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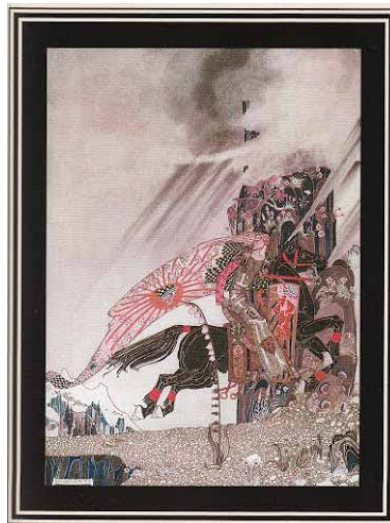
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Perennially Popular

The Appeal of Classic Fairy Tales for Children

PAULINE DEWAN



"The Princess on the Glass Hill" from *East of the Sun and West of the Moon: Old Tales from the North* by Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe, illustrated by Kay Nielsen. New York: George H. Doran Company, 1920.

Author's note: All illustrations taken from books in the public domain.

Fairy tales were not initially intended for children. "Originally told at fireside gatherings or in spinning circles by adults to adult audiences," as Maria Tatar points out, "fairy tales joined the canon of children's literature (which is itself of recent vintage) only in the last two to three centuries."¹

They began as oral tales for all listeners, passed down by word of mouth from one generation to the next. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Giovanni Francesco Straparola, Giambattista Basile, and Charles Perrault published some of the first collections of fairy tales in the Western tradition. During the nineteenth century, famous fairy tale authors such as Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen, and Joseph Jacobs continued writing down oral tales.

Many fairy tales have survived hundreds of years and are as popular today as they were in older societies. No matter how few books children know, they are often familiar with fairy tales such as "Cinderella," "Jack and the Beanstalk," and "The Sleeping Beauty." Although these tales can appeal to people of all ages, they particularly resonate with the young. What is it about classic fairy tales that captivates so many children?

Empowering Children

Many of the classic tales empower youth in a number of ways. The least privileged children rise above their elders in many

fairy tales. The youngest of three succeeds where elder siblings fail (for example, "Cinderella," "The Golden Goose," and "Beauty and the Beast").²

Underdogs prevail by outwitting powerful opponents. The brave little tailor conquers two giants, a unicorn, and a wild boar; Hansel and Gretel kill an evil witch; Puss in Boots outsmarts an ogre; and young Jack cuts down a beanstalk to defeat a giant.³

In many fairy tales, children not only conquer opponents but also become kings and queens by virtue of their good hearts and brave deeds. They are active agents in their own destiny as they strive to become their best selves (as represented by the royal status they achieve).

"The Princess on the Glass Hill" is a classic example of an empowering fairy tale for children.⁴ It begins with a problem that three siblings try to solve in turn. When the two elder sons fail to discover why their father's meadow is destroyed on a particular night each year, the youngest son takes up his post as guard. Finding a horse with brass armor, he tames it and leads



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it away—an action that saves the meadow. The following two years, he again saves the meadow when horses with silver, and then gold, armor appear.

Having accomplished the first quest, he is presented with a second one. A king issues a challenge to those in his kingdom: whomever is able to ride up a glass hill to win a golden apple from his daughter can marry her. Everyone who tries this task fails, including the two elder siblings. When the youngest brother successfully rides up the hill on three occasions in brass, silver, and then gold armor, he wins the princess and half a kingdom. His incremental rise from ridiculed youngest son to esteemed prince is the result of his own agency and characteristic of the best tales.



"Cinderella," illustrated by Edmund Dulac, from *The Sleeping Beauty and Other Fairy Tales from the French* by Arthur Quiller Couch, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1910.

