FAIRY-TALE HEROINES
IN
NINETEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH FICTION

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The same impulse toward the irrational that manifested itself at the end of the eighteenth century in the novel as gothicism and in poetry as Romanticism also stimulated throughout Europe an interest in the fairy tale.¹

Fairy-tale imagery appears with great frequency in the works of such nineteenth-century English novelists as the Brontës and Charles Dickens, and even where its use is not overt, larger motifs which have much in common with basic folktale patterns provide underlying levels of meaning to plot structures. Both Freud and Jung have suggested that fairy tales may be interpreted in much the same way as dreams to reveal basic patterns of the psyche and its development. This paper will explore the development of the heroines of Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights, and The Mill on the Floss through their authors' use of two basic transformational patterns which appear in specific fairy tales--"Cinderella," "The Frog Prince," and "Beauty and the Beast."

Many versions of folktales were available to nineteenth-century readers and writers as a result of the renewed interest referred to in the opening quote from Elliot Gose's Imaginations Indulged—an interest evidenced in many contemporary novels. Although oral tradition provided stories which are impossible to date, the first widely known published collection of tales was that of Charles Perrault, translated into English by Robert Samber in 1729 as Histories or Tales of Past Times. Another collection, by Madame Leprince de Beaumont, came out in 1761 under the somewhat misleading title of The Young Misses Magazine. And the extensive collection of the Grimm brothers was first published in 1812 and translated into English.
first published in 1812 and translated into English in 1826.2

All of these collections of tales would have been available to the Brontë sisters and to George Eliot, all of whom were born between 1816 and 1819. As literate women growing up in relatively isolated circumstances, it seems likely that the Brontës would have been familiar with some, if not all, of these works. Their avid interest in fantasies can be seen in those which they created as children. While Eliot's circumstances were somewhat different and her taste in literature perhaps more realistic, she too probably would have been aware of at least the better known tales. Unfortunately, biographers of the Brontë sisters and of Eliot are not able to cite specific evidence of their having read fairy tales, so their familiarity with such stories must remain conjectural. In fact, most biographers suggest that there were probably few "children's books" in their homes, but they emphasize that all three young women were encouraged to read widely, even in such questionable works (for young ladies) as Byron's poetry and Scott's romantic novels. These works are mentioned as favorites of all three---further evidence of their interest in romance and fantasy.3

According to Marie Louise von Franz, "Dr. Jung once said that it is in fairy tales that one can best study the comparative anatomy of the psyche." Since they contain less specific culture-conscious material, they clearly mirror the basic patterns of the psyche.4 It seems reasonable to hypothesize, then, that the conscious or unconscious use of fairy-tale motifs in fiction could reveal aspects of a character's psychological and emotional development, or perhaps even the author's psyche, not evident in a novel's surface meaning. Works such as those of Northrop Frye and Bruno Bettelheim suggest that fairy tales and romantic conventions are making yet another come-back in contemporary thought and literature, perhaps fulfilling the same need for writers today as for those of the last century. This increased popularity of fairy tales, which offer the reader both violence and happy endings, may be seen as a response
to deep needs created by the demands of modern society. The narrative conventions of fantasy offer both an escape from and a reentry into life, helping us reconcile the conflicting drives within us. This reconciliation of conflicting drives makes possible the full development of the individual, which Bettelheim in particular sees as a positive value of fairy tales.

Folktales come in many varieties, from legendary exploits to animal tales to fairy tales involving incredible marvels, but those of a certain type seem the most popular. In their *Classic Fairy Tales*, Iona and Peter Opie suggest a reason for this:

In the stories that are central to the fairy tale tradition, the tales of royal romance and magical transformation—tales which are mostly of great age, and all of which are in one way or another related to each other—we find ourselves closely identifying with the principal characters.5

They cite Cinderella, Beauty, and the princess in "The Frog Prince" as examples of such sympathetic characters. Bettelheim agrees with this concept in *The Uses of Enchantment* but states the case even more strongly: children need to identify with characters of fantasy in order to work out their emotional and psychological conflicts on a level removed from their real existence, and thus achieve maturity.

