

Initiation and Meaning in the Tale of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs

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Initiation and Meaning in the Tale of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs

The psychology of Snow White: What does she hope for? "Someday my prince will come." By this Snow White means that she lives her own being as incomplete, pending the arrival of one who will "complete" her. That is, she lives her own being as "not-with" (even though she is in some sense "with" the seven men, Bill, Kevin, Clem, Hubert, Henry, Edward and Dan). But the "not-with" is experienced as stronger, more real, at this particular instance of time, than the "being-with."

. . . [or] in the area of fears, she fears

Mirrors
Apples
Poisoned Combs.

—Donald Barthelme, *Snow White*
(New York: Bantam Books, 1968), pp. 70, 17.

Introduction

MIRCEA ELIADE HAS STATED that the popularity and power of fairy tales in modern life might be because the folktale "takes up and continues 'initiation'" on the level of the imagination.¹ In other words, the universal appeal of a traditional narrative form like the folktale is not simply that it allows for amusement or a temporary escape from the

¹"Myths and Fairy Tales," Appendix 1 in *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1968), p. 202. For other writings by Eliade on folklore see his *Oceanografie* (Bucharest: Editura Cultura Poporului, 1934), pp. 270-273, and "Folklore as an Instrument of Knowledge" in *Insula lui Euthanasius* (Bucharest: Editura Fundatia Regala pentru Arta si Literatura, 1943), pp. 28-49 (in Romanian). I am using the terms "folktale" and "fairy tale" synonymously for purposes of this essay. On the problem of nomenclature for traditional narrative forms see William Bascom, "The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives," *Journal of American Folklore*, 78 (1965), 3-20; and Linda Dégh, "Folk Narrative," in *Folklore and Folklife*, ed. Richard M. Dorson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), pp. 53-84.

banalities of ordinary life but, because at a deeper level, it preserves a vision of human life as fundamentally an initiatory process: "what is called 'initiation' coexists with the human condition, that every existence is made up of an unbroken series of 'ordeals,' 'deaths,' and 'resurrections'"²

Eliade's suggestion that the fairy tale functions as an "easy doublet" for initiatory myths and rites and, consequently, reaffirms the ultimate religious significance of life and the real possibility of a "happy ending,"³ has been echoed by scholars such as Max Lüthi who wrote that:

The charm of the fairy tale is explained not only by the fact that everything usually comes out all right in the end. . . . It is more than mere wish-fulfillment literature. The religious historian Mircea Eliade once said that the hearers of fairy tales, without being aware of it, experience a sort of initiation not entirely unlike that in the customs of some primitive peoples. . . .How correct this scholar's assertion is can be shown in any folk fairy tale.⁴

My intention is not to discuss these general speculations, but rather to examine the proposition that fairy tales not only vaguely suggest initiatory themes at the level of individual symbols but that the narrative form of a fairy tale as a particular structural constellation of symbols basically reveals an initiatory pattern.

This observation, of course, is not new; initiation has frequently been seen as an underlying structure informing folktales, as well as epic biographies of the hero.⁵ Vladimir Propp, for example, has shown the amazing structural and functional unity of fairy tales and even implies that all folktales (or, at least, the Russian tales he dealt with) go back to the paradigmatic totemic initiation tale of the "Dragon Slayer" (AT 300).⁶ Propp, therefore, notes that the "study of the basic forms leads the

² Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, p. 202. Bruno Bettelheim in *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), p. 35, notes that Eliade may have been influenced in his views by Paul Saintyves (pseud. of E. C. Nourry). See, for example, Saintyves' *Les Contes de Perrault et les récits parallèles* (Paris: E. Nourry, 1923) and Jan de Vries' discussion of Saintyves, *Betrachtungen zum Märchen, besonders in seinem Verhältnis zu Heldensage und Mythos* (Helsinki, 1954), pp. 29ff. Eliade, however, does not ascribe to a ritualistic theory of the origins of fairy tales; see *Myth and Reality*, p. 196.

³ Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, p. 202.

⁴ Max Lüthi, *Once Upon a Time: On the Nature of Fairy Tales* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1970), pp. 59-60. See also James Hillman, "A Note on Story," in *Children's Literature: The Great Excluded*, vol. 3, ed. F. Butler and B. Brockman (Storrs, Connecticut: Modern Language Association, 1974), pp. 9-11; M. Von Franz, *Interpretation of Fairytales* (Zurich: Spring Publications, 1973); Hedwig von Beit, *Das Märchen, Sein Ort in der geistigen Entwicklung*, 3 vols. (Bern and München: Francke, 1965); Charlotte Bühler and Josephine Bilz, *Das Märchen und die Phantasie des Kindes* (München, 1958); and, most recently from a Freudian perspective, Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment*.

⁵ See note 2, and the review article by Archer Taylor, "The Biographical Pattern in Traditional Narrative," *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 1 (1964), 114-129. Taylor discusses the theories of J. G. von Hahn, Alfred Nutt, Otto Rank, Joseph Campbell, and Vladimir Propp.

⁶ See Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* translated by Laurence Scott, 2nd ed. revised and edited by Louis A. Wagner. American Folklore Society Bibliographical and Special

researcher to compare the fairy tale with religions."⁷

Propp's work, like other notable studies, relates directly to the whole issue of the origins of folktale and in some ways represents a more sophisticated restatement of the Grimm brothers' contention that folktales preserve fragments of primitive myth and ritual.⁸ But the problem of origins admits to no easy solution; it is necessary to suggest at the outset that the surprising uniformity of folktales, especially with respect to an initiatory structure, is not sufficiently explained in terms of direct or indirect historical connections and certainly implies the operation of psychological and cognitive universals. Eliade consequently remarks that, "We never find in folk tales an accurate memory of a particular stage of culture; cultural styles and historical cycles are telescoped in them. All that remains is the structure of an exemplary behavior—that is, one that can be vitally experienced in a great number of cultural cycles and at many historical moments."⁹

In fact, this kind of perspective was already suggested by the Grimm brothers in their preface to the second volume of the first edition of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (1812) where in a discussion of the variants of their published tales, they note that "these variants seem more remarkable to the editors than those who see in them merely changes or distortions of an original which once really existed, whereas, on the contrary, they may be attempts to attain in a manifold way an inexhaustible ideal which is present only in the imagination."¹⁰ For the brothers Grimm this "inexhaustible ideal" was primarily expressive of a "purely German" *Volk* imagination; but allowing for the demands of an incipient romantic nationalism their point is well taken. The quest for historical origins or a hypothetical *Ur*-form is doomed to failure and, as the comparative folklorists of the Finnish school recognized, we are left with what can only statistically be called the *Normalformen*.¹¹ Statistical determination

Series, vol. 9 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968). See also Taylor's discussion of Propp, "Biographical Pattern," pp. 121ff; and Isidor Levin's "Vladimir Propp: An Evaluation on His Seventieth Birthday," *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 4 (1967), 32-49. Both Levin, pp. 38-39, and Eliade (*Myth and Reality*, p. 196) point to the significance of Propp's work on the "Historical Roots of the Magic Tale" for an understanding of the relationship between the folktale and primitive religion and cult.

⁷Vladimir Propp, "Transformations in Fairy Tales," in *Mythology*, ed. P. Maranda (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 141. For some problems in applying the comparative perspective of the history of religions to folktales see C. W. von Sydow's "Comparative Religion and Popular Tradition" in his *Selected Papers on Folklore* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1948), pp. 166-188.

⁸On the theories of the origin of folktales see Stith Thompson's classic discussion, *The Folktale* (New York: The Dryden Press, 1951), pp. 367-390, and his "Myths and Folktales" *Journal of American Folklore*, 68 (1955), 482-488.

⁹Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, pp. 196-197.

¹⁰Quoted by T. F. Crane, "The External History of the Kinder- und Hausmärchen of the Brothers Grimm," *Modern Philology*, 19 (1917), 608.

¹¹See Richard M. Dorson's comments on this in his "Concepts of Folklore and Folklife Studies," in *Folklore and Folklife*, p. 12.

of a "normal" or typical form, however, still avoids the problem of a universal symbolic interpretation of a folktale or myth¹² and allows for the reintroduction of Eliade's idea of the universality of an initiatory pattern at the level of the imagination.

The importance of considering cognitive and psychological structures of the human mind has been suggested many times and from sometimes contradictory perspectives,¹³ but I do not want to argue for the superiority of one particular theory over another or try to specify the meaning of Eliade's appeal to the "imagination" as the determinative faculty of universality.¹⁴ Here I only consider the role of initiatory patterns in a common fairy tale as one possible approach to the problem of the symbolic interpretation of narrative forms. My concern, therefore, is to test Lüthi's observation that the correctness of Eliade's view "can be shown in any folk fairy tale."