Conquering Fears

Although fairy tales are populated with kindly helping figures and noble kings and queens, they also include witches, monsters, trolls, and other scary creatures. Some fairy-tale adapters minimize the fear, evil, and violence, forgetting that many children enjoy dangerous situations, particularly in the safe environment of fiction. Celebrated fairy tales such as "Little Red Riding Hood," "Jack and the Beanstalk," "Hansel and Gretel," and "Jack the Giant Killer" are filled with frightening situations.⁵

Perrault in "Blue Beard," for example, deliberately heightens readers' fears.⁶ When Blue Beard's wife violates her husband's interdiction and enters a forbidden room, she finds multiple corpses of his ex-wives. Discovering her disobedience, Blue Beard prepares to kill her. As she awaits her execution, she repeatedly asks her sister if her rescuers are in sight. Three times, Anne replies, "I see nought but dust in the sun and the green grass growing."⁷ The brothers arrive at the last possible moment to spare her life and allay readers' fears.

In the tale, "The Old Woman in the Wood," robbers jump out of a thicket and murder everyone except a servant girl who hides behind a tree.⁸ When the robbers leave, the servant girl is left alone in the forest, afraid of the dangers surrounding her. A dove near an old tree befriends her, providing food, shelter, and clothing. In exchange, the dove asks her to retrieve a ring guarded by an evil old woman. Despite her fears, the servant girl accomplishes the task and is rewarded by the transformation of the old tree into a handsome prince.

Scariness, as Jerry Griswold points out, plays a larger role in stories for children than it does for adults.⁹ When children read stories, they experience the same fear and anxiety as the characters, but they do so in a safe simulator-type environment. Characters facing frightening situations model coping skills for child readers, providing them with a dress rehearsal for life's challenges.

Leaving Home and Growing Up

Fairy tales also appeal to children because they typically embody patterns of growth and development. Children become adults in these tales by moving away from home and entering "the wide world"—a place filled with danger, challenges, and exciting adventures. Many fairy tales begin with a domestic problem, one that propels children into the larger world. This movement away from home stimulates personal growth as characters face new challenges. As Jack Zipes observes, "The wandering protagonist always leaves home to reconstitute home."¹⁰

Hansel and Gretel are forced to leave their house and enter the frightening woods because there is not enough food for the family during a famine.¹¹ The hard-hearted mother talks her husband into abandoning their children. Although Hansel and Gretel manage to return home by planting a trail of stones, their success is short-lived once the famine returns.



"The Old Woman in the Wood," illustrated by Arthur Rackham, from *Little Brother and Little Sister and Other Tales* by The Brothers Grimm, illustrated by Arthur Rackham. London: Constable & Co., 1917.

The second time the siblings are abandoned in the woods, they are unable to return home because birds eat their trail of breadcrumbs. But the children manage to rescue themselves permanently by outwitting their mother's fantasy-world equivalent—the child-eating witch. Once the pair kill the witch, they find their way home to their father and discover that their mother has died.

Thumbelina, like Hansel and Gretel, is another fairy-tale child forced to leave home.¹² A toad carries her off to a muddy stream, a beetle to a forest, and a field mouse to a hole in the ground. But even in the midst of despair, Thumbelina does not forget others. Her kindness to a dying swallow gains the bird's sympathy.

In fairy tales, compassion to those less fortunate frequently evokes a reciprocal response, one that rescues the protagonist

from harm (for example, “The Juniper-Tree,” “The Elves and the Shoemaker,” and “The Water of Life”).¹³

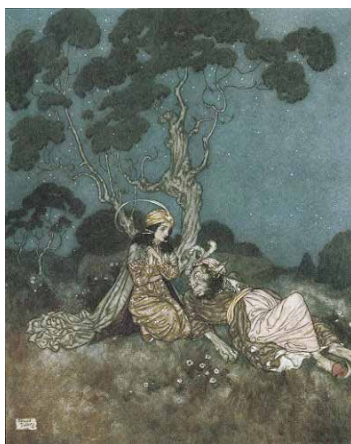
The swallow in Andersen’s tale rescues Thumbelina from entrapment and carries her to a land of enchantment where she marries the miniature king of the flowers. Her testing in the wide world releases her from imprisonment and brings her full circle from a childhood home of flowers to a marital home of flowers.

