

“Sibling Tales from the Bettelheimian Perspective”

Dara Davis

Russian Fairytales, Russian 0090

04/13/03

### “Sibling Tales from a Bettelheimian Perspective”

This paper will be analyzing the sibling genre of fairytales from the perspective of Bruno Bettelheim, a famous psychologist who studied in the Freudian school of psychology.

Bettelheim was born in 1903 in Vienna Austria. He was educated in the same city and received his Ph.D. from the University of Vienna in 1939. During that same year he was taken into imprisoned by the Nazi Regime and placed into a concentration camp. About a year later, he was released and immigrated to the United States where he began to publish numerous world famous articles, the first of which being, “Individual and Mass Behavior in Extreme Situations”. This article was based on his experiences in the concentration camps, and the behavior that he witnessed by the people in and controlling the camps where he was held captive.

In 1976 Bettelheim published the “Uses of Enchantment” in which he proposes theories on the meanings of fairytales and how they have a way of communicating role models to children unconsciously. He believed that a true fairytale is designed to help children progress through their stages of psychological development. This book covers wide range of moral and ethical dilemmas that children encounter through the tales.

When children read through the tales with their parents they are introduced to an assortment of characters such as: heroes, heroines, and even evil characters. These tales let children act out different situations and help them learn strategies for dealing with a number of diverse problems through their development like puberty, detachment from their parents, or living up to others expectations. It also shows them that evil exists in the world and that they are not bad children for having evil thoughts. (Birnbaum)

Studying under Freud, Bettelheim followed his Psychodynamic Theory. This theory, which proceeds in discrete stages, is determined largely by biologically based drives shaped by encounters with the environment and through the interaction of three components of the personality (Hetherington).

The Id is the first personality component, which drives on the pleasure principle. It drives the person to go after what they want (Hetherington). This is a purely selfish component. This is the part of the personality that normally rules young children.

The next component, the Superego holds the societal values, morals, and roles (Hetherington). Often in fairytales, this is the voice of her mother in the child's head. When child is making decisions they hear this voice, and avoids actions that the children should not perform.

The last component, the Ego is the rational and controlling part of the psyche. This piece of the conscious tries to satisfy needs through socially acceptable means, it is almost a compromise between the Id and the Superego. (Hetherington)

The Oedipus complex<sup>1</sup> is the theory in which the boy is sexually attracted to his mother and views his father as competition, fears his father's retribution. Through the same idea, the Electra complex<sup>2</sup> which is the theory in which the girl resents her mother for having deprived her of a penis and transfers her affection to her father. In both circumstances there is resentment of the parent of the same sex, and the yearning for the parent of the opposite sex's affections. These complexes are both intricate parts of Freud's theories that tie into the three parts of the human psyche.

---

<sup>1</sup> Hetherington

<sup>2</sup> Hetherington

Like Freud, Bettelheim believed that children grow through these stages of “psychological development”, and the end result is that their unconscious minds function properly and harmoniously together. He also believed in symbolism and dream analysis. He would expose the meaning behind every character and plot of each story.

One of Bettelheim’s focuses was on the Two Siblings tales. He believed that every sibling tale followed many of the same characteristics or course of events. During the average sibling tales Bettelheim suggests that one of the two siblings will be adventurous where the other will be cautious. During the course of the tale the adventurous sibling will meet some misfortune, the cautious sibling will learn of the others misfortune through a magical source, and will save the life of the adventurous sibling. Sibling tales are intended to display the each sibling’s need for the other, integration between their characteristics.

I will analyze the tale “Sister Alionushka, Brother Ivanushka” through Bettelheimian perspectives. In his book “The Uses of Enchantment” Bettelheim goes into great detail about what he refers to as “brother and sister” tales. Like many past philosophers Bettelheim, believes that each person has both animal and human characteristics and we spend most of our lives trying to create a balance between the two forces enabling us to be better human beings. This struggle is known as Dual Nature. The story that the tales often tell is the struggle for integration between this two forms.

(Bettelheim)

The tale “Sister Alionushka, Brother Ivanushka” is a classic example of the brother and sister tale the Bettelheim discusses in his book. The tales begins with the death of Alionushka and Ivanushka’s parents, the king and queen. This typically

symbolizes the children growing up and becoming their own person, often referred to as self-realization<sup>3</sup>. Now that the children are without parents they begin to wander, which can be attributed to their growth period into adulthood.

As Alionushka and Ivanushka wander, Ivanushka's animal nature begins to take over his actions. He also seems to be ruled by his Id, or pleasure principle. Whereas his sister Alionushka remains human in nature and takes on the role of the Superego to her younger brother's Id.

While walking Ivanushka complains of being thirsty, and repeatedly asks his sister to stop so that he can get a drink of water where the different animals are grazing. His sister, acting in a more responsible manner, told him that he could not drink from where the animals were grazing and would have to wait to get a drink. Alionushka is flawlessly representing the Ego and Superego characteristics in this story, and is seen as using higher mental functioning to make her decisions (Bettelheim). She continuously warns her brother of the dangers and tries to prevent him from following his Id, or pleasure principle.

After numerous attempts to gain a drink of water, Ivanushka ignores his sister's warning and drinks from where a flock of goats were grazing.