The tale I have chosen for these purposes is the classic Grimm story of Snow White (AT 709) which Stith Thompson classifies as one of the variants of the widespread "Banished Wife or Maiden" tale.¹⁵ Many other stories could obviously have been chosen, but there is good reason to focus on a story that is immediately identifiable; secondly, despite the renown of the tale, I know of no detailed commentary specifically dealing with its initiatory significance within the context of the general history of religions. There are, of course, Ernst Böklen and Johannes Bolte and Georg Polívka's massive studies, but these works are more collections of variants, source materials, and mythological analogues than coherent analyses.¹⁶ More recently Bruno Bettelheim has published an extended interpretation; while his reflections from a Freudian perspective are most illuminating and have much bearing on the significance of an initiatory pattern, my analysis attempts a broader, more comparative and less psychologically reductive, approach.¹⁷ Finally, a detailed discussion of a

¹²For an interesting discussion of the problem of symbolic universality and interpretation see Alan Dundes, "Earth Diver: Creation of the Mythopoeic Male," *American Anthropologist*, 64 (1962), 1032-1051, and a subsequent letter in *American Anthropologist*, 65 (1963), 915-917.

¹³The most obvious examples are the Jungian and the Lévi-Straussian perspectives. For a good recent discussion of this issue see G. S. Kirk, *Myth, Its Meaning and Function in Ancient and Other Cultures* (Cambridge and Berkeley: Cambridge University Press and University of California Press, 1970), pp. 275-285. Also helpful is J. L. Fischer, "The Sociopsychological Analysis of Folktales," *Current Anthropology*, 4 (1963), 235-295.

¹⁴For a discussion of Eliade's methodology see the following recent works: M. L. Ricketts, "The Nature and Extent of Eliade's Jungianism," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 25 (1969), 211-234, and his "In Defense of Eliade," *Religion*, 3 (1973), 13-34; Guilford Dudley, "Mircea Eliade as the 'Anti-Historian' of Religions," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 44 (1976), 345-359, and John A. Saliba, "Homo Religiosus" in *Mircea Eliade, An Anthropological Evaluation* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976).

¹⁵Thompson, *Folktale*, pp. 120-125.

¹⁶See Ernst Böklen, *Sneewittchen-Studien, Mythologische Bibliothek*, Vols. 3 and 7 (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1910, 1915) and Johannes Bolte and Georg Polívka, *Anmerkungen zu den Kinder- und Hausmärchen der Brüder Grimm*, 5 vols. (Leipzig: Th. Weicher, 1913-1932); for Snow White see vol. 1, pp. 450-464.

¹⁷See Bettelheim, *Uses*, pp. 199-215.

tale like Snow White from the comparative standpoint of the history of religions helps to understand in what sense a fairy tale, as distinguished from an epic or saga, still maintains a certain continuity with a mythic vision of the world. Thus, Jan de Vries points out that an important distinguishing factor is that in saga or epic the mythic world of the gods is explicit, or at least presupposed, while in fairy tales there seems to be an extreme secularization or break with the sacred world of gods.¹⁸ But, as will be seen in the following commentary, it seems necessary to side with Eliade's observation that instead of a complete break or "desacralization" of the mythical world in fairy tales, it "would be more correct to speak of a camouflage of mythical motifs and characters . . . if the Gods no longer appear under their real names in the tales, their outlines can still be distinguished in the figures of the hero's protectors, enemies, and companions. They are camouflaged—or, if you will, 'fallen'—but they continue to perform their function."¹⁹ This view seems most pertinent when the manner in which Snow White is revived is considered, and it tends to belie G. S. Kirk's view that as "supernatural elements are subsidiary" in folktales, "they are not primarily concerned with 'serious' subjects or the reflexion of deep problems and preoccupations."²⁰

Moreover a concern for the mythic, sacred, religious, or sublime—what Freud called the "uncanny"—dimension in fairy tales serves as a corrective to Bettelheim's more pragmatic and psychotherapeutic interpretation of fairy tales as "paradigms or parables that teach us how to adjust to an adult reality."²¹ In this vein, Harold Bloom effectively refers to Ruskin's views on "Fairy Stories" (1868):

fairy stories . . . cannot be "removed altogether from their sphere of religious faith," since in them: "the good spirit descends gradually from an angel into a fairy, and the demon shrinks into a playful grotesque of diminutive malevolence." For Ruskin what is repressed most strongly in fairy tales is a world of angels and demons, a world of energies that transcend familial conflicts, and that offer irrational solutions to the sorrows of "growing up." Those energies inform "Snow White" as a fiction, but are either unseen or evaded Bettelheim.²²

Many will immediately recall the popular cartoon images of the Disney version of this tale which, while sentimentalizing the story and personifying the seven dwarfs, still preserves, unlike later Disney efforts, much of the dark ambiguous power of the original story—especially in the portrayal of the evil stepmother.²³ For purposes of analysis, however, it is

¹⁸ de Vries, *Betrachtungen*, pp. 175 ff. (discussed in Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, pp. 195-200).

¹⁹ Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, p. 200.

²⁰ Kirk, *Myth*, p. 37.

²¹ Harold Bloom, "Driving Out Demons," *The New York Review*, 23 (1976), 12.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ See Richard Schickel's discussion of "Disneyfication" in *The Disney Version* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), pp. 213-228. The depiction of the dwarfs as typical buffoon-like, yet

necessary to go back to the original tale recorded by the Grimms since that particular narrative form of the story, especially its formulaic patterns and triadic repetition, is important to the overall communication of meaning.²⁴

In relying on the Grimm version of this tale there is still the issue of whether or not their version really represents an authentic oral tale or is only a *Buchmärchen* (influenced by Basile, Perrault, Musäus, etc.) that was edited and stylized by the brothers.²⁵ While Kurt Ranke notes that Snow White in particular is more *Buchmärchen* than *Volksmärchen*, it would still seem that in terms of overall form and motif the Grimm version represents a typical form of the tale.²⁶ Along these lines it is also worthwhile to recall Linda Dégh's observation that folklorists have often been misguided in their efforts to find oral traditions completely unsullied by literary influences since "oral and literary traditions have, directly or indirectly, always affected each other."²⁷ Therefore, a tale such as Snow White that can be partially traced back to older written sources does not necessarily represent a "deterioration" or a less authentic folkloric product.

There is no doubt, as Alan Dundes has written, that "it is always risky to base an analysis upon a single version of an item of folklore" and that interpretation, therefore, requires careful comparative consideration of the different variants of a single tale type.²⁸ This task, in fact, is complicated for Snow White because the variants of the tale are in many cases not instances of separate oral tradition but were specifically influenced by the Grimm version.²⁹ Thus, a consideration of the many other versions presents us with many interesting transformations and substitutions of the contents of the Grimm tale important for the analysis of national character and cultural variations; still, the basic frame of formulaic form, main events, and episodic sequence remains generally constant.³⁰ Although an interpretation of variants would present us with

lovable, cartoon characters particularly detracts from the rich ambivalence of cruelty and innocence that is so important in fairy tales. The Disney version also bowdlerizes the ending of the tale and recounts only the single ordeal of the apple.

²⁴ I have used the translation by Francis P. Magoun, Jr. and Alexander H. Krappe, *The Grimms' German Folk Tales* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1960), pp. 192-199. Concerning the issue of narrative formulae see Thompson, *Folktale*, pp. 428-461; Dégh, "Folk Narrative," pp. 61-62; and A. Olrik, "Epic Laws of Folk Narrative," in *The Study of Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965), pp. 129-141.

²⁵ See, for example, the article by Rolf Hagen, "Perraults Märchen und die Brüder Grimm," *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie*, 74 (1955), 394-410, and Ernest Tonnelat, *Les contes des frères Grimm* (Paris, 1912).

²⁶ Kurt Ranke, *Folktales of Germany* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. xviii.

²⁷ Linda Dégh, *Folktales and Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), p. 146.

²⁸ Dundes, *Study of Folklore*, p. 110.

²⁹ See Dégh, *Folktales and Society*, p. 148.