The journey from childhood to adulthood is often represented in fairy tales by the movement from a single state to a married one (for example “The Golden Goose,” “Thumbelina,” and “Cinderella”).¹⁴ Deviation from this fairy-tale pattern is depicted as unnatural.

When the heroine of “Rapunzel” hits puberty, a witch tries to lock her in a high tower—one that has no stairs or doors.¹⁵ But the King’s son discovers Rapunzel and enters the tower by climbing up her hair, an action that enrages her captor. Despite the witch’s best efforts, Rapunzel eventually leaves the tower and becomes a wife and mother. A copper castle with many towers in “The Tinderbox” and a dark tower in “Maid Maleen” are also ineffective in thwarting the natural progression from childhood to adulthood.¹⁶

Misfortune can befall protagonists who deviate from this pattern. In “Beauty and the Beast,” Beauty keeps her father’s promise to Beast by leaving home to marry him.¹⁷ She becomes homesick and tells Beast that she has such a strong desire to see her father that she will die of grief if she is unable to do so. Since suitor supplants father in the customary fairy-tale pattern, the return home interrupts the normal developmental trajectory. Beast almost dies when Beauty returns to her father, and it is only her compassion for Beast that saves him.

Rather than depict individual development, a number of fairy tales demonstrate familial progression as one character improves upon the actions of his or her siblings (for example, “The Story of the Three Little Pigs,” “The Water of Life,” and “The Golden Castle that Hung in the Air”).¹⁸ In “The Golden Goose,” the eldest son enters the forest to cut wood.¹⁹ When he meets a little old man, he refuses to share his food with him. The middle son repeats the actions of his brother. But when the youngest son enters the woods, he shares his food willingly with the old man.



“Beauty and the Beast,” illustrated by Edmund Dulac, from *The Sleeping Beauty and Other Fairy Tales from the French* by Arthur Quiller Couch, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1910.

Because a forest is an unknown and unfamiliar place, it is often the site of fairy-tale challenges and tests. Nancy Canepa points out that the forest is a place of initiation—“the site of trials and tasks the successful completion of which effect a radical change in the protagonist’s life.”²⁰ The purpose of entering a forest, according to Maria Nikolajeva, is to gain “maturity and better knowledge.”²¹ Venturing into the woods is an essential component of protagonists’ quests and instrumental in their progression from childhood to adulthood.

In “The Golden Goose,” the youngest son is rewarded for his kindness in the woods with a magical goose, which in turn wins him a princess.²² Likewise, when the maiden is tested in the forest in “The Three Little Men in the Wood,” she is rewarded for her generosity and obedience with magical gifts and abilities. Her stepsister is correspondingly punished when she fails the same forest testing.²³

Embodying Hopes and Dreams

Although fairy tales can depict children’s deepest fears, they also frequently embody their greatest hopes and dreams. Many of the best fairy tales present wondrous worlds that captivate and inspire readers. “Resplendent, imperishable, and incorruptible” are the words Max Lüthi chooses to describe fairy-tale worlds.²⁴ In “The Twelve Dancing Princesses,” the princesses’ beds sink into a magical subterranean realm each night.²⁵ A beautifully illuminated castle sits in the midst of groves of trees with silver, gold, and diamond leaves.

In a number of fairy tales, metals and precious gems combine with nature to improve upon it. The emperor’s gardens contain flowers with tinkling silver bells in “The Nightingale,” a hill of brilliant glass dazzles onlookers in “The Princess on the Glass Hill,” and roses of crimson diamonds, leaves of emeralds, pomegranate flowers of garnets, marigolds of topazes, and tulips of amethysts, opals, and diamonds shine brilliantly in “The Golden Branch.”²⁶ These bejeweled landscapes depict a world of splendor and magnificence; indeed, the natural world is even more wondrous when transformed into a gem-laden one.

