4-15-1981

Crime and Punishment -Or Development- in Fairy Tales and Fantasy

Anita Moss

Follow this and additional works at: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore

Part of the Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol8/iss1/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to: http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm
Crime and Punishment -Or Development- in Fairy Tales and Fantasy

Abstract
Discusses “the practices of writers of didactic fairy tales and ... [contrasts] them to fantasies which also incorporate the archetypal fantastic journey in the interest of expressing complex spiritual, ethical, or emotional truths.”

Additional Keywords
Babbit, Natalie. Tuck Everlasting; Fairy tales—Moral and ethical aspects; Fantasy—Moral and religious aspects; Grimm Brothers. “Hansel and Gretel”; Lang, Andrew. The Golden Fairnilee; Linda Leach
When I was a small girl in rural Mississippi, my grandmother often sat by the fire in the evenings telling stories she had heard in her own childhood. She told traditional folk tales, ghost stories (all supposedly true), which sent me to bed with tingling, thrilling terror. But her specialty was the fantastic moral tale; these terrified me beyond all hope, leaving me lying rigid, sleepless, and sweating under the covers. The most vivid of these was the well-known poem, James Whitcomb Riley's "Little Orphant Annie," who "comes to our house to stanch her cupps / saucers up and sweep the crumbs away." In one of Annie's tales, a wicked little girl is spirited away by evil spirits: "Her mama heard her holler/Her papa heard her squall/And when they turned the covers back, she wasn't there at all/And the goblins will get you if you don't watch out." I also carry in my consciousness even now an image of a grinning, insinuating boogie man, hiding out behind the lilac bush, waiting and watching to see if I cried, whereupon, no doubt, he would fetch me away and perform unspeakable acts of torture upon my sin-ridden person. There were other Awful Warnings too. Once as I sat innocently sewing doll clothes on a Sunday afternoon, Grandma shrieked in horror that the Devil would "bore holes in my tongue for sewing on the Sabbath." I need hardly elaborate on the horrific images suggested by this information.

I know now from the relatively safe and analytical perspective of the adult student of children's literature, that these fantastic moral tales undoubtedly descended from what I term the didactic fairy tale (and ultimately, of course, from the medieval exemplum). These didactic fairy tales were popular in the 1830s and 1840s in England. Such stories as "Uncle David's Story about Giants and Fairies," an interpolated fairy tale in Catherine Sinclair's realistic novel, Holiday House (1839), Francis Edward Paget's The Hope of the Katzekopfs (1844), Mark Lemon's The Enchanted Doll, as well as the later works, Christina Rossetti's Speaking Likenesses (1873) and George MacDonald's The Wise Woman (1875), all incorporate the archetype of departure and return and the conventions of fairy tale, as well as terrifying effects, in order to teach children, as Gillian Avery notes, "quite ordinary moral lessons." The stories I heard in my own childhood and even Roald Dahl's Charlie and the Chocolate Factory (1964) are clearly descendents of the British didactic fairy tale. These writers employ the fantastic journey in the service of a narrowly focused and unpleasant didacticism. Frequently in traditional folk tales and in many excellent fantasies from both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, the archetype of departure and return reveals that the child protagonist is spirited into fairy land where he or she receives genuine spiritual or emotional insight. Such stories acquire a more profound sense of identity and the nature of things, and, like the Ancient Mariner, returns to the ordinary world a sadder but wiser child. In such stories fantastic journeys also serve a moral function, but it is an enlarged, mythic truth, not a simplistic lesson in moral conduct.

I would like to discuss, then, the practices of writers of didactic fairy tales and to contrast them to fantasies which also incorporate the archetypal fantastic journey in the interest of expressing complex spiritual, ethical, or emotional truths: the Grimms' story, "Hansel and Gretel," Andrew Lang's The Gold of Fairnilee, and Natalie Babbit's Tuck Everlasting.

Most of the earliest literary fairy tales and fantasies written from 1840 to 1850 in England were concerned with diagnosing, treating, and curing the moral ailments of children, as were writers of explicitly Moral and Matter-of-Fact tales. The attitude of most writers and adult readers of fairy tales at mid-century is represented by an anonymous review of Uncle Peter's Chair (a work which has apparently suffered oblivion) in The Athenaeum, 1843; the reviewer describes the volume as "... intended for little boys and girls from 8 to 14, who may be affected with a painful and dangerous disorder called Discontentalgia, or the king and queen fever. Uncle Peter wishes, forsooth, to cure them of the desire to be kings and queens." Writers such as Paget, Sinclair, Lemon, and even Charles Kingsley, merely borrowed the external trappings of fairy tales and romances in order to teach moral lessons to bad children. While all of these writers consciously espoused the value of the imagination and its function in the lives of children and their books, none of them sustained a commitment to the pleasures of fantasy and the imagination all the way through their stories. Sooner or later they all turned their fairy tales into narrow lessons. In each story the child protagonist, often a lively and spirited child, is removed from the ordinary world to a fantastic world of terror, placed under the control of a tyrannical adult figure, and transformed into the pious and saintly children to which early Victorian audiences apparently responded. One notes in these stories a deep split in the creative purposes of the writers between their avowed attitudes toward fantasy, children, and the imagination and their actual practices, a bifurcation often manifested in the split structures of the stories themselves.