³⁰ For a bibliography of variants of AT 709 see Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson, *The Types of*

different repertoires of individual symbols, the overall articulation of these different symbols would still point to an initiatory scenario. My own method of analysis tries somewhat like Lüthi's, to combine both a consideration of form with an analysis of the symbolism of particular constituent units. While there seems to be a common form behind many different fairy tales, "every single fairy tale has a particular message."³¹

What is the meaning of this well known story? At the most obvious level it is a moral tale concerning the triumph of the heroine over the malevolent jealousy and pride of the evil stepmother—"Beauty is a simple passion, / but, oh my friends, in the end / you will dance the fire dance in iron shoes."³² From a broader point of view it is what Lüthi calls a story that is concerned with the process of human maturation, a tale that depicts some essential threatening transitional episode in personal growth and socialization.³³ In a primitive setting this is the ritualized puberty theme of "coming of age," which is concerned with an interrelated series of essential transformations in the round of social life: the passage from childhood to adulthood, natural to cultural life, asexual to sexual life. More specifically for Snow White, she makes the necessary move from the egocentric self-love of the child to the other-directed love that is required for maintaining society through its institutionalized form of marriage.³⁴

Another consideration is the emphasis given to female characters in many Grimm tales, this story in particular. One self-evident reason for this is that most of the Grimms' key informants were women and, consequently, tended to stress female characters and situations.³⁵ While from a Jungian point of view much, possibly too much, could be made of the female focus of the story,³⁶ and while there are interesting differences in tales having male heroes, I only want to suggest that it is wise to be

the Folktale, Folklore Fellows Communications no. 184 (Helsinki, 1961), p. 246; Böklen, volume 1 (which lists 57 variants); Bolte and Polívka, vol. 1, pp. 453-464; and the Grimms' own discussion (in Margaret Hunt's translation), *Grimm's Household Tales*, Vol. 1 (London: George Bell & Sons, 1884), pp. 406-409. See also the variants (obviously influenced by the Grimm version) recounted in Katherine M. Briggs, *Dictionary of British Folktales* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), vol. 1, pp. 494-495; and Lucetta K. Ratcliff, "Filipino Folklore," *Journal of American Folklore*, 62 (1949), 272-273.

³¹ Lüthi, *Once Upon*, p. 144.

³² Ann Sexton, *Transformations* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1971), pp. 3-5.

³³ Lüthi, *Once Upon*, pp. 70, 109-119, 139.

³⁴ For a general discussion of initiation see the classic work of Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960) and Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1965). Initiation in the most general sense "denotes a body of rites and oral teachings whose purpose is to produce a decisive alteration in the religious and social status of the person" (*Rites and Symbols*, p. x) and involves the transformation or passage "by way of a symbolic death and resurrection, from ignorance and immaturity to the spiritual age of the adult" (*Myth and Reality*, p. 201).

³⁵ For the Grimms' informants see Crane, pp. 142-149. See also Dégh (*Folktales and Society*, pp. 90-93) who points out that "female" themes do not necessarily indicate female storytellers.

³⁶ For an interesting, but at times overwrought, discussion from a Jungian perspective see Von Franz, *Interpretation*, pp. 83ff.

cautious concerning analogies coming from an overly generalized picture of initiation (which is usually based on accounts of male rites), and focus as much as possible on patterns related to primitive female initiations.³⁷ It must be kept in mind that there are different kinds of primitive initiation associated with different social and religious functions. Whereas a certain commonality of theme and form is present, instances of male and female puberty initiation (involving seclusion and ordeals), secret society initiation, and shamanic initiation all represent different patterns of function and intent.³⁸

Also relevant is that from a cross-cultural perspective rites involving seclusion and painful ordeals (suggested in the tale of Snow White) are ordinarily found in a cultural situation involving patrilocal marriage.³⁹ Brown sees this as being related to a "conflict of sexual identity" which comes about from a childhood fostering an identification with the mother and the eventual move into a male dominated domestic unit which gives rise to a conflicting identification with the male role.⁴⁰ Although superficial explanations can be offered, it is by no means clear why painful ordeals are more necessary in this situation than others; perhaps it is best to think of this as suggesting only that the more extreme the cultural disparity between the sexes, the more dramatic the rites necessary to insure the stability of the society.⁴¹ The significance of this for Snow White is simply that *Märchen* in general reflect an idealized feudal society where patrilocal marriage is the rule⁴² and that in Snow White sexual conflict and the passage to sexual and social maturity are crucial issues.

Despite the risks involved, it is possible for comparative purposes to set out a somewhat "typical" pattern of initiation associated with "women's mysteries" found in many primitive traditions.⁴³ I offer the following scenario:

Phase of Separation

The moment of transition for a young girl into womanhood is

³⁷See, for example, Alfred Winterstein, "Die Pubertätsriten der Mädchen mit deren Spuren in Märchen," *Imago*, 14 (1928), 199-274. For some of the problems inherent in the anthropological discussion of women in primitive society see R. Rohrlach-Leavitt, B. Sykes, and E. Weatherford, "Aboriginal Women: Male and Female Anthropological Perspectives," in *Women Cross-Culturally*, ed. R. Rohrlach-Leavitt (The Hague: Mouton 1975), pp. 567-580.

³⁸See Eliade, *Rites and Symbols*, pp. 2-4.

³⁹See Judith K. Brown, "A Cross-Cultural Study of Female Initiation Rites," *American Anthropologist*, 65 (1963), 837-853, and "Female Initiation Rites: A Review of the Current Literature," in *Issues in Adolescent Psychology*, ed. Dorothy Rogers (New York: Appleton-Century Crofts, 1969).

⁴⁰Brown, "Cross-Cultural Study," pp. 842-847.

⁴¹See Eliade, *Rites and Symbols*, pp. 21-40.

⁴²See Dégh, "Folk Narrative," pp. 64-65.

⁴³The pattern presented here follows Eliade's scheme in *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1967), pp. 209-213, and it adopts van Gennep's classic tripartite structure.

ordinarily marked by the coming of the first bloody menstruation. Successful passage to adulthood and marriage, however, requires a preliminary separation or isolation from the ordinary world and usually involves a retreat from the village and family to the bush, forest, or some outlying area. There is also sometimes a special place (hut, house, etc.) of initiation where the young women are sequestered from the tribe.

Phase of Liminality

The period of separation is variable in time (possibly even years in length), but commonly involves the teaching of tribal lore to the young initiates by the old women who represent the mythic ancestors originally responsible for the mysteries and powers of female life. This traditionally involves an education in the basic feminine crafts (spinning, weaving, etc.) and responsibilities necessary for adult married life, as well as a teaching of feminine sexual and religious lore. There are often ordeals of a physical and psychological nature inflicted by the old women which suggest that this period of time spent in isolation from the community is a deathlike period—in effect, a period that represents a symbolic return to the liminal conditions of the mythic chaos time which is a necessary prelude to any new creation or transition in life.⁴⁴

Phase of Reincorporation and Rebirth

The whole initiation process is completed by a return to the village and the giving of a new name and gifts symbolic of the initiate's new identity and status as an adult woman. In many instances the successful passage into the cultural world of the tribe is marked by collective dance rites which serve as a direct and necessary prelude to marriage (which either immediately follows the initiation or occurs at some later time set by the tradition).

The dangerous transition from childhood to psycho-sexual maturity and full membership in the cultural life of the society is accomplished by these rites—the bringing of a girl to social, psychological, and religious adulthood. There is an obvious relation between this scenario and what happens in the story of Snow White; at the most fundamental level of action, the tale starts with the abrupt movement from birth to a symbolic moment of transition (at the age of seven) during Snow White's childhood, then focuses in the longest section on the events of Snow White's sequesterment in the forest with the dwarfs where she undergoes various ordeals, and finally concludes rather suddenly with the

⁴⁴On the symbolism of the "liminal" condition see Eliade, *Rites and Symbols*, pp. xiiff. and Victor Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*," in *Symposium on New Approaches to the Study of Religion*, Proceedings of the 1964 Annual Spring Meeting of the American Ethnological Society (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1964), pp. 4-20.

“eucatastrophe”⁴⁵ of her revival from “death” and her marriage with the prince. The implication is that as Snow White lay deathlike in the crystal coffin for a “long, long time,” she was of marriageable age at the end of the story—that is, she was around fourteen years old, or seven years beyond the age of seven.⁴⁶

When Snow White became seven, therefore, she was at the threshold of the passage to puberty and adult married life and had to undergo the necessary tests and training for becoming fully a woman. It is also worth noting van Gennep’s observation that the moment of puberty is sociologically and not physiologically determined, and that the period of transition and training tends to be prolonged as a culture becomes more and more complex.⁴⁷ Another aspect of this is that as primitive puberty initiation is signaled and, in a sense, effectuated through the sacred medium of menstrual blood, so also does the story of Snow White constantly turn on the symbolism of blood (or the color symbolism of blood-red) as the transforming and regenerative agent. The color triad of red, white, and black is particularly important, and, as Victor Turner states, “in the ethnographic literature it is noteworthy that among societies that make ritual use of all three colours the critical situation in which these appear together is initiation.”⁴⁸

With these preliminary comments in mind it is best to proceed more methodically in order to see how Snow White portrays a basic initiatory pattern reminiscent of the primitive scenario set out above. The procedure followed here is to break the story down into its functional sequence of

⁴⁵Tolkien defines “eucatastrophe” as “the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous ‘turn’ . . . a sudden and miraculous grace never to be counted on to recur”—see “On Fairy Stories,” in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), p. 68.