Castles and palaces are the apex of the built world in fairy tales. They are frequently illuminated with the most brilliant lights and adorned with the costliest and most radiant gems. The palace of the mer-people in “The Little Mermaid” is located far out to sea, deep into the ocean’s unfathomable depths.²⁷ Its walls are made of coral, its windows amber, and its roof cockle shells adorned with pearls. The castle in “Queen Cat” is even more splendid with its doors of precious stones, walls of finest porcelain, and halls of mother-of-pearl and radiant gems. This castle is filled with golden plates, crystal glasses, and thousands of glittering lights.²⁸

Cosmic journeys highlight the magnificence of the sun, moon, and stars. Characters in “The Seven Ravens” and “East of the Sun and West of the Moon” undertake breathtaking celestial

quests in search of loved ones.²⁹ The four winds carry the protagonist in the latter tale east of the sun and west of the moon to an enchanted castle.

When the protagonist of “The Golden Castle that Hung in the Air” travels nine hundred miles beyond the world’s end, he sees something sparkling and twinkling like a tiny star in the far distance. As he gets closer, he discovers that it is an otherworldly castle that hangs suspended in the sky.³⁰ The enchanted castles and wondrous landscapes of fairy tales suggest a visionary world of perfection and fulfillment, the apex of aspiration and desire. The reader’s imagination soars, unrestrained by the limits of the real world.



“East of the Sun and West of the Moon,” illustrated by Kay Nielsen, from *East of the Sun and West of the Moon: Old Tales from the North* by Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe, New York: George H. Doran Company, 1920.

Providing Reassuring Structure

Fairy-tale landscapes suggest infinite possibilities yet are bound by the comforting limits of formulaic structure.³¹ Children learn to recognize the conventions of fairy tales early in their reading careers: the “once-upon-a-time” beginnings, “happily-ever-after” endings, good and evil characters, generalized settings, and triplicate adventures and character groupings. These formulaic patterns provide stability in fairy-tale worlds filled with unknown forces and strange events. Numerous fairy tales make use of familiar patterns that resonate with children: the progression from home to the wide world to a new form of home,³² the movement from innocence to experience, the journey symbolizing development, and assistance to those less fortunate who in turn help the assister.

Fractured fairy tales such as Jon Scieszka’s *The Frog Prince Continued*, David Wiesner’s *The Three Pigs*, Babette Cole’s *Prince Cinders*, and Robert Munsch’s *The Paper Bag Princess* delight young readers because they violate the fairy tale conventions that children have learned to recognize.³³

Depicting the Essential and the Elemental


Fairy tales are stripped of extraneous details. They depict character types, not individualized or even named characters. Nuances and subtleties of portrayal are deliberately avoided. Princes are noble, witches evil. The fairy tale genre thrives on extremes and juxtaposed contrasts such as ugly/beautiful, caring/cruel, rich/poor. As with characters, settings are rarely

individualized or localized. Seldom are place names given or detailed descriptions of surroundings provided. Events take place in “the forest,” not a particular forest. Everything peripheral is eliminated.

Stripped of localized and particularized detail, characters and places offer infinite possibilities to the imagination. The child reader is free to visualize a world that is larger than life. And by eliminating nuances and particulars, fairy-tale authors focus on the essential, the universal, and the elemental.

As both J. R. R. Tolkien and Jane Yolen remind us, classic fairy tales have been revised and honed over the course of time, emerging as tales of refined wisdom, wonder, and inspiration for children.³⁴ Their truths have withstood the test of time and their enchanted worlds have appealed to young readers over hundreds of years. Fairy tales touch children in profound ways because they reenact patterns that are especially significant and memorable for them—patterns that have had to pass through the distillation process of oral transmission before being committed to print.

Note about Illustrations

The Golden Age of children’s book illustration, at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, was a period of lavish fairy-tale artwork. Three outstanding Golden-Age illustrators—Arthur Rackham, Edmund Dulac, and Kay Nielsen—created opulent fairy-tale gift books, many of which are still reproduced today. See, for example, Dover’s Calla Editions. 

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