Another manifestation of this division occurs in the frequency with which these writers use the office of imagination or fantasy to create terrifying effects. The obvious function of such terror is clearly to frighten the child reader into being good. But even more sinister is the notion that the writers themselves seem to be most intensely and imaginatively charged when contemplating the horrible. The practices of these writers suggest that the imagination, if not tightly reined by moral and rational stricture, leads one on a journey to the chaos of nightmare, an idea in keeping with much nine-
teenth-century literature. Finally these didactic fairy tales emphasize with unusual power the in-capacity and helplessness of parents, another common theme of the time which may also have derived from early folk tales done in the same vein. This effect seems to be a consequence of the tension between the conventions of the moral tale and the traditional fairy tale. Children in these stories are removed from their childish parents as in folk tales, and now the result of their own initiative and the kindly assistance of some supernatural friend; rather they are punished by a tyrannical embodiment of adult authority until their spirits are broken.

Paget's The Hope of the Katzekopfs will demonstrate these characteristics. In the preface to his fairy tale, Paget, speaking in the voice of William Churne of Staffordshire, defends the value of faerie tales in Paget's tales. The effect seems to be a consequence of the tension between the conventions of the moral tale and the traditional fairy tale. Children in these stories are removed from their childish parents as in folk tales, and now the result of their own initiative and the kindly assistance of some supernatural friend; rather they are punished by a tyrannical embodiment of adult authority until their spirits are broken.

Paget's The Hope of the Katzekopfs will demonstrate these characteristics. In the preface to his fairy tale, Paget, speaking in the voice of William Churne of Staffordshire, defends the value of faerie tales in Paget's tales. The effect seems to be a consequence of the tension between the conventions of the moral tale and the traditional fairy tale. Children in these stories are removed from their childish parents as in folk tales, and now the result of their own initiative and the kindly assistance of some supernatural friend; rather they are punished by a tyrannical embodiment of adult authority until their spirits are broken.

One boy bristled with prickly quills like a porcupine and raised and depressed them at pleasure; but he usually kept them pointed outwards. Another instead of being rounded like the people found the needles of a pine tree at his fingertips. A third caught in everything he came near, for he was hung round with hooks like fish-hooks. One girl exuded a sticky fluid and came up to the knees. Another, rather smaller, was slimy and slipped through the hands.

The climax of the story occurs when Flora finds herself being walled up with the birthday queen. She wakes from her nightmare and runs home, much chastened and better-tempered girl. After the terrifying intensity of the fantastic journey, the narrator's platitudinous moral seems particularly flat.

In the split structures of these works, in the pervasive presence of nightmare and terror, and in the depiction of weak parents, these writers reflect their own struggles to liberate their imaginations from moral structure. They retreat finally from the truths of their own perceptions, and they reduce the stature of their own characters in order to make lessons of human conduct be enacted by following simple rules: "Be industrious and don't eat sweets."

We can see the direct influence of didactic fairy tales on Roald Dahl's Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, in which several bad children and one very good child are transported by Willy Wonka, the counterpart of the fairy godmother, to the magical chocolate factory. Here Augustus Gloop, Mike Teavee, Violet Beauregarde, and Veruca Salt, are all subjected to punishments befitting their sins. Augustus Gloop is sucked into an enormous pipe for his gluttony. Violet is transformed into a giant blueberry bubble to cure her gum-chewing addiction. A board of squirrels send Veruca Salt down a garbage chute to cure her of selfishness, and Mike Teavee disappears into the giant lens of a television camera, where he is metamorphosed into an inching television viewer. Only Charlie Bucket, who is kind to his helpless parents and grandparents, controls his passion for sweets, and who submits to the good-natured tyranny of Willy Wonka. He escapes punishment and finally wins the entire chocolate factory for himself. Dahl's story is light-hearted to be sure, but it nevertheless expends an extraordinary degree of fantastic invention in order to teach simplistic moral lessons. In this, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory and the didactic fairy tales of the early nineteenth century are reductive in depicting childhood, fantasy, and the imagination. The archetypal patterns of the journey and transformation are rendered trivial.