⁴⁶An interesting parallel to this sequence of seven year periods in the development of a woman is found in the Chinese medical classic, *Huang Ti Nei Ching Su Wen*, which says that: “When a girl is seven years of age, the emanations of the kidneys become abundant, she begins to change her teeth and her hair grows longer. When she reaches her fourteenth year she begins to menstruate and is able to become pregnant. . . .” See I. Veith, *The Yellow Emperor’s Classic of Internal Medicine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), pp. 98-99. In the story of Lisa found in Basile’s *Pentamerone* of 1634, a probable influence on the story of Snow White, it is said that “after her apparent death and incarceration . . . [Lisa] continued to grow like any other girl, and the crystal casket lengthened with her, ‘keeping pace as she grew.’” See the discussion in Iona and Peter Opie, *The Classic Fairy Tales* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 175, and also the “Table of Analogues Between Basile and Grimm” (especially Day 2, Tale 8; Day 9, Tale 9; and Day 5, Tale 9) in N. M. Penzer, ed., *The Pentamerone of Giambattista Basile* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1932), Vol. 2, pp. 279-285.

⁴⁷Van Gennep, pp. 65-70. See also van Gennep’s discussion of Chinese rites of “departure from childhood” and the symbolism of the “Mother” (pp. 55-61), Miriam Van Waters, “The Adolescent Girl Among Primitive Peoples,” *Journal of Religious Psychology*, 6 (1913), 375-421; 7 (1914), 32-40, 75-120; and Rita E. Montgomery, “A Cross-Cultural Study of Menstruation, Menstrual Taboos, and Related Social Variables,” *Ethos*, 2 (1974), 137-170.

⁴⁸Victor Turner, “Colour Classification in Ndembu Ritual,” in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Banton (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), p. 79. For a discussion of Turner’s theory and color symbolism in general see Sam D. Gill, “The Color of Navajo Ritual Symbolism: An evaluation of Methods,” *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 31 (1975), 350-363.

action represented by what might be called the core sentences or “narremes.”⁴⁹ It should be emphasized that, as Propp and Lüthi suggest, the functional aspect of the overall narrative form is most important in getting at the possible meaning or layers of meaning. Thus, the characters in fairy tales are almost always stylized and colorless; they are no more than stock figures that emphasize various functional and symbolic values.⁵⁰

In particular, the figure of Snow White as heroine is hardly a developed personality or even very heroic. Snow White in fact, is always acted upon and seems incredibly stupid in her repeated failure to see through the wiles of the evil stepmother. Indeed, the distinctly stylized and mechanical protagonists in fairy tales, as differentiated from the more defined and tragic heroes of epic tradition, may represent an essential functional trait associated with the type of initiatory theme found in fairy tales. In this way Kay Stone’s comments on what she considers to be the insipid and uninspiring “passivity” of female characters in the Grimm tales, while not entirely unfounded, do seem to miss the point that ultimately initiation is the fortuitous work of the gods (however they are disguised).⁵¹ Heroes and heroines in fairy tales, more so than in epic or saga, do not ordinarily succeed because they act, but because they allow themselves to be acted upon—helped, protected, saved, or transformed—by the magic of the fairy world.

Analysis of the Tale

The story of Snow White can be summarily represented by twenty-five key statements or narremes grouped in the following way:

- I. *Prologue and Problem* (narremes:1-5)
Birth of Snow White to the Stepmother’s Instructions to the Huntsman (Motifs: Z65.1; L55; M312.4; D1311.2; D1323.1; S31; S322.2)
- II. *Separation* (n: 6-7)
Compassionate Executioner and the Journey to the Seven Dwarfs’ House in the Forest (Motif: K512.2)
- III. *Liminal Period* (n: 8-21)
Adoption by Dwarfs and Snow White’s Ordeals and “Death” (Motifs: F451.5.1.2; N831.1; K950; S111; S111.1.2.3.4)
- IV. *Reincorporation and Rebirth* (n: 22-23)
Revival and Marriage with the King’s Son (Motifs: F852.1; N711; E21.1)
- V. *Epilogue* (n: 24-25)
Death of the Evil Stepmother during the Wedding Ceremony (Motif: Q414.4)

⁴⁹For the use of this terminology see Joseph Blenkinsopp, “The Search for the Prickly Plant: Structure and Function in the Gilgamesh Epic,” *Soundings*, 58 (1975), 204-206.

⁵⁰See Lüthi, *Once Upon*, pp. 21ff, and Propp, “Transformation in Fairy Tales,” pp. 139-150.

⁵¹Kay Stone, “Things Walt Disney Never Told Us,” *Journal of American Folklore*, 88 (1975), 44-45.

In the following pages I attempt to demonstrate the relevance of this scheme by offering a commentary on the initiatory movement and its rich resonance with many different, yet correlative, symbolic themes. My basic concern is to show how the whole story—in terms of overall form, sequence of action, and particular events and symbols—is orchestrated around an initiatory pattern represented by the phases of separation, liminality, and reincorporation.^{5 2}

Prologue and Problem

n. 1: *During mid-winter the Queen wishes for a child “white as snow, red as blood, black as wood.”*

In the opening lines of the story we are presented with the whole story in miniature. Snow White’s real mother is sewing, practicing one of the traditional female arts that indicates her maturity and creative powers. She pricks her finger and three drops of blood fall in the snow. This is the first reference to the significance of menstrual blood; symbolic here of the birth of Snow White and, later, of Snow White’s own sexual and social maturation involving a threefold unification of the white, black, and red parts of her nature. Indeed, these colors might be taken as an indication of the tripartite constituents of the human person seen in many traditions: body, spirit, and soul. In the Indian *Upanishads*, for example, this same color symbolism is related to the three *gunas* (*sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*) or “strands” of existence: “*sattva* is the quality of purity and tranquillity (and may be equated with white); *rajas* is the active principle which initiates *karma* (and may be equated with red), while *tamas* is ‘constrictive, obstructive, and conducive to lethargic apathy (and may be equated with black).’ ”^{5 3}

The Queen’s wish is interesting from a number of perspectives, but it is especially evocative of the color symbolism of alchemy which stresses the triune initiatory scheme of *nigredo*—*albedo*—*rubedo* (the black, white, and red) or a transformation of man and matter that involves a movement through death, purification, and rebirth. This is the “great work” which is accomplished through the mysterious refining heat of fire (the red) by which the dualities of matter must suffer and die in order to be made whole. To become a whole person in body, spirit, and soul, man also requires the purgation of fire and the elixir of blood.^{5 4} The counterpoint

^{5 2}For a discussion of the structural interrelationship between the tripartite initiatory scheme employed here and Propp’s more elaborate transformational scheme of analysis (based on his thirty-one functions or kinds of action) see Blenkinsopp, pp. 210-213.

^{5 3}Turner, “Colour Classification,” pp. 76-77. Kay Girardot has also pointed out to me that white, red, and black are the Indo-European trifunctional colors of authority, combat, and increase. As a triplet the colors might be said to signify a cosmological unity—see G. Dumézil, *L’idéologie tripartite des Indo-Européens* (Brussels: Collection Latomus, 1958), pp. 25-27.

^{5 4}On alchemical symbolism see, among numerous works, J. Read, *Prelude to Chemistry, An Outline of Alchemy* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1966); Mircea Eliade, *The Forge and the*

of alchemical symbolism that I allude to throughout this interpretation is not meant to suggest that Snow White is somehow an alchemical story or specifically harbors an occult level of meaning. My intention is simply to draw attention to the comparative significance of alchemical symbolism as representative of another tradition which is clearly focused on initiatory themes.⁵⁵

It should also be noted that the time is said to be mid-winter, a transitional period in the cosmic round of the year. That is, mid-winter is a solstice period—a period during the season of death but, at the same time, the moment, marked ritually in many traditions, which turns toward the coming of spring and new life.⁵⁶ Such references prompt a Müllerian type of interpretation wherein the story could be seen as a disguised nature allegory with the figure of Snow White representing a moon goddess who must be periodically regenerated; it is not necessary, nor methodologically defensible, to limit the interpretation in this way.⁵⁷

n. 2: *Snow White is born and the Queen dies.*

The birth of the child requires the death of the mother as the completion of the old, and the start of a new, life cycle. This child, called Snow White, has the parts of black, red, and white but not their refinement and unification.⁵⁸ They are only seeds which can potentially grow into a mature flower, perhaps a red rose as in the complementary tale “Snow White and Rose Red.” In this stage of life, then, Snow White is pure and innocent, but not complete. She is, however, poised to embark upon the path that her mother has just completed, the dangerous journey to maturity and womanhood.

n. 3: *The new Queen, Snow White’s stepmother who is “proud and haughty,” arrives and questions the magic mirror for the first time.*

While it is tempting to apply a Jungian interpretation to the role and figure of the stepmother as, possibly, a personified shadow aspect of the psyche, such an overly specific interpretation is not required. It is always necessary to keep in mind the relevance of an initiatory theme for social

Crucible (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1971); R. Bernoulli, “Spiritual Development as Reflected in Alchemy and Related Disciplines,” in *Spiritual Disciplines*, ed. J. Campbell (New York: Pantheon Books, 1960), pp. 305-340; Titus Burckhardt, *Alchemy* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1967); and C. G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1968).

⁵⁵ On the initiatory significance of alchemy see Eliade, *Forge and Crucible*, pp. 142-168.

