

Bettelheim

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Russian Fairy Tales, Russian 0090

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Bruno Bettelheim approached different fairy tales with a psychoanalytical analysis that used Freudian theories and terminology to categorize certain events, items, stages, attitudes, and people in tales. He had some fascinating ways to look at different events and, sometimes, categorized them into either oral, anal, phallic, latent, or genital fixations or periods in a person's life. It really is interesting to take a closer look at Bettelheim's theory and try to determine patterns in fairy tales and how they may fit into Freudian thought processes (Bettelheim).

There are countless examples of fairy tales that exemplify Bettelheim's ideals, and one such example is the tale *Prince Danila Govorila* (page 351-6) from the A'fanasev collection. This exemplary Bettelheimian tale contains many facets of the Freudian belief system. One of the first happenings in the story is that a phallic symbol is presented. Bettelheim would say the fact that the mother gives the son a ring to put on his finger is phallic; the finger of the young prince is a phallic symbol here. There is separation anxiety at the very setting of the story. The fact that the father is never mentioned and that the mother dies gives the indication of separation anxiety which Bettelheim claims is essential for the development of the children into adulthood (Bettelheim 78-83).

As the story progresses, the prince claims that since the ring his mother gave him to find his bride fits his sister's finger, that they should be married at once. His sister objects to this and even says that it would be a sin, but he completely dismisses her. Here, the sister can be seen a direct extension of their mother. If this is the case, an Oedipal conflict is quite clear. The prince is still in his

phallic stage of development and has an Oedipal attachment to his mother, or specifically in this case, his sister. His sister is taking the place of his mother and this desire the prince has to marry his sister is actually showing the love or desire to be with his mother (Bettelheim 78-83).

In this story, Baba Yaga and her daughter, in the Bettelheimian approach, split themselves into the bad half and the good half of the mother respectively. Bettelheim claims that children must be able to distinguish a good and bad half of their mother. In doing this, they separate the loving side with the disciplinary side. This ends up being significant in the relationship between mother and child because then the child is able to view his mother as all good all the time. The child attaches the disciplining side as more of an alien personality; the disciplining "mother" isn't really their mother - not their real mother. This lets them deal with the fact that they must be disciplined, but that they are always loved. In the tale of Prince Danila Govorila, Bettelheim would view Baba Yaga as the disciplining side of the mother figure and her daughter as the nurturing, loving side of the maternal image of the story. After the princess escapes her brother (who has just married her and wants her to come to bed with him), she escapes to underground passageways where she encounters Baba Yaga's hut. Here, the daughter receives the princess with kindness and spends time with her. When Baba Yaga returns and wants to eat whatever Russian she smells, the daughter shelters the princess and keeps her safe from the witch (Bettelheim 66-73).

Later on in the tale, the daughter helps the princess to put Baba Yaga in to

the stove. The "good" mother helps the princess rid herself of the "bad" mother. Then, Baba Yaga (the "bad" mother) comes after the two girls. Once the girls escape to safety and kill the "bad" mother, they make their way back to the prince (Bettelheim 68-73).

All three of them, the prince, the princess, and Baba Yaga's daughter have finished their journey which symbolized the latent stage of development. This is the stage where they are just growing as individuals and have to complete some type of personal growth before they are able to come to the age of marriage. They have all finished their latent stage and are ready to move to the genital phase. The genital phase is the phase in which each person will find an age-appropriate mate and live with them; they have sexually matured and are ready for adulthood. At the end of the tale, the prince has overcome his Oedipal desires (the phallic stage and wanting to marry the extension of his "mother", his sister) and he is ready to marry Baba Yaga's daughter who is an appropriate mate for the prince. The princess, too, has moved into the genital phase and marries a handsome young man and the two couples live happily ever after (Bettelheim 78-83).

A second tale from the same collection also displays some Bettelheimian aspects. The tale is called *Prince Ivan and Byely Polyenin* (page 475-482). Here, once again, the story starts out with a prince, Ivan and his three sisters who are abandoned upon the death of their father. We have this same separation anxiety occurring where the children are left parentless. Right away, the viewer can assume that there is going to be some type of metamorphosis of the children as

characters. Prince Ivan is left in charge of the kingdom. He must slay three different sets of troops and after the slaying of each one he rests for days on end. Each time his rest is for more and more days. Bettelheim would describe this time of "slumber" as Prince Ivan's latent rests. They are necessary for Ivan to become ready for a mate later on in the story. They allow him to develop as a character (Bettelheim 80-83).

