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ONCE UPON A TIME: THE ENDURING APPEAL OF FAIRY TALES

by Holly Ordway

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Once upon a time...A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away...The fairy tale is alive and well today in modern popular culture, appearing in forms that include film and television (*Maleficent*, *Once upon a Time*), musicals (*Into the Woods*), numerous book adaptations, and even films that put science-fictional trappings on the time-honored story structure of the fairy tale. Indeed, the fairy tale has a strong and enduring appeal for both adults and children for a good reason: its very structure resonates with our deep-seated longings.

FAIRY TALES FOR CHRISTIANS?

Before we go further in discussing fairy tales, let me address a concern that some readers may have. Some might suggest that fairy tales are evil or harmful because they contain magic and feature witches, wizards, monsters, and so on. Can, or should, Christians enjoy fairy tales?

Yes, with discernment, as with all other literature. Let me make three brief points. First, healthy children and adults recognize the difference between fantasy stories and the occult: it is the difference between fresh and spoiled food. Furthermore, reading fairy tales can help to strengthen the reader's emotional and spiritual health. G. K. Chesterton recounts in his *Autobiography* that when he encountered spiritualism as a young man, he reacted with disgust and aversion; the occult went against all the healthy goodness he knew and loved from fairy tales.

Second, the inclusion of evil characters is, by itself, simply a recognition of the reality of sin in this fallen world: what matters is how the author handles the material. For instance, C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* features the White Witch as a major character—and she is shown to be evil and is defeated. Lewis is unequivocally and clearly on the side of Good and his stories show this.

Third, as we will see, the very structure of the traditional fairy tale is deeply moral, and it is this structure that is taken up by the great Christian fantasists such as Lewis and Tolkien.

It is worth noting, though, that it is the *traditional* structure that is healthy and moral; there is a modern tendency to create versions of fairy tales that are ironic or that deliberately distort key elements in the story; such revisions generally undermine or eliminate the moral element from the original tale. To be sure, the images in a revised fairy tale still have power, and it is this power that is tapped into, even in parodic versions. Readers and viewers should exercise caution here. Any good thing can be twisted, but *abusus non tollit usum*: abuse does not preclude proper use. It's worth noting as well that the modern versions are parasitical on the traditional versions. In order to appreciate the changes, one has to know the original.

THE LAND OF FAERIE

Traditional fairy tales take place in a land of once-upon-a-time, an unspecified past, with landscapes drawn in bold strokes: kingdoms, woodcutters' cottages, forests, mountains. Later authors, such as Hans Christian Andersen, who wrote their own fairy tales, might add a bit more detail, but not much; simplicity of setting is a hallmark of the fairy tale. Everything about a fairy tale is stripped down to its essentials. The result is that these essentials are rendered extraordinarily vivid. These images are well suited for meaningful imaginative connections, for in a fairy tale, the hero's journey or challenges can be powerful images of self-discovery and growth. The monsters that are defeated and the evils that are confronted in the fairy tale can provide an imaginative vocabulary for the reader's own emotional and spiritual growth and maturation.

The simplicity of the fairy-tale setting also helps to awaken the reader's sense of wonder in the real world. J. R. R. Tolkien, the author of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, discusses this idea in his insightful essay "On Fairy-Stories." He notes that "fairy-stories deal largely, or (the better ones) mainly, with simple or fundamental things, untouched by Fantasy, but these simplicities are made all the more luminous by their setting."¹ The spillover effect of the simple, yet magical settings of fairy tales is that rivers and trees, mountains and rivers, the moon and stars can be more readily recognized as the wonders of creation that they are. Tolkien called this effect

“recovery”: helping the reader to see things as we ought to see them, with awe and delight.

HEROES AND HELPERS

The characters in a fairy tale are as iconic as the setting. The classic fairy tale has a hero or heroine, who might be a prince or princess, as in “Snow White,” but might also be an ordinary girl or boy, as in “Hansel and Gretel.” The hero goes on a quest or an adventure, rescues someone, or escapes from danger, abuse, or even death (as in “Cinderella” or “The Juniper Tree”). The hero in a fairy tale is not a rounded character but a sketch of one, which allows the reader to put himself or herself into the story — and here, the fact that the stories are often full of terrors is vitally important.

G. K. Chesterton writes that “fairy tales do not give the child the idea of the evil or the ugly; that is in the child already, because it is in the world already....The baby has known the dragon intimately ever since he had an imagination. What the fairy tale provides for him is a St. George to kill the dragon.”²

Acknowledging fears makes it possible to overcome them. We can see on the news that there are bad things in the world, and those evils do not necessarily steer clear of children. For a child who is safe, the monsters of selfishness, fear, and cruelty still make appearances, even if only in the child’s own heart. In the person of the fairy tale hero or heroine, the reader finds an image of how evil can be recognized, faced, and defeated—both in the outer world, and in the reader’s own self, where evil must also be confronted and put to death.

The hero of a fairy tale is not, however, entirely on his own — another reassuring element of the traditional tale. Alongside the hero we almost always find the *helper*: a fairy godmother, wise old woman or man, or friendly animal, whose role is to provide the hero (or heroine) with information, magical help, guidance, or wisdom. The Brothers Grimm, in their versions of German fairy tales, often depicted the helper figure in such a way as to make clear the symbolic connection to the Holy Spirit. In “Hansel and Gretel,” for instance, the children’s last obstacle on their homeward journey is a large body of water with no bridge. Gretel sees a white duck and calls to it for help, and it ferries her and her brother across the water.