⁵⁶ See, for example, F. Huxley’s discussion of archaic Chinese practices in *The Way of the Sacred* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday and Company, 1974), pp. 226-227 (based on M. Granet’s classic account in *Danses et légendes de la chine ancienne* [Paris: University of France, 1959]).

⁵⁷ See, for example, the brief discussions in Ad de Vries *Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore, and Symbols* (New York: Scarecrow Press, 1961), vol. 2, p. 1121, and also Richard M. Dorson’s discussion of the “nature mythology” school of interpretation “The Eclipse of Solar Mythology,” rpr. in Dundes, *Study of Folklore*, pp. 57-83.

⁵⁸ Eliade notes that among the primitive Dyaks a girl is considered “white” or “without blood” before the completion of the initiation; see *Rites and Symbols*, p. 44, and also Turner, “Colour Classification,” p. 56.

and religious growth, as well as psychological development; the Jungian perspective, while insightful and frequently very helpful, tends to limit too immediately the meaning to the inner unconscious dynamics of the psyche.⁵⁹

From a more general perspective, the stepmother can be seen in functional terms as introducing the main problem to be dealt with by Snow White in her development and maturation. Therefore, the stepmother's pride, haughtiness, and envy can be taken as an indication of one of the basic problems of personal and social development faced by a child who is "coming of age." The period of childhood is both psychologically and sociologically a period of self-centered love reinforced by the close identification with the mother. The stepmother is not Snow White's "real" mother; for a real mother is one who ultimately must sacrifice her own desire to possess the child forever to the inevitable future separation and growth of the child as a new mother herself and a giver of life. The circle must turn, and true motherhood demands a recognition of this law of life.

Leaving aside questions of shadow and electra complex, it may simply be said that the stepmother (or real mother as "stepmother"—Ranke notes that the stepmother was the Grimms' substitution for the mother "to make the villainess an outsider in the family circle")⁶⁰ is the one who prompts a real life crisis for the child in that she is the one who represents the dangers of retarded development. She is one who has failed to pass the sacrificial tests of life and growth, one who selfishly attempts to perpetuate her "beauty" when life demands that she grow old and die, to be replaced by new life and new beauty. The problem posed, then, is one that involves the necessary struggle of the child to leave home and mother, a struggle that involves the need for the child to go beyond the limited and ultimately destructive values of childhood represented by the malevolent self-centeredness of the stepmother.

The mirror that always speaks the truth first reports that the stepmother is the "fairest of all," the truth of which is verified by the fact that in this early period of childhood Snow White is not fully a person and is wholly identified with the mother. She cannot yet be a threat, or be threatened, because her time of passage to womanhood and the necessary replacement of the mother has not yet come. It is also worth commenting briefly on the significance of the mirror which in many traditions represents a magical instrument of self-realization, a device which can reflect the true state of the soul.⁶¹ There is an ambivalence here, however, since, like the waters of the Narcissus myth, the mirror only

⁵⁹ See Lüthi, *Once Upon*, pp. 64-65.

⁶⁰ Ranke, *Folktales*, p. xviii.

⁶¹ For a comparative perspective concerning mirror symbolism see P. Démieville, "Le Miroir spirituel," *Simologica*, I (1948), 112-137, and Alex Wayman, "The Mirror as a Pan-Buddhist Metaphor—Simile," *History of Religions*, 13 (1974), 251-269.

reflects what is physically present and does not in itself cause self development. Seeing oneself can be either the occasion for growth or decay.

n. 4: *Snow White becomes seven and is now "more beautiful" than the stepmother, a fact that is verified by the second questioning of the mirror.*

A transitional moment is reached in Snow White's round of life. She is now a *potential* woman ("puberty" in a sense being marked by her physical beauty at the age of seven). She is physically coming to completion, but, more importantly, this physical development must be matched by psychological, social, and spiritual growth. She must give up her comfortable innocence as only "Snow White," the childish ways of self gratification, and face the painful task of refining the separate white, black, and red parts of her nature. Only then will she achieve her complete identity as a woman and creator of life.

n. 5: *The stepmother, envious and hateful, instructs her huntsman to kill Snow White and bring back her liver and lungs (or heart).*

The stepmother, as indicated above, can be seen as one who did not successfully make the passage to complete womanhood and lives only in terms of the externalized values of sexuality and physical beauty. In this way, she is a witch representing all the destructive and dark forces of a woman who is retarded in personal development and seeks to prevent the creation of new life.

While it is probably pushing the interpretation too far, it may be worthwhile speculating that the reference to the stepmother being "yellow and green" with envy echoes another alchemical motif of color symbolism. The agent of transformation, the solvent that is necessary to separate the constituent parts of matter and human nature, is frequently represented by the color yellow (associated with sulphur and its acidic properties) or as the "Green Lion." What is significant is that the solvent of transformation, the agent of change, is both the necessary source of destruction and death ("*solve*") and of resurrection and life ("*et coagula*").⁶² As previously noted, and despite the tenuous plausibility of this particular speculation, there is a constant allusion to color symbolism in the story that finds a fascinating parallel in alchemical themes of transformation.

In her refusal to accept the inevitable course of life, the stepmother decides that Snow White must die—as indeed she must, but not to perpetuate the designs of the witchlike stepmother—and instructs her huntsman, the first real male figure in the story (there is only a passing reference to the king at the start of the story), to take Snow White into the forest and kill her.

⁶²S. Klossowski de Rola discusses some aspects of alchemical color symbolism in *The Secret Art of Alchemy* (New York: Avon Books, 1973), pp. 10-20 (see plate 20 for a depiction of the "Green Lion" and its associations with blood, sulphur, and mercury).

Separation

n. 6: *The huntsman takes Snow White into the forest; spares her life because she is "so beautiful" and kills a young boar, cutting out its lung and liver as a substitute sacrifice to bring to the stepmother.*

The episode of the huntsman is reminiscent of similar themes of the "compassionate executioner" (Motif K512.2) found in other tales; it may represent an embellishment of the core story (in some versions, for example, Snow White is sent directly to the dwarfs' house with the idea that they will kill her).⁶³ Despite the possibility that this is a later interpolation, it still functions in unison with the rest of the story. On the one hand, it fulfills the essential function of initiating the forced separation of Snow White from her home, an action that is crucial to the successful resolution of her development. More intrinsic to the overall theme of the story, however, is the fact that this episode acts as a kind of anticipatory doublet to the required ordeals, death, and fortuitous resurrection that is to come.

The huntsman is said to spare Snow White because she is so beautiful, which implies an acceptance of her potential status as a woman and bringer of new life. The huntsman, therefore, like the prince at the end of the story, is an agent of creative death and transformation as distinguished from the stepmother's consumptive desire for the finality of death. The huntsman as the first significant male character also forecasts the idea that the medium of transformation and wholeness will ultimately involve the union of opposites, male and female. From a comparative perspective, the color symbolism in some primitive situations involves the idea of a union of the red (menstrual blood) and white (semen) through the agency of the black (the ritual "death" involved in the initiation and marriage union).⁶⁴

But while this episode may be taken as a kind of foretaste of the happy ending to the whole story—that there will be an intervention of love and grace in the world—Snow White is still required to undergo the requisite testing and education necessary for adult womanhood. The substitute of the boar is not sufficient. Snow White must herself really suffer and die to become whole. Transformation requires self-sacrifice in the truest sense, not a vicarious substitution.

There are echoes here of the sacrificial rites of the virgin maiden which, in some archaic traditions, were necessary for a regeneration of the world and the maintenance of fertility. In addition to this, it is interesting that the huntsman kills a boar in place of Snow White since, again in various religious traditions, the wild boar or pig is frequently a substitute sacrifice for a human victim.⁶⁵

⁶³ See Thompson, *Folktale*, p. 124.

⁶⁴ See Turner, "Colour Classification," pp. 49-71.

⁶⁵ See de Vries, *Dictionary*, pp. 56-57 and Joseph Campbell, *Primitive Mythology* (New York: The Viking Press, 1959), pp. 170-176, 184ff., 444ff.

n. 7: *The stepmother eats the boar's lung and liver believing them to be the organs of Snow White.*

In some primitive traditions the cannibalistic ingestion of entrails is associated with the absorption of the power and soul of the victim and is also reminiscent of the *vagina dentata* of the terrible earth mother who attempts to dismember and eat the hero in his quest for the treasure. Whereas the reference to the lungs can be related to the powers of the breath, the liver (like the heart) is linked in folkloric tradition to desire and strength, as well as being associated with the secrets of witchcraft.^{6 6}

In this case, the witchlike evil stepmother is deceived, a necessary deception since Snow White has still not overcome her childish innocence and lack of cultural knowledge which will make an authentic self-sacrifice and transformation possible.