"Ah, little sister, now I must drink," Ivanushka said. "Do not drink, little brother, or you will become a kid" But he could not restrain himself and did not heed his sister; he drank from the well, and became a kid. He leaped before Alionushka and cried: "Maa-ka-ka! Maa-ka-ka" (Afanas'ev 407)

---

<sup>3</sup> Bettelheim- "Uses of Enchantment"

He ignores his sister because he is seeking immediate gratification and his want overpowers his sister's pleas. As a result of his actions, Ivanushka exhibits the Id characteristics of selfishness, and doing whatever one wants. Whereas, his sister is acting responsibly and telling him that what he wants to do is wrong, and that he will be punished for his actions. She is able to refrain herself from actions she knows are wrong even though she is thirsty as well.

This scene also is a great example for what Bettelheim would consider part of development. It is believed that development is not an easy process to undergo and that the suffering that the children undergo, such as Ivanushka's thirst, is an expression of his unhappiness of having to leave his home (Bettelheim).

Remaining as the symbolic ego, Alionushka ties her silk scarf around the neck of the kid that is her brother, and continues to wander through the forest. They wandered until they entered the garden of the King. Alionushka was spotted by King's servants. They reported to the King that there was a beautiful maiden leading a kid by her belt. Alionushka and the kid were brought before the King and she told the tale of who they were, why they were wandering and how her little brother had been turned into a kid.

The king was pleased with Alionushka and wanted to marry her. The King and Alionushka were married and began to live happily ever after with the kid.

Very characteristically of a brother and sister tales is the introduction of the King who will be come enchanted by the beauty of the sister. He will of course want her hand in marriage and accept that her brother in his animal form will live with them in his palace. Of course they will begin to live happily ever after until an evil force comes to disturb them.

While the king was out hunting one day, a sorceress came to the palace ground and put a spell on Queen Alionushka. The Queen fell ill and everything in and around the palace became gloomy. When the king returned from hunting he found his wife ill. The next day he went hunting again. After he had left the palace, the sorceress came again, and asked the Queen if she would like to be cured. The Queen did want to be cured and was instructed by the sorceress on how to get better.

The sorceress instructed her to “Go to such and such a sea at twilight and drink water there” (Afanas’ev 408). The Queen followed the sorceress’ instructions and, when she was at the sea, the sorceress was waiting there; she captured her, tied a stone to her neck and threw her into the sea. The kid watched as his sister sank to the bottom of the sea and saw the sorceress take on the likeness of his beloved sister and return to the palace.

Bettelheim writes of how the Queen is seduced by the evil of the sorceress and does not realize that she is in even greater danger by following her instructions.

The king returned to find his wife healed and was relieved. But something was not right. When they went to eat dinner that night, the kid was no where to be found. When the king questioned his wife on the matter, she claimed that she did not want him around; he had a strange odor so she sent him off. Puzzled, the King accepted and finished his dinner.

The next day, the king went hunting again. While he was away, the sorceress abused the kid, and told him that she was going to have him slaughtered because she did not like him. When the King returned home from his day, the fake Queen informed her

husband of her wishes to have the kid slaughtered. Again the King was puzzled but accepted his wife's wishes and ordered the kid to be slaughtered.

The kid sensing his fate, asked the king to go to the sea so that he could clean his insides. The King agreed to his request, and the kid went to the sea. While he was there she tried to communicate with his sister.

Alionushka, my little sister,

Come up, come up to the shore.

Hot fires are burning,

Big kettles are boiling, Steel knives are being sharpened-

They want to slaughter me! (Afanas'ev 408)

To his surprise and delight his sister answered him.

Ivanushka, my little brother,

The heavy stone is pulling me down,

The cruel serpent has sucked out my heart (Afanas'ev 408)

The kid returned to the palace, but once again asked for permission to go to the sea and clean his insides. The king agreed again, and off to the sea the kid traveled. This was repeated again, but the third time the King followed the kid to the sea.

When the kid recited his lines to his sister for the third time she responded as usual but then his sister miraculously rose to the surface. The King immediately took her in his arms and brought her to shore.

As in many fairytales, actions are often repeated in three times, like the kid's calling to his endangered sister. On the third attempt of the kid's wish it is finally granted.

In this case, the Queen is able to escape the sea bottom, and rise to the top and find her brother and husband.

The kid and Queen told the King everything involving the sorceress. The grounds of the palace flourished again, and the King ordered the sorceress to be put to death. The King, Queen and the kid ate, drank and prospered together.

Commonly after the reunion between the husband and wife and sister and brother, the witch or in this case, sorceress is put to death for her evil activities. Since the story is based on the relationship of the brother and sister, the ending often depicts the integration of the animalistic and human nature characteristics and has the brother and sister reunited in human form living happily ever after.

Although the kid is not restored back to his human form of Ivanushka in this tale, the nature of this evolution is implied. The actions that the kid performed in order to save his sister from certain death show his humanity towards man. Alionushka emerging from the water is a sort of rebirth for her. It is the transition of her from young maiden into a mature woman, or possibly future mother. The end result is a balanced Id-Ego-Superego in both the brother and the sister, showing the integration of not only their animal and human nature but also the integration of the adventurous and cautious children that was noted to appear in typical sibling tales. The integration of all these things are examples of the child's conscious that Bettelheim bases his theories on.

Work Cited

Afanas'ev, Aleksandor. Sister Alionushka, Brother Ivanushka. Trans. Norbert Guterman. New York: Random House, Inc. 1973.

Bettelheim, Bruno. The Uses of Enchantment. New York: Random House, 1976.

Birnbaum, David. "Two Sibling Tales". Russian Fairytales Lecture. University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh. 29 January 2003.

Hetherington, E. Mavis, Ross D. Parke. Child Psychology: A Contemporary Viewpoint. McGraw-Hill: New York, 2003