Once Prince Ivan's sisters convince him that he shouldn't need to "rest" like he does, Ivan sets out to see if the great warrior, Byely Polyenin ever rests. His sisters tell him that he is wrong for going through these "latent periods," and he wants to find out for himself. So, he sets out on his journey. Instead of meeting your typical Baba Yaga character in the deep forest, which is what usually occurs in these tales, Ivan comes upon three old men on his way to find Byely Polyenin. This is unusual and Bettelheim would note that the fact that these are old men instead of old women is significant. This shows the general empowerment of men over women. Bettelheim presents that women are inferior and have penis envy. So, the fact that the tale has old men instead of the traditional old women shows the strength of men in the tale. Prince Ivan is asking the old men how to find the male warrior that he is searching for (Bettelheim 78-83).

Also, the mere fact that Ivan is searching for the great male warrior that he looks up to suggests that he is searching for a father figure. There is this male figure that he is looking up to and basing his battle strategy on, and it leads the reader to believe that Byely Polyenin takes on a father figure role. The fact that

Byely Polyanin is serving a father role in this tale is quite interesting in another sense too. There is an Oedipal conflict going as well. Firstly, at the beginning of the story, Ivan asks his sisters what their opinions of battle are. He listens to his sisters and lets them make decisions and asks them for leave to go on the journey. His sisters have power over him. They definitely affect Ivan, and it is evident that he cares a great deal for them. Since there is no mother figure in the tale up to this point in his development, the sisters clearly take on the mother role. It is also evident that he cares a great deal for them. This is where the Oedipal conflict arises. He loves the sisters as he would the mother, and he realizes that since they always speak of Byely Polyanin, what a great warrior he is, and tell Ivan that he doesn't match up to Byely's abilities, he sets out to find out if this is true and to challenge Byely - the father figure. Ivan feels the need to rid the competition, so that he can live happily with his sisters and fulfill his Oedipal desires (Bettelheim 78-83).

As soon as Ivan reaches Byely, he challenges him to a duel, and he puts Byely in a position to plead for his life to be spared. As soon as Ivan agrees to spare him, Byely then states in plain words that he will honor Ivan as a father. So, we have this role reversal. As soon as Ivan conquers the "father figure," he is able to move past his Oedipal conflict and tells Byely that he wants to defeat Baba Yaga and marry her beautiful daughter. Bettelheim would clearly see this as a feat that Ivan had to go through to reach this stage in his development. He had his three latent periods earlier in the tale, he overcame his Oedipal desires by defeating the

father figure in the tale, and now he is almost ready to move into the genital stage and marry an age-appropriate mate (Bettelheim 79-83).

Now Baba Yaga is brought into the tale. She isn't introduced in the way she is normally introduced. There are some feminine and masculine stereotypical role reversals in this tale. The sisters in the beginning of the tale are telling Ivan what he should be doing in war. Typically, the man will be in the dominant position and tell the females what to do. The fact that Baba Yaga is the one that Ivan wants to defeat in battle isn't the normal routine in fairy tales. She must be killed in battle because she isn't taking on her normal feminine role. She also has the "bad" mother role in this tale. She can be viewed as the bad mother that Ivan has to defeat then he will have succeeded in war. As in the previously mentioned tale, once Ivan defeats the "bad" mother and overcomes the Oedipal conflict, he has overcome all stages (latency and phallic specifically) and is ready for marriage which is the ultimate reward (Bettelheim 66-73, 78-80).

At the end of the tale, Byely and Ivan have both partaken in enough war and journeys to reach their adulthood. Both characters have reached the time when they will transition into the genital phase and take wives. Just like the last tale, where the two couples ended up married and happy together, we have two more couples who are married and will live happily ever after with marriage as the final reward (Bettelheim 78-83).