Liminal Period

n. 8: *Snow White goes deeper into the forest and finds the house of the seven dwarfs where she eats and falls asleep.*

n. 9: *The seven dwarfs return from mining gold and discover Snow White.*

Being deep in the forest at the house of the dwarfs, Snow White has symbolically returned to the mythic beginnings of time, the liminal period of chaos when the mysterious gods and ancestral creatures of creation were active. In many tales the dwarfs, as chthonic creatures, are malevolent and destructive beings; but, as in this case, they can also be the creative agents of growth and rebirth. Indeed, in this story the dwarfs (or, in some versions, robbers, others who are outside the normal social realm)^{6 7} can be taken as the divine ancestors, teachers, refiners, guardians, or helpers necessary for a successful initiation.^{6 8} They help to mine gold from the black earth of Snow White's soul as the smith and alchemist assist in the divine work of accelerating the processes of nature, or the shaman heals through the agency of various spirit-animals.^{6 9}

Snow White stays with them and "keeps house" for the first time (Motif N831.1) and thus, in a way, she starts to learn the lore of adult life

^{6 6} See Eliade, *Rites and Symbols*, pp. 51-52; R. Gressain, *Le motif vagina dentata* (Copenhagen: 32nd International Congress of Americanists, 1958); and Huxley, *Way of the Sacred*, pp. 50-51. For a discussion of witchcraft and cannibalism consult Reay Tannahill, *Flesh and Blood, a History of the Cannibal Complex* (New York: Stein and Day, 1975), pp. 97-103; and for a note on the symbolism of the liver see the *Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Co., 1950), vol. 2, pp. 636-637.

^{6 7} See the English version in Briggs, *Dictionary*, p. 494.

^{6 8} See Thompson, *Folktales*, pp. 49-50; for the Celtic and Germanic representations of dwarfs as divine ancestors and primordial beings see Alexander H. Krappe, "Antipodes," *Modern Language Notes*, 59 (1944), 441-447, and Hans Bächtold-Stäubli, *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1938-41), vol. 9, pp. 1007-1138.

^{6 9} See Eliade, *Forge and Crucible*, pp. 87-108, and his *Shamanism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), pp. 102-103.

that will be expected of her. Consequently, the dwarfs can be called the ancestral teachers or helpers of transformation, but they do not control or guarantee the outcome of the process. Snow White's transformation is finally effected only through her own self-sacrifice and the sudden and accidental intervention of a grace which breaks the spell of death. The dwarfs, however, act as protective agents in this difficult passage, and they teach her the arts of civilization and warn her of the dangerous ordeals and death to come.

n. 10: *The stepmother questions the mirror for the third time and discovers that she has been deceived.*

n. 11: *The stepmother disguises herself as a peddler woman and goes over the seven mountains to the house of the seven dwarfs.*

Now is the start of the formulaic triple ordeal of Snow White which is conducted by the vengeful stepmother. As the dwarfs might be said to represent the creative and positive dimension of the chaos condition, the stepmother now directly embodies the negative and destructive dimension of death and decay. The stepmother, rather than true Queen, reveals herself as she really is (as a lower class peddler, old woman, and farmer's wife). She is a witch, yet at the same time she is something like the old women of primitive tradition (frequently depicted as a crone or witch) who must torture and "kill" the young initiate if she is to cross successfully the threshold to adult life. Again, the multivalence of the symbolism is important in that the stepmother must become a witch and agent of death so the final work of transformation can be made possible. The message seems to be that in life it is fated that at a certain moment in the growth of a girl, the mother will necessarily play the role of a witch (as possibly the father must play the role of a giant in the life of a boy).

n. 12: *The stepmother tricks Snow White with a "many colored bodice lace" that is used to squeeze her breath away.*

There are possibly two levels of meaning concerning this first rather curious ordeal of the lace. At one level it might be seen as another aspect of the teaching (the communication of the *sacra* of the tradition)⁷⁰ necessary for taking up adult life—that is, a garment, or an object like the comb of the second ordeal, that is associated with a mature married woman. More significant, however, is the association of breath with the idea of spirit.⁷¹ In the three ordeals the stepmother sequentially attacks the white (breath), black (hair), and red (apple-blood) elements of Snow White's nature—all three of which must be tested and refined if the final union is to be complete (*solve*, then, *coagula*).

It is also interesting to note that in alchemical tradition the appearance of the many-colored "peacock's tail" symbolically marks an important stage in the process of transformation. Thus, in the *Twelve Keys of*

⁷⁰On the importance of the *sacra* in primitive initiation see Turner, "Betwixt and Between," pp. 12ff.

⁷¹See de Vries, *Dictionary*, pp. 63-64.

Basilius Valentinus, the alchemical Queen's "fan of peacock's feathers is allusive to the appearance of colours in the later processes of the Great work."⁷²

n. 13: *Snow White falls down as if dead for the first time, but the dwarfs save her and warn her.*

n. 14: *The stepmother in questioning the mirror for the fourth time discovers her failure and makes a poisoned comb with which she tricks Snow White for the second time.*

As the white (breath) was tested initially, now the black (hair) must also be tested and refined. It should be remarked that hair is often associated with physical energy and spiritual power⁷³ and this second ordeal represents a further attempt to prevent the union of the three.

n. 15: *Snow White falls down unconscious for the second time but is again saved and warned by the dwarfs.*

n. 16: *Questioning the mirror for the fifth time and again discovering her failure, the stepmother prepares a poisoned apple and vows Snow White's death "even if it costs her own life."*

In this third and culminating trial the stepmother prepares a special red and white poisoned apple, only the red part of which is deadly. Here we see the completion of the cycle of "solve"—the progressive testing and corrosive attack on the white, the black, and now the red. One difference is apparent, however, in that the red apple (blood, fire) brings death which is the necessary pre-condition for the final union of the white and the black.

Moreover, the apple symbolism is suggestive of a number of other parallel motifs. For example, there are the analogies of the apple with the fruit of earthly desires in the Biblical garden of paradise which brings death into the world but at the same time makes Adam and Eve aware of their sexuality and godlike power to create new life. Human society and the institution of marriage are, in a sense, initiated by this act.⁷⁴ The eating of the fruit is the root of sin yet also the precondition for man's own salvation and identification with god. From another perspective the apple resonates with the alchemical symbolism of the elixir or philosopher's stone which is ambivalently both a deadly poison and the medicine of life. George Ripley, therefore, writes in his alchemical work, the *Twelve Gates* (1677):

⁷²Quoted by Read, *Prelude*, p. 202.

⁷³See de Vries, *Dictionary*, pp. 231-234, and also Bruce Lincoln, "Treatment of Hair and Fingernails Among the Indo-Europeans," forthcoming in *History of Religions*, Vol. no.16 (1977), Edmund Leach, "Magical Hair," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 10 (1958), 147-164. The practice of tonsure during initiation should also be noted as, for example, in the Indian rite of *Cūḍākarma*; see H. Oldenberg, *The Grikya Sutras* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1886-1892), vol. I, pp. 55-57.

⁷⁴See Huxley, *Way of the Sacred*, pp. 272-274, and S. G. F. Brandon, *Creation Legends of the Ancient Near East* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1963).

The Toad with Colours rare through every side was pierc'd;
 And White appear'd when all the sundry hews were past:
 Which after being tinted Ruddy, for evermore did last.
 Then of the Venom handled thus a Medicine I did make;
 Which Venom kills, and saveth such as Venom chance to take.⁷⁵

n. 17: *Snow White eats the red part of the apple and falls down dead.*

At this turning point in the story there is a significant recapitulation of the color coded formula of the white, black, and red. As at the start of the story mid-winter has symbolically arrived again—the time of death but also the transitional moment of future rebirth.

n. 18: *The stepmother questions the mirror for the sixth time and hears that she is now the fairest of all.*

The mirror continues to tell the truth for Snow White is no longer of the world. She is in the liminal, deathlike or germinal, condition. She is betwixt and bewitched.

n. 19: *The dwarfs, returning in the evening and seeing that they cannot revive Snow White, bathe her in water and wine, mourn for three days, and put her in a glass coffin.*

Snow White's period of "death" involves a reiteration of the overall cycle of transformation. She is bathed ceremoniously, purifying baptismal waters being necessary for the final spiritual and physical union of marriage. The reference to the "glass coffin" where Snow White remained unburied, as shown in Figure 1, is also interesting alchemically in that in various emblematic books concerning the "great work" a crystal coffin is depicted as a prominent symbol of the vessel (retort, *aludel*, egg, gourd, etc.) of transformation (Figure 2).⁷⁶ Furthermore, various substitutions for the glass coffin such as a golden or silver coffin (Motifs F852.2; F852.3) also emphasize alchemical themes.

From an even broader perspective linking both this tale and some of its analogies to alchemical symbolism there is the widespread religious motif of the crystal mountain, found for example in the Tibetan *Gesar* epic, which involves color symbolism similar to Snow White and the "concept of the soul's journey into another world (*Jenseitsreise*), the world of the dead or else the mountain of the ancestors. . . . The basis is the idea of three stages of an ecstatic transfiguration which eventually leads either to a sacred marriage, a *hierosgamos*, or else to a transmutation into gold in the sense in which this was understood by the alchemists."⁷⁷ The crystal

⁷⁵De Rola, *Secret Art*, p. 23.