In contrast to such shallow renderings of archetypal patterns of experience, the Grimms' folk tale, "Hansel and Gretel," reveals the two characters facing their fears -- abandonment by parents and the threat of being eaten by the witch; overcoming these threats through Gretel's initiative and quick wit, and at last returning with the witch's jewels to help their father, Hansel and Gretel vanquish the cruelty which had evoked so much domestic anguish in the fairy tale place. The pattern of departure and return in "Hansel and Gretel" helps to illuminate some of the most painful and complex emotions of growth, rather than reducing such complexities to a set of simple rules.

Most recent writers of fantasy have shown that the fantastic journey into the other world can reveal the mystic interpenetration of the
ordinary and the fabulous, the relationship between the actual and the imaginary. Most of us are familiar with Tolkien's discussion of fairy stories and his famous statement about their significance:

"Faerie is a perilous land, and in it are pitfalls for the unwary and dungeons for the overbold. . . . The realm of fairy-story is wide and deep and high and filled with many things: all manner of beasts live there; shoreless seas and stars uncounted; beauty that is an enchantment, and an ever-present peril; both joy and sorrow as sharp as swords."

Despite Tolkien's criticism of some of Andrew Lang's stories, Lang's The Gold of Fairnilee is a poignant story about a boy who yearns for the perilous realm, who departs from the warm comforts of home to the terrifying strangeness of fairy land, and who at last returns to embrace human affection and the joys of this world. The Gold of Fairnilee, drawing upon the Celtic folk traditions of Lang's own childhood, depicts a world at once beautiful and potentially tragic. It is a pastoral and innocent world where loss, separation, and death nevertheless occur:

Randal had no father; his mother, Lady Ker, was a widow. Only women were left in the house and Randal played with the shepherd's children.

Lang's story is full of mysterious, supernatural events, and the old Scottish nurse notices an inexplicably mysterious quality about Randal. He lived in a kind of dream. He yearned for the strange and the beautiful: "Randal wishes to be taken into that other world where everything was beautiful." While Randal knew that it was wrong to yearn for the realm of faerie, he nevertheless longs to meet the Fairy Queen. At last he is stolen at the wishing well and kept for the usual seven years until his virtuous and devoutly Christian foster sister redeems him.

Once home again, Randal explains that fairy land is a terrifying world of illusions and troubled dreams. The Fairy Queen had appeared beautiful, shining, and brilliantly alive when Randal first saw her. He gladly rode off with her on a dazzling white horse. After washing his eyes with a magical potion, Randal sees the true nature of fairies: "The Fairy Queen looked as if she had been there for thousands of years, always longing for the earth, and the wind and rain. There were sleepy poppies twisted in her hair, instead of a golden crown. And the knights were changed. They looked but half alive" (p. 64).

In The Gold of Fairnilee Lang presents an exquisite tension between the desire for the other world, for romance, and adventure, and love for the pastoral innocence of the natural world, the warm ambience and intimate space of home, woodland, and natural affections. Relegated to the imagination, fantasy imparts poignance to life and beauty to experience. But when romance, the essence of which is desire, becomes actual, it loses its capacity to enrich us. Rather it enslaves us by arousing essentially destructive passions. Randal escapes no pain by going into fairy land. Lang's fantasy is thus a moving portrayal of the perilous realm, as well as a critique of the liabilities of fantasy and romance. Randal escapes into a world of haunted passions and experiences the death of desire, the tragic shattering of a dream, a fitting emblem of fantastic reveries out of control. Lang's story portrays childhood as a time and place of innocence and heightened imagination and desire, a precarious time in which imaginative longing must be balanced with the demands and pleasures of daily living. Lang reveals the departure into fantasy and the return to the ordinary world as an occasion for examining the nature and function of the imagination. The fantastic journey implies also a moral function, but it clearly transcends the narrow lessons of didactic fairy tales and fantasies.

The fantastic journey or the archetype of departure-return occurs in too many contemporary fantasies to mention, but surely one of the most powerfully original examples of this pattern appears in Natalie Babbitt's Tuck Everlasting. Babbitt's fantasy draws upon the characteristic features of folk tales, realistic fiction in order to portray ethical truths of a mythic significance which transcend the tradition of many of these forms. Winnie Foster, the sensible child from the "touch-me-not" cottage who does not believe in fairy tales, is kidnapped by the Tuck family, whose four members had accidentally drunk from a fountain of youth in the Fosters' wood. When a Faust-like "man-in-the-yellow-suit" threatens to expose the secret and to use a frak to gain the water from this fountain-of-youth, Mae Tuck finally kills him rather than risk either the secret or Winnie's happiness. And because she loves the Tucks, Winnie goes against everything she has been taught to help Mae Tuck escape jail and thus keep the awesome safe. In Babbitt's fantasy, then, Winnie is taken to a remote pastoral world from which death has been removed, where she acquires insight into the place of death in the wheel of nature, the twin life cycle and a vision that ethical truth is ambiguous, difficult, and painful at best. Winnie's knowledge, when she returns from the world of the childlike Tucks to the "touch-me-not" cottage, finally transcends the folk-tale justice of the Tucks or the ordinary social morality of her parents. In Babbitt's use of the fantastic journey, the profound ambiguity of good and evil, life and death, etc., is handled finally through Winnie's sympathetic humanity. Like George Eliot's Maggie Tulliver, Winnie acts rashly because she loves; she loves the Tucks and risks herself to protect them. She loves the ugly toad with wrinkled skin and so makes him safe forever with the magic water from the spring. And finally she loves life and chooses the natural life-cycle with all its wear and pain; she becomes at last a name on a tombstone: "Winnie Foster/Dearest Wife/Dearest Mother/1870-1948."