THE MORAL STRUCTURE OF FAIRY TALES

The morality of fairy tales is deeply embedded in the structure of the story. The Brothers Grimm brought out the Christian elements in the stories that they recorded

and adapted, but even ones that are not directly Christian show what C. S. Lewis calls the “Tao”: the underlying recognition of objective morality. Some fairy tales are indeed distinctly Christian in their teaching, while others are not; but what is consistent about them is that they encourage a way of thinking about the world that recognizes goodness and evil, wickedness and virtue, and that also recognizes our helplessness and our need for rescue. These are elements that help build, or reinforce, a foundation for a Christian view of the world.

The very shape of a fairy tale hinges on key moral ideas: justice and mercy; obedience and disobedience; the virtues of courage and perseverance; and, in the tellings by Christians, the virtues of faith, hope, and love. The deep structure of fairy tales can be understood intuitively by child readers; adults who are steeped in realistic or quasi-realistic fiction and television may need to take a step back to see the elegant simplicity of the way fairy stories work.

Interestingly, traditional fairy tales are often subversive, or seem to be—something that secular adaptors of the tales seem to recognize but not fully to understand. In fairy tales, hierarchies are often overturned: the youngest son succeeds on the quest when his brothers fail; a frog turns out to be a prince under a spell. Appearances can deceive, and the underdog often wins out. However, traditional fairy tales are subversive of expectations and assumptions, not of moral values: in fact, the grounding in an assumed bedrock morality is what makes fairy tales work. A boy may defeat a giant; but the giant was an evil giant.

REALISTIC FANTASY

Strange as it may sound, fairy tales are highly realistic in that they recognize the existence of pain, fear, injustice, oppression, and death, and that ordinary people are capable of both good and evil. The plots are fantastic, but this heightens and clarifies the moral realism of the tales. The blacks are blacker, the whites are whiter.

This sharpening of lines is helpful because our world is full of shades of gray, and a dose of clarity is much needed. No one wonders if the witch in “Hansel and Gretel” had a troubled childhood and thus should receive sympathy. We simply recognize that she is murderous and evil. To be sure, in the real world, children must learn to negotiate complex moral situations, but fairy tales can nourish the imagination on the reality of good and evil, and thereby help build a foundation for moral action in ways that more realistic stories find difficult to do. We will not, in adult life, encounter witches living in gingerbread houses, but we can take from “Hansel and Gretel” that it is always evil to murder children.

Fairy tale plots grapple with evil and sin in ways that are fundamentally safe, more so than in realistic novels for adults or children. Because the story takes place in once-upon-a-time, with very simple characters, the reader can engage with the *meaning* of the story without being distracted by the details. And here we encounter the most significant and beautiful element of the fairy tale structure: the ending.

THE HAPPY ENDING

Just as the traditional fairy tale begins with “Once upon a time,” it ends with “And they all lived happily ever after.” To be sure, some fairy tales have sad or ambiguous endings, but the exceptions can be said to prove the rule; it is the stories with happy endings that are the most memorable and resonant. Snow White is rescued from her deathlike sleep; Hansel and Gretel find their way home to live with their father; Cinderella marries her prince.

The happy ending is all the more powerful because, as we have seen, fairy tales recognize the existence of evil and suffering. Hansel and Gretel might have died at the hands of the witch, or starved in the woods; Cinderella might have continued to be abused and neglected by her stepmother and stepsisters. The move from sorrow to joy in a fairy tale is what Tolkien identifies as its most important element, what he calls *eucatastrophe*, meaning the “good catastrophe,” the unexpected happy ending that turns sorrow into joy.

We respond so powerfully to fairy tales, Tolkien says, precisely because they resonate with truth at a level much deeper than we realize: “The Gospels contain a fairystory, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairystories.” Here is what C. S. Lewis called “myth made fact”: as Tolkien puts it, “This story has entered History and the primary world....The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man’s history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation.” The Gospels are the highest fairytale art fused with supreme truth and joy: “There is no tale ever told that men would rather find was true, and none which so many skeptical men have accepted as true on its own merits....To reject it leads either to sadness or to wrath.”³

When we respond imaginatively to the happy ending of a fairy tale, we are, possibly without even realizing it, responding to the gospel, which has the same joy as that evoked in a fairy tale: “But,” Tolkien tells us, “this story is supreme; and it is true.” The happy ending of the fairy tale gives us, as Tolkien shows us, a foretaste of the Good News. For we are all Cinderella: the gospel is the story of the Prince who rescues us from the ashes and brings us to his wedding feast.⁴

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NOTES

- 1 J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), 59.
- 2 G. K. Chesterton, "The Red Angel," in *Tremendous Trifles*. Available at Project Gutenberg, www.gutenberg.org.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Suggested further reading: J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-stories," in *The Tolkien Reader* or (for a better edition) *Tolkien on Fairy-stories* (ed. Flieger and Anderson) or *Tree and Leaf*; Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Selected Tales*, Oxford World's Classics edition; Hans Christian Andersen, *Fairy Tales: A Selection*, Oxford World's Classics edition; G. K. Chesterton, "The Red Angel," in *Tremendous Trifles*; G. Ronald Murphy, (Oxford University Press, 2000).