⁷⁶For a depiction of the alchemical crystal coffin see p. 103 (no. 6) in de Rola. This illustration, also reproduced here, is from the famous 1622 edition of the *Philosophia reformata* by Mylius. Note also the illustrations of the Green Lion (p. 103, no. 2; p. 105, no. 18); the baptismal bath of purification (p. 103, no. 4); and the raven or crow (p. 103, no. 4 and 5; p. 104, no. 9; p. 105, no. 14). Concerning the one-legged man in Figure 2, see Peter L. Hays, *The Limping Hero* (New York: New York University Press, 1971) and J. Przyluski, "Les Unipedes," *Mélanges chinois et bouddhiques*, 2 (1933), 307-332.

⁷⁷Siegbert Hummel, "The Motif of the Crystal Mountain in the Tibetan *Gesar* Epic," *History of Religions*, 10 (1971), 206; see also Otto Huth, "Der Glasberg," *Symbolon*, 2 (1961), 15ff.

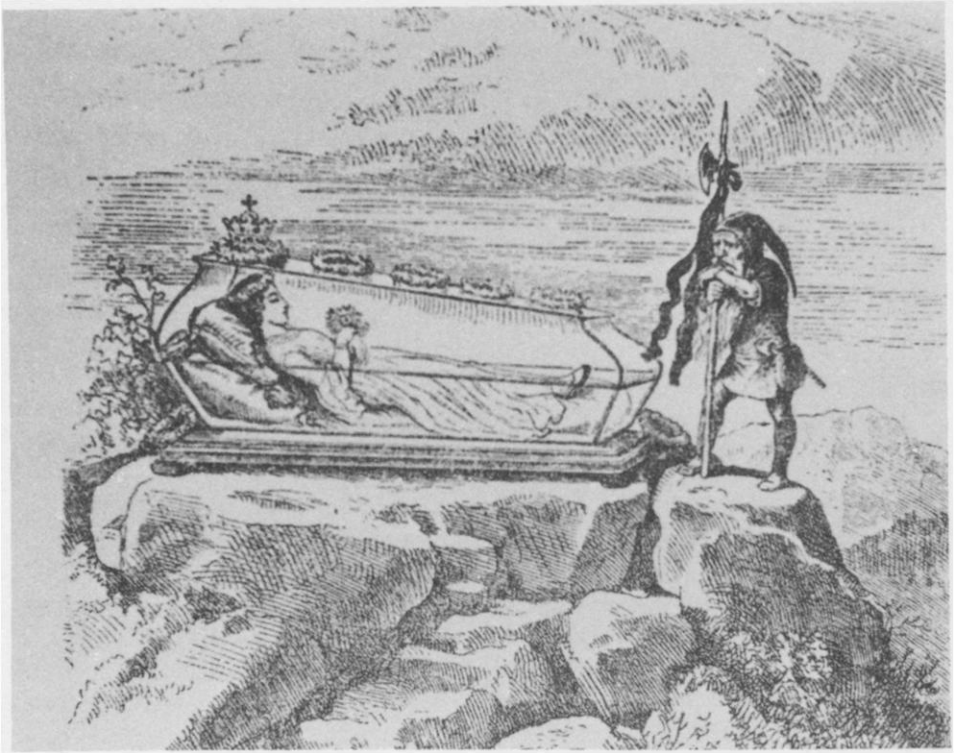


Figure 1. Snow White in the glass coffin. From the Grimms' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (München: Winkler Verlag, 1819).

mountain (or coffin) is “the mountain of the dead, which is at the same time the hill of creation,” and this is the liminal place or condition where “the soul is united with the Totality, which can also be portrayed as the king’s daughter.”⁷⁸

Siegbert Hummel and Otto Huth both see the themes of a multistaged purification leading to a sacred marriage (also found in the tales of Eisenhans and Cinderella) as suggesting the influence of an archaic megalithic religious tradition.⁷⁹ This suggestion as to a possible historical and cultural origin for some of these motifs should, however, be tempered by Eliade’s remark that “unfortunately . . . we know next to nothing of the protohistorical ‘Megalithic religion.’”⁸⁰

⁷⁸Hummel, pp. 209-210.

⁷⁹Hummel, p. 208, and Otto Huth, “Märchen und Megalithreligion,” *Paideuma*, 5 (1950), 12ff.

⁸⁰Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, p. 198.

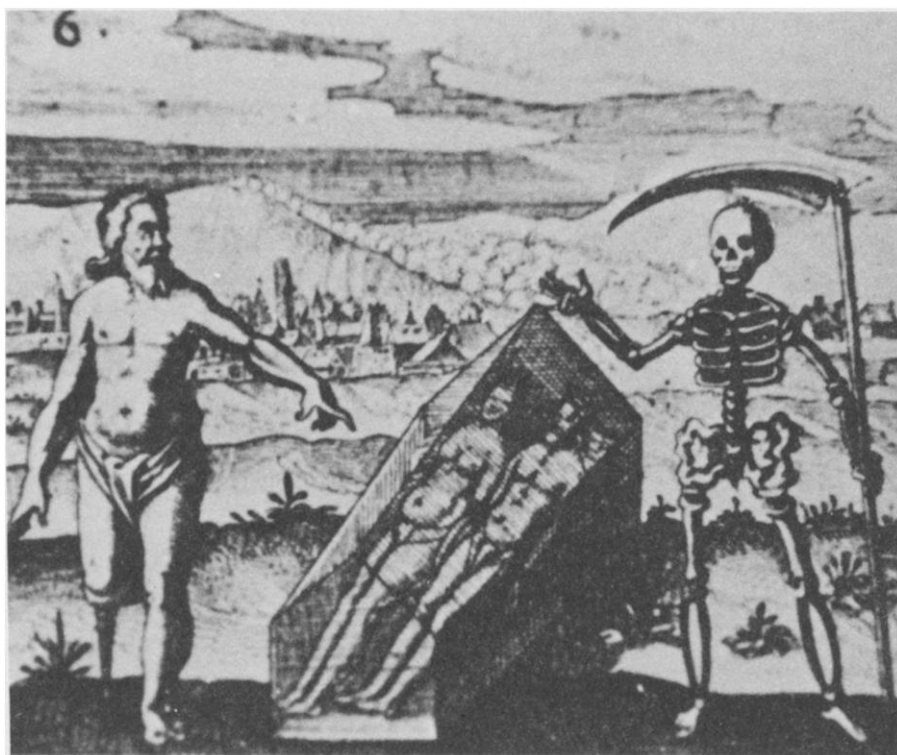


Figure 2. The alchemical crystal coffin. From J. D. Mylius, *Philosophia reformata* (1622). Used by permission of the British Library, London.

It is said that on the coffin the dwarfs wrote Snow White's name in golden letters, and that she was a King's daughter. Like the completion of primitive initiation rites, Snow White is now entitled to her name, a name that is expressive of her soon-to-be-realized status and identity as woman, wife, and Queen.

n. 20: *An owl, raven, and dove come to weep over the coffin.*

For the third time there is a symbolic recapitulation of the overall tripartite process of transformation. Thus, the owl in European folklore is often associated with the bringing of omens of death and darkness, or the onset of an eclipse. The black raven (or crow) is likewise an omen of death and the *nigredo* phase of the alchemical process. The dove, like the harbinger of new life for Noah in the Bible, signals the successful completion of the process. Finally, it is worth noting that these birds are said to "weep over Snow White" which is analogous to another alchemical motif. In the illustrations to Mylius' *Philosophia reformata*, picture five shows the black birds of death and putrefaction, pictures six and seven

show the death of the alchemical King and Queen in a crystal coffin and the process of volatilization, and picture eight depicts the appearance of a hermaphroditic body being watered with the celestial influence of the tears or dew of heaven.⁸¹

In many fairy tales and in some religious traditions birds are expressive of spiritualization or, in alchemy, symbolic of sublimation and volatilization as a final step in the refining work. Moreover, birds are frequently depicted in shamanic traditions as spirit helpers or guardians. In this respect they function like the dwarfs.⁸²

n. 21: *Snow White's body does not decay and she lays as if sleeping for a "long, long time."*

The lack of decay indicates the coming resurrection and, as indicated previously, it must be assumed that Snow White rested in the coffin for seven years which would make her of marriageable age.