Some fairy tales and fantasies in both the past and present history of children's literature, then, seem to deal with the child's crime and subsequent punishment, an emphasis which essentially denies the validity of the child's symbolic imagination and denies the capacities of children to grow. Winnie acts as a satisfying fairy tale, and fantasies in the past and present, however, appeal directly to the symbolic imaginations of children, to their emotions and spirits, encouraging them to move out of the black and unmanageable forest of nightmare and terror into the clearing of their own independence, initiative, and maturity.

Notes

1See Gillian Avery, Childhood's Pattern: A Study of the Heroes and Heroines of Children's Fiction 1770-1950 (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1975), p. 21. Avery gives a vivid account of this extreme form of cautionary tale: "There is the Awful Warning story, where bad conduct meets..."
an unusually strong sense of how long Bilbo has been gone from the Shire. So Machen's sense of horror is tied to the organic. The dead held no interest for him; he creates his effects through distorted life. Even in discussing abstract evil in "The White People" he fell back upon organic illustration: "What would your feelings be ... if your cat or your dog began to talk to you ...? You would be overwhelmed with horror. I am sure of it. And if the roses in your garden sang a weird song, you would go mad." In "The Great God Pan," that unrecognizable creature for "Anglophobia & Baba Yaga," the organic is invaded by the infernal, in The Terror nature casts aside its decorum, in The Green Round strange things are astir upon the earth.

Such a sensual apprehension was consistent in an author who believed that the great struggle of western civilization is that between "the sacramentalist and the anti-sacramentalist." Machen's eventual alignment in a Catholic hospital led to a rumor that he had gone over to Rome at the last; in fact he remained an Anglican, but an Anglican of a combatively High Church variety.

"We want the Mass," he would write and he regarded bitterly all vetoes that Low or Broad Church held over ecclesial policy. Machen reserved only disgust for those who "drove Newman out of the Church of England." He was fond of alerting for inward grace breaking through its earthly masks and wrote Vincent Starrett that Cabell's Cream of the Jest ought to be subtitled "On the Right Receiving of the Sacraments". Of his war tales, "The Monstrance" is more typically a Machen story than "The Bowmen".

To such a man, one to whom matter may be the vehicle for grace, not merely its symbol, matter must also lie open to spiritual infection and a malignancy not of this world. Earthly horror is the price we pay for the Incarnation.

Fermented drink was for him, as for Chesterton, a misunderstood, maligned and misused sign of our destiny. Sex likewise - he translated Casanova explicitly and apparently without qualms "for private subscription" and his works often embody a covert but concentrated eroticism that occasionally maddened Victorian and Edwardian reviewers (see especially Ornaments in Jade).

The obscurity of many of his references, his willingness to hint at concepts rather than spell them out, has been applauded by Starrett, Cabell and other Machenites, regretted by quasi-admirers like Robertson Davies. This trait has certainly limited Machen's appeal. But it was, perhaps, inescapable in an essentially lonely man, who perceived himself as a minority spokesman, writing what he could for the other sacramentalists of the world, and in one who believed in the grafting of language to convey any reality that truly matters. He worked hard and deserves his laurels, even though he decried the work.

"The fact is, that what we commonly call life is not life at all. All the things that are considered serious, important and vital: the faithful earning of a living, the going to the City every morning to copy letters, keep accounts or float companies ... these things are not life at all. They are the curse of life, or, as it is sometimes called, the curse of Adam; as the theologians might have told us if they had not been too busy over the 'curse of alcohol,' over the dubious moral influence of the pictures, over the decidedly frivolous character of the lighter fiction of the day, and the demoralizing effect of putting a bob on the winner .... But this curse of getting a livelihood remains profoundly unnatural to man, in spite of his long experience of it: hence his frantic efforts to escape from what he erroneously calls life by running himself red in the face at Lord's, by rowing himself blue in the face at Henley, by drinking methylated spirit ... and even by writing books."