This type of motif—i.e., transformation and romance—and these specific tales provide additional levels of meaning to the novels in question. Of course, as the Opies point out, "The magic in the tales (if magic is what it is) lies in people and creatures being shown to be what they really are."6 The Beast is really a king, the frog a handsome prince, and Cinderella good and beautiful. An important related concept dealt with in the novels and the tales, is the nature of love, and all seem to suggest that real love is the acceptance of the beloved as he or she really is, not as he or she seems to be. Mature love is the ability to see beyond the
appearance to the reality, and the acceptance of that reality in all of its aspects.

One of the most popular types of fairy tale is that in which a young girl is rescued from unpleasant circumstances by a handsome prince and is "transformed" into a princess. This usually involves a recognition of the heroine's true worth rather than an actual transformation, as she is either restored to her rightful status and/or elevated through marriage. Included in this category are "Snow White," in which the princess is driven away from home by her wicked stepmother; "Sleeping Beauty," who is bewitched by a vengeful fairy; "The Goose Girl," whose place is usurped by her evil servant; and "Cinderella," who is mistreated by her stepmother and stepsisters. Of these, "Cinderella is perhaps the best known, both as a fairy tale and as a motif carried over into other literature."

There are two main versions of "Cinderella" that would have been available to nineteenth-century readers: that of Charles Perrault, which is the best-known version today, and that of the Brothers Grimm, in which Cinderella is represented quite differently. Perhaps due to distaste for some of the more grotesque details of the other versions of the tale, Perrault made changes which significantly alter the meaning of the story. His heroine is essentially passive, exhibiting a stereotyped long-suffering feminine nature, as Bettelheim says, "Perrault's Cinderella is sugar sweet and insipidly good, and she completely lacks initiative. . . . Most other Cinderellas are much more of a person." In this type of tale, it seems to be the nature of heroines to await their fate passively at the hands of someone else. The more active heroine of the Grimm version is of interest because she appears more representative of the true meaning of earlier versions of the story, unchanged by later concepts of sensibility. In contrast to Perrault's contrived fairy-godmother solution, Grimms' Cinderella asks to go to the ball, persists in her request (although she is turned down), and performs the impossible tasks demanded of her so that she may go. When the prince brings the slipper, she appears in her rags, takes the
slipper from him, and places it on her foot. This scene is doubly important to the meaning of the story: the prince sees Cinderella as she is and recognizes her inherent qualities in spite of her outward appearance, and the sexual symbolism of slipping her foot into the slipper implies an acceptance of her femininity and suggests an active role for her in their sexual relationship. These meanings are lost in the Perrault version, in which a gentleman of the court brings the slipper, and Cinderella appears before the prince only in elaborate attire.

The reverse of this female transformation or elevation motif is one in which the heroine of the tale brings about the transformation of a bewitched animal to its true state as a human being. Among the best known of these stories are "The Frog Prince" and "Beauty and the Beast," in both of which a repulsive animal is made human by the love and acceptance of the heroine. These stories seem to take up where the previous type leaves off: there is more involved in loving than passively being chosen by some prince. Bettelheim states that "The message of these fairy stories is that we must give up childish attitudes and achieve mature ones if we wish to establish that intimate bond with the other which promises permanent happiness for both."9

The role of the father figure in these tales seems to be important. In Perrault's version of "Cinderella," the father is an ineffectual figure, "for his wife governed him entirely."10 However, in the Grimm brothers' version and in the best-known versions of "The Frog Prince" and "Beauty and the Beast," the father's role in relation to his daughter is significant. In the Grimms' "Cinderella," the father helps the prince to find her after she has run away. Beauty's father creates the situation which makes it necessary for her to live with the Beast when he brings a rose as a gift to her. And the king in "The Frog Prince" insists that the princess keep her promise to the frog and allow him to share her plate and bed. In all of these stories, it is love or obedience to the father that eventually unites the heroine with her husband-to-be. Bettel-
heim interprets the psychological meaning as follows:

Only if the father first indicates his readiness to release his daughter from her ties to him can she feel good about transferring her heterosexual love from its immature object (the father) to its mature object--her future husband.11

How do these motifs relate to the novels under consideration? There are obvious parallels to the fairy-tale elements in both Brontë novels and less overt but still discernible similarities in The Mill on the Floss. Jacqueline Simpson points out that folklore is prominent in Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights, that "the Brontës here make it an essential part of the minds of their heroes and heroines, use it at climactic moments, and link it to their central themes."12 She sees its most significant use in "the intense inner life which sets their heroes and heroines apart from ordinary humanity, and binds them irrevocably to one another."13 One can only speculate to what extent the inner lives of the authors are also reflected.

Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre has elements of both the "Cinderella" and "Beauty and the Beast" motifs. There are many specific references to Jane as a fairy, particularly in the scene in which she first meets Rochester. Each suspects the other of being a supernatural creature, she picturing the "Gytrash" of childhood stories as she hears a horse approaching and sees a great black-and-white dog. When they have their first interview on the following day, he reveals that at his first sight of her "I thought unaccountably of fairy tales,"14 and implies that her lack of family connections makes her a part of the fairy world. Such obvious references suggest further, deeper similarities.

In many ways, Jane is a Cinderella figure. Like Perrault's Cinderella, she lacks parental relationship or guidance, but in all other aspects she resembles the more active heroine of the Grimm version. Although she has many admirable qualities, she comes from a humble background and readily admits to a
plain appearance. In the Reeds (the aunt and cousins with whom Jane lives as a child), we can see the unfeeling stepmother and cruel stepsiblings. When Jane comes to Thornfield Hall as a governess, as when Cinderella attends the ball at the palace, its appearance makes it seem to her "a fairy place" (p. 107). Rochester's proposal of marriage seems unreal to her: "to imagine such a lot befalling me is a fairy tale--a daydream" (p. 261). She reminds him that she is his "plain, Quakerish governess," to which he replies, "You are a beauty in my eyes" (p. 261). Like Cinderella's prince, he sees beyond her unattractive exterior and appreciates her true nature.

Like Cinderella, Jane runs away, although her motivation is the fact that Rochester already has a wife, rather than an obligation to observe a magical time limit. However, there is an underlying implication that both are unready to accept mature sexual love. After some time has passed and the "prince" has undergone his "trials," Jane, like the Grimms' Cinderella, takes an active part in bringing about their union.

Even more pronounced in the love story of Jane and Rochester are the parallels with "Beauty and the Beast." Although Jane's only claim to beauty is her image as seen through Rochester's eyes, Rochester is clearly described in terms which suggest a bestial appearance. When they first meet on the moor, Jane observes, "He had a dark face, with stern features and a heavy brow; his eyes and gathered eyebrows looked thwarted just now" (p. 116). This impression is reinforced when they meet at Thornfield:

I knew my traveller with his broad and jetty eyebrows; his square forehead, made squarer by the horizontal sweep of his black hair. I recognized his decisive nose, more remarkable for character than beauty; his full nostrils, denoting, I thought, choler; his grim mouth, chin, and jaw... (p. 123).
Some days later, as they converse in the evening (also the usual meeting time for Beauty and the Beast), Rochester says, "You examine me, Miss Eyre, do you think me handsome?" The answer slips from her without thought--"No, sir" (p. 134). This echoes the fairy tale: when Beast joins Beauty for their evening conversation, he asks, "but tell me, do you not think me very ugly? That is true, said Beauty, for I cannot tell a lie /sic/." Yet as they become better acquainted, Jane is no longer bothered by Rochester's appearance: "And was Mr. Rochester now ugly in my eyes? No, reader: gratitude and many associations, all pleasurable and genial, made his face the object I best liked to see" (p. 149). When they are reunited at the end of the novel, Jane's first view of him suggests "some wronged and fettered wild beast" (p. 434). As she attempts to comb his hair, she says, "you talk of my being a fairy; but I am sure, you are more like a brownie." Rochester, like the Beast, asks, "Am I hideous, Jane?" and she replies, "Very, sir; you always were you know" (p. 441).