Reincorporation and Rebirth

n. 22: *The King's son arrives and after the dwarfs give him the coffin, the apple is dislodged accidentally.*

The prince is unsuccessful in his efforts to buy the coffin but the dwarfs upon seeing his good will and unselfish love freely give him the sleeping Snow White. This factor, as well as the additional detail that Snow White's revival was not, despite the Disney version, through a fortuitous kiss⁸³ but because of the accidental stumbling of the servants carrying the coffin, suggests an important aspect of the initiatory theme. The final work of transformation is not the work of man, but in a sense, is the free gift of God or the gods. The happy ending that is so characteristic of fairy tales, as Tolkien says, is a conviction concerning the reality of "faerie": the acceptance of the world as a magical and enchanted realm where there is always the real possibility of the intervention of the sacred in human life, the real possibility of "good news" in the painful journey of human life. But a man must believe in and be prepared for this sudden joyous turn, this accident of grace in the midst of the darkness of the world.⁸⁴ Eliade, thus, reminds us that in primitive initiation:

⁸¹ See de Rola, *Secret Arts*, pp. 103-104, and also the discussion by F. Sherwood Taylor, *The Alchemists* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), pp. 121-122.

⁸² See Eliade, *Shamanism*, pp. 477-482, 88-95; and Thompson, *Folktale*, pp. 55-59.

⁸³ The motif of the kiss can, however, function in a similar way and is found as a substitution in some versions. See Nicolas J. Perella, *The Kiss Sacred and Profane* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

⁸⁴ Although the idea of "grace" in this context is as much primitive or gnostic as it is Christian, Tolkien sees a relationship with the meaning of the Christian "story" found in the Gospels; see *Tolkien Reader*, pp. 9ff, 67-73. This relationship is discussed by John E. Zuck, "Tales of Wonder: Biblical Narrative, Myth, and Fairy Stories," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 44 (1976), 299-308.

man is *made*—he does not make himself all by himself. It is the old initiates, the spiritual masters, who make him. But these masters apply what was revealed to them at the beginning of time by the Supernatural Beings. They are only the representatives of those Beings. . . . The initiatory new birth . . . requires rites instituted by the Supernatural Beings; hence it is a divine work, created by the power and will of those Beings; it belongs, not to nature . . . but to sacred history.⁸⁵

n. 23: *Snow White revives, the Prince proclaims his love; and they go to his father's palace for the wedding.*

Upon awakening Snow White says "Where am I?" The answer is that she is no longer *who* she was, or *where* she was, as a child. She has now returned from the land of the dead, that realm where all things are possible for either good or evil, growth or decay. No longer the same innocent and untempered girl, she has found a new home and life. She is a whole person now, complete in her sexuality, womanhood, and socialization.

The black and white, the King and the Queen, are now one in flesh and spirit. Gold has been mined by the dwarfs. This is the completion of the "great work," the phase of *coniunctio* or marriage where the opposites of male and female, white and black, are unified through the third term of spirit and blood—the red. Three is one.

Epilogue

n. 24: *Invited to the wedding, the stepmother questions the mirror for the seventh time and discovers her failure.*

The mid-winter witch must die as the wheel of life turns toward new life. Thus, with the completion of one life cycle at the start of the story, a new cycle of development is now complete and is indicated by the seventh and final questioning of the mirror.

n. 25: *The stepmother is forced to wear red hot iron slippers and dances to her death during the wedding celebration.*

The time of union, the time of the sacred rites of marriage, is also the time when the dark, retarding powers that hinder personal and social development come to an end. There are, consequently, three interrelated factors which are significant in this concluding episode. The first is the manner of the stepmother's demise through the instrument of the red hot iron slippers which recalls folk practices of destroying a witch through the magic agency of iron.⁸⁶ There are also associations of slippers and shoes with the female sexual organs which, as expressive of the egocentric overestimation of the physical dimension of human nature, represent the root of the stepmother's evil. As with the " 'Old Woman of the Shoe' who had so many children she didn't know what to do," the stepmother "lives in" her sexuality.⁸⁷ Instead of a concern for physical beauty and bodily

⁸⁵ Eliade, *Rites and Symbols*, p. xiv.

⁸⁶ See Eliade, *Forge and Crucible*, pp. 28-29.

⁸⁷ See R. D. Jameson's discussion in *Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend*, col. 2,

sexuality, the love that comes from self-sacrifice and spiritualization is necessary for real personal development. Again the ambiguity of the symbolism is significant in that sexuality is both the locus of the destructive and demonic powers of the stepmother and the basis for the transforming union of love being celebrated at the wedding. Finally, the other interrelated factor is that the wedding dance is the occasion for the death of the stepmother, a ritual act which is a celebration of the rhythmic nature of life and human society.

Conclusion

What, then, is the meaning of Snow White? At one level it is a moral tale, a cautionary fable concerning the destructiveness of pride and self-love; but this is only part of the message, since it can be read in a more intensive way as I have tried to show. As simple as the form is, it is an amazingly rich portrayal of a particular vision of human life as a sacred round, a dance, that speaks of the necessity of sacrificing self-love in order to discover true love. It also speaks of the terrors and ordeals of growing up, and suggests that the world is not simply a meaningless chaos but an enchanted realm where man is not alone and can expect a happy destiny if he will listen to his own soul, and the voices of tradition and the gods.

Most important, a story such as this speaks on many levels; my interpretation is by no means exhaustive. Story as story must by its very nature embody the multivalence of symbol, the meaningful ambiguity of life. Certainly this tale is most immediately concerned with a rather simplistic moral message, but at the same time it communicates deeper messages of a psychological and social nature. And, as I have suggested, there is also a message of religious significance. The theme and form of initiation which may be taken as central to this story derives its power from its ability simultaneously to orchestrate all of these levels.

The meaning of a story like Snow White is not seen until all of the interrelated levels are taken into consideration. To say that there is an underlying initiatory structure is only to suggest that while the meaning of real life and real story is always impossibly elusive and complex, there is nevertheless an inner shape or form that points to a saving cosmos in the midst of chaos. While we have glimpses of that form, and can potentially detect it at all levels of human life, it is still impossible to chart its meaning in any particular or exhaustive way. In fact, to really tell of meaning ultimately would seem to imply the telling of more stories; for telling a story "is a 'rite' which seeks the 'right' order of experience in Time."^{8 8}

The power and popularity of a story like Snow White is clear—especially for children, whose minds are so open to the imagination, and

pp. 1008-1009, and de Vries, *Dictionary*, pp. 421-422.

⁸⁸Ted L. Estess, "The Inenarrable Contraption: Reflections on the Metaphor of Story,"

who are in the midst of their own journey of growing up surrounded by the imaginary terrors and delights of evil stepmothers, dragons, dwarfs, witches, giants, and magical animals. Even for adults these stories still "appeal to the imagination"—for a folktale powerfully and directly reasserts a mythic vision of life for an age that no longer has a publicly shared religious cosmology. That there is merit in analyzing the initiatory meaning of Snow White is therefore, I think, without question; and, for that matter, it could easily be supplemented by many other well known tales from Grimm and other folk collections. This is not to say, however, that all stories in Grimm or all folktales explicitly display this form and meaning. Indeed, it is necessary to distinguish between different folkloric genres of tales, many of which (such as animal tales and local legends) are only peripherally, if at all, concerned with initiation themes.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, it is surely important that the most famous and beloved tales have, in most cases, a rather obvious initiatory character.

If the initiatory form and meaning of a folktale like Snow White is grounded in mythic values, then this observation seems to reinforce Eliade's implicit contention that initiation, in sympathy with cosmogonic myth, is the model for all authentic ritual forms. Initiation, as the ritualized expression of cosmogonic myth, is the paradigmatic metaphor of life as a constant cyclic process where death, a return to the beginning, is the necessary condition for new life. Myth in the most general sense tells of creation or how something new came into being, and initiation is the constant acting out of the original principle of transformation. To live authentically and religiously in a traditional society means to repeat this pattern in both individual and social life. As Victor Turner has said, "Myths treat of origins but derive from transitions."⁹⁰

My commentary on this tale does not imply that because of the initiatory form and symbolism I am arguing for the ritual origin of folktales or that this story is somehow a disguised rendition of an actual initiation ritual. It should be clear that there is no one ritual that can be historically identified; rather, it seems that what is important is the imaginative "idea" of initiation as conveyed by a form open to details associated with many different historical periods and situations.

The concern of the storyteller was, first of all, with the telling of a good story. Perhaps we can say, however, that part of the reason that it was a "good" tale, a tale to be remembered, cherished, and told again, was that it did resonate with age-old traditions and memories when different types

Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 42 (1974), 422. See also Stephen Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 39 (1971), 291-311.

⁸⁹ See Lüthi, *Once Upon*, pp. 36-46, and Dégh, "Folk Narrative," pp. 62-80.

⁹⁰ Victor Turner, "Myth and Symbol," *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*, ed. David L. Sills (New York: Macmillan Co. and The Free Press, 1968), vol. 10, p. 576.

of specific initiation rituals were employed. More significant, possibly, is that the form itself as a “traditional” narrative preserved a fragmented yet more universal conviction of European folklife—that life itself is a story, a story told by God or the gods, to accomplish the happy passage of men and women through a dark and dangerous world.

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