touching the many sidedness of human sensibility. It is through the envisionments we develop, as we explore new horizons of possibility, that we can at least begin to imagine the perspectives of others – in other circumstances, eras and cultures – and be moved to make new sense of ourselves, our times and our world.(145)

Thus, the exposure that children receive contributes immensely to their development as ecologically aware individuals of an enlightened future generation. The emphasis on the role of fairy tales in shaping attitudes and the presentation of metaphors of nature that will consequently lead to the shaping of ecological realities in the future, therefore, assume great significance.





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