Throughout the story there have been indications that Jane's influence is civilizing Rochester's bestial nature. After the revelation that he is married prevents their wedding, Rochester recalls their developing relationship in an effort to convince Jane not to leave him:

Very soon you seemed to get used to me: I believe you felt the existence of sympathy between you and your grim and cross master, Jane . . . snarl as I would, you showed no surprise, fear, annoyance, or displeasure at my moroseness. . . (p. 316).

His deceitful attempt to marry her because of her reforming influence on him echoes the Beast's predicament of having to remain in that shape until a beautiful virgin would consent to marry him.

Like Beauty returning to visit her father, Jane leaves Rochester even though she loves him, which leads us to one final comparison: Beauty has a vision
that the Beast is dying because of her desertion, and she returns in time to prevent his death. Her agreement to marry him transforms him into his true form of a handsome prince and they are married. Jane too has an inexplicable experience in which she hears a voice, "that of Edward Fairfax Rochester; and it spoke in pain and woe wildly, eerily, urgently. 'I am coming! I cried. 'Wait for me'" (p. 422). Jane sets out the next day, arriving at Thornfield to find Rochester's wife dead and he himself blinded and crippled. To Jane, however, he is her prince because now she may love him completely. Each has been able to see the reality of the other behind the appearance, and thus they are transformed in one another's eyes.

In Wuthering Heights, Emily Brontë employs the "Beauty and the Beast" motif twice. In the first generation--Catherine and Heathcliff--the reconciliation is not completed, but the attempt provides a background for the fulfillment of the second-generation relationship between Cathy and Hareton. Nelly Dean's story about Catherine and Heathcliff begins in much the same way as does the fairy tale: the father is going on a trip and promises to bring the children a gift. Like the father in the tale, Mr. Earnshaw brings him trouble instead--the Beast itself. In his introduction to the family, Heathcliff is referred to as "it": "'you must e'en take it as a gift of God; though it's as dark almost as if it came from the Devil.'"16 From the beginning, Catherine is a civilizing influence on Heathcliff; but after her father's death, her brother Hindley brutalizes him, encouraging rough behavior. Elliot Gose believes that "Thereafter he can develop . . . only like the Beast . . . dependent on the pity and love of Beauty. When Catherine fails him by choosing Edgar Linton, Heathcliff remains untransformed."17

Seemingly against her better judgment, Catherine chooses the more passive role of a Cinderella who is transformed into a princess in preference to effecting Heathcliff's transformation. Although she knows she should not marry
Edgar, she believes it would "degrade" her to marry Heathcliff because he has been brought so low by Hindly (p. 95). As in many fairy tales, pride and unwillingness to stoop for another's sake are eventually punished. Gose says, "A major conflict develops between the pain of her active stooping to raise another and the passive bliss of her being raised herself." This inability to fulfill her true role ultimately destroys her.

Although Catherine cannot accept Heathcliff as he is and develop a mature relationship with him, her daughter Cathy fulfills the role of Beauty to Hareton's Beast. Our first view of these characters is through Lockwood's eyes: Cathy has "the most exquisite little face that I have ever had the pleasure of beholding; small features, very fair; flaxen ringlets, or rather golden" (p. 12). The terms he uses are significant; traditionally, flax and the activities related to it symbolize the essence of feminine life with its fertility and sexual implications, while gold represents perfection, as in the golden ball which begins the action of "The Frog Prince." Hareton's rough appearance presents a great contrast: "his thick, brown curls were rough and uncultivated, his whiskers encroached bearishly over his cheeks, and his hands were embrowned like those of a common labourer" (p. 13).

Like Beauty, Cathy has been forced against her will to leave a father she loves and live at Wuthering Heights. She too sacrifices herself for her father's sake, marrying Linton Heathcliff so she may be allowed to see her father again before he dies. After Linton's death, Cathy is literally a prisoner, deprived by her marriage of her independence and her home. Because he was not transformed from his bestial state by the fulfillment of his love for Catherine, Heathcliff has brutalized Hareton in revenge—a situation similar to the evil spell imprisoning the Beast. Cathy's influence makes Hareton want to improve himself, but her experiences have so embittered her that she ridicules him, calling him a "brute" (p. 357). Hareton then rejects any transformation brought about by her influence: "'Nay! if it made me a king, I'd not be scorned for seeking her good will any more'" (p. 370).
Eventually Cathy apologizes and helps Hareton learn to read, and as the "beast" is civilized, love develops between them. Nelly Dean concludes:

Earnshaw was not to be civilized with a wish, and my young lady was no philosopher, and no paragon of patience; but both their minds tending to the same point—one loving and desiring to esteem, and the other loving and desiring to be esteemed—they contrived in the end to reach it (p. 373).

As in the fairy tale, the ability to distinguish a person's real qualities regardless of outward appearance and to achieve the relationship of mature love symbolized by this process take time. It cannot be accomplished by a "wish." Gose concludes, "The daughter is able to learn through suffering the patience and humility needed to love another and transform him. More than this... she transforms her dependent egoism into a rebellious self-reliance which is equally necessary for survival."20

Cathy and Jane are able to complete this process, moving beyond "dependent egoism" into a mature relationship, but Catherine is unable to attain this maturity. Maggie Tulliver in Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* also is unable to complete the maturing process. Like Beauty, Catherine, and Cathy, she loves her father and has a close relationship with him; but after his death she transfers this love to her brother Tom instead of to an appropriate husband. Gose points out that "for a girl a brother is often an early choice in the process of finding a father substitute." Using as an example a tale called "The Glass Coffin," he describes a situation in which the brother acts first as father substitute and then as sublimated husband for the girl.21 This motif provides a pattern for Maggie's development, preventing her maturation.

The parallels with fairy-tale motifs are not as clearly defined in this novel as in the Brontë works, but they do exist. Maggie, the child who is always in trouble for not behaving as she should, grows up
to be a beauty, as does Cinderella. Although she
dresses plainly and does not call attention to her
appearance, both Philip and Stephen see her true
worth and pursue her. Unlike Cinderella, however,
she is unable to accept a mature feminine role and
develop a full relationship with either suitor.

Philip Wakem, with his physical deformity can
be seen on one level as the "beast" to Maggie's
"Beauty." As in the tale, after an initial repug-
nance she develops an affection for him over a period
of time, during which they hold many long conversations.
Although she tells Philip that she loves him, she says,
"There is only one thing I will not do for your sake:
I will never do anything to wound my father."\textsuperscript{22} Later
she breaks off their relationship at her brother's
insistence (acting in her father's role) because of
obedience to her father's wishes. Like Beauty, she
eventually agrees to marry her "Beast" for his sake.
Maggie confides in Lucy: "I would choose to marry
him. I think it would be the best and highest lot for
me--to make his life happy" (p. 454). Lucy previously
has predicted to her that Philip "will adore you like
a husband in a fairy tale" (p. 400). However, in this
case the marriage never takes place.

If one interprets the "animal grooms" of the fairy
tales on a more psychological basis, they can be seen
as symbolic of the animalistic, sexual side of human
nature, which must be accepted by the female in order
for a mature relationship to develop. On this level,
Stephen Guest can also be seen as the "Beast," i.e.,
sexual passion, with which Maggie is ultimately unable
to cope. Although she cares for Philip in spite of his
deformity, he is not threatening in the sexual sense;
however, she cannot accept the handsome prince--Stephen--
who replaces him. The transformation ostensibly occurs
in the male, but fulfillment is dependent on a trans-
formed attitude in the female, which is lacking in
Maggie.

Patricia Spacks says that "The Mill on the Floss
concerns itself with what it means, with what it can
mean to a girl, to be a woman."\textsuperscript{23} The emphasis here is
on what it could have meant for Maggie, for she never
achieves the fulfillment of her personal maturity. Deprived of a father to help her develop a responsible conscience (as the king does for his daughter in "The Frog Prince" when he insists she keep her promises to the frog), Maggie instead has first a father and then a brother who actively prohibit her from keeping her promises to Philip. By retaining her passive dependence on a male relative, Maggie is either unwilling or unable to accept and return the physical passion which is a part of a mature love relationship. Like Catherine Earnshaw Linton, she cannot make the resolution of conflict which is necessary for maturity, and thus she experiences a psychic death, represented in the novels by physical death.

With the exception of the Perrault version of Cinderella and the fictional heroine who follows this model, the fairy tales considered here and the novels employing their motifs imply an active female nature. The Grimms' Cinderella, who completes the difficult tasks given her by her stepmother and takes an active role in her relationship with the prince, can be seen in Jane Eyre, who overcomes many difficulties and, once assured of Rochester's love, takes the initiative in their relationship. As he points out, "Janet, by-the-by, it was you who made me the offer." Her matter-of-fact response is, "Of course, I did" (p. 264). While the tales of "Beauty and the Beast" and "The Frog Prince" emphasize the proper feminine responses of love and obedience to the father (mothers are noticeably absent in these tales), they also center around an active female protagonist who gains her own humanity through her efforts to help another gain his. On a psychological level, both the tales and the novels involve the heroine's coming to terms, or failing to do so, with the sexual nature of mature love relationships.

Perhaps these archetypal motifs were chosen consciously by these authors to deal with a subject that could not be dealt with overtly in the nineteenth-century novel. As Elliot Gose points out, while the Victorians did not object much to the violence of such tales as the Grimms' "Cinderella," in which the
wicked sisters chop off their toes in order to fit into the slipper and later have their eyes pecked out by birds, the Victorian novel is distinguished even from those of the eighteenth century for its "suppression of sexual relations." At any rate, like the fairy tales, these novels convey the message that sex, which at first may seem repugnant, in due time can prove to be a beautiful and natural part of life; and they convey this without ever directly referring to a sexual relationship.

The personal lives of the authors considered may also offer some clues as to their choice of these particular motifs. Fathers and brothers played a prominent role in the lives of all three women, and all lost their mothers at a relatively early age. With the exception of the time they were attending school or teaching, Charlotte and Emily Brontë spent their lives at home caring for their weak and ineffectual father and brother. Eliot also cared for her father until his death and was quite close emotionally to both her father and her brother. However, she and her father quarrelled seriously over religion, and her brother disowned her for living with G. H. Lewes. Perhaps the ineffectuality of the Brontës' male relatives helped them develop their own personalities as well as those of their fictional heroines. In *The Mill on the Floss*, however, Eliot seems still to be working out her psychological dependence on her father and brother, whom she loved but with whom she could not agree.

Finally, both read and written literature seems to have offered those authors an escape from the narrowness of the limited lifestyle available to women at that time. In these fairy tales, they could see women taking an active role, a pattern that was scarce in the real world around them. Denied access to real-life activity, women generally tend to live more in their imaginations and develop a varied fantasy life. While the use of fantasy motifs in these novels is significant, as is the fact that these particular stories feature active heroines, the emphasis seems to be on the development of