A third and final tale that is comparable to the last two as far as Bettelheim's approaches are concerned is called *The Bold Knight, the Apples of Youth, and the*

Water of Life (page 314-20), also from the A'fanasev collection. In this tale, it begins with a king who has the typical three sons. Three is the most common and magical number in fairy tales. It is important that the number three is represented in the fairy tale. When the king sends the first son out, he immediately comes to a pillar with three roads marked. Both the first and second sons died when they were tricked by the widow's daughter. Then, the third and youngest son wasn't taken in by the trickery of the widow's daughter, and he then had three rods. Yet another example of the number three playing a big part in the Russian tales. The last and most important time three makes an appearance in the tale is when the youngest brother is thrown over the precipice by his brothers near the end. By him falling for three days it makes it seem unrealistic, but, at the same time, it makes you think that he will be able to come back from this terrible tragedy since he fell for the total of the magic number - 3! These are only a few examples of the number three being a significant factor in the lives of the tales' characters (Bettelheim 105-110).

The third son experiences separation anxiety early on in the tale when his father finally gives him leave to go on the journey to find the apples of youth for his father's eyesight. This is the first time that the youngest son leaves his father. This is the only separation in the story as far as parent and child relations are concerned. The mother is never present, but, again, the good mother/ bad mother appears. This is frequent in the Bettelheim interpretation because of the need to separate the mother personalities. The bad mother is the witch who appears later in the story and guards the wall to the apples of youth and the water of life. The good

mothers are the nieces of the witch. They help the youngest son and give him the four-winged horse to help him retrieve the apples and water (Bettelheim 66-73).

One of the more important aspects of the tale to talk about is the fact that the hero of the tale is the youngest child. It is significant that he is the youngest of three, but that already being established earlier, it is vital for other reasons. Firstly, by the youngest child being the victor, it shows that there is hope even for the youngest child who, in the tale, seems the most likely to succeed. The youngest child wasn't even initially allowed to attempt the journey to help his father. Then, when finally given permission, he not only succeeds in that task but ends up saving the day overall as well. Even when the two older brothers attempt to kill the youngest brother, his life is spared. He prevails no matter what, and this is the key element in the story. Bettelheim believes that it is important to have the youngest child be the hero because then the little children listening to the tales can relate to him/her. If they have doubts in themselves or just feel that they relate to the youngest child, then they are given hope that they, too, can prevail in the end and save the day. They feel that no matter what the obstacle, they have the chance to overcome it (Bettelheim 102-111).

In this tale, even though the youngest son has completely matured as a male, and seems ready for marriage once he meets the beautiful princess Paliusha, he still has not fulfilled his commitment to his father's health, and, therefore, has not completed all that he started before he matured. He must fulfill his obligations and take revenge on his brothers by causing them to jump into the river. So, once

again, the youngest son has found his appropriate and loving mate and he will be married to her, but first he must retrieve the water of life for his father. His father is still blind, although regaining his youth, and the son helps his father before officially taking his bride. With the obligations to his father and his past as a boy (how he started the story out) resolved, the youngest son is free to take his place as the man he has become and, as Bettelheim would claim, marry rightfully, his age-appropriate mate (Bettelheim 104-111, 78-82).

All three tales, some containing more similar aspects than others, convey the general thoughts upheld by Bruno Bettelheim. Each one, though different characters, settings, and plot elements existed, create the same feelings in the reader that is being influenced by the tales. It is at least plausible to view the tales as Bettelheim himself would. There are certain stages or phases that the character undergoes as his/her own metamorphosis throughout the story, and it is essential that the reader relate to these changes and relate themselves to the different character developments as well. It is in this way that we can really see the affect that the tales can have over a person. If children listen to these tales and then believe that they can overcome obstacles in their lives as well, then that says a lot for the tale (Bettelheim).

Bettelheim would suggest that these children aren't just picking up the ability to believe in hope and change. They are also learning about their roles and development into a sexually responsible adult. Bettelheim bases his entire analysis upon this thought, and relates certain happenings to either phallic, latent, genital,

anal, or oral stages of development. He traces the characters' development through these stages and once they reach the ultimate goal (marriage) they have reached the ideal state (the genital phase) and are sexually and emotionally mature (Bettelheim 78-83).

Bibliography

Bettelheim, Bruno. "Transformations." *The Uses of Enchantment*. New York: Vintage. 1976. 66-73, 78-83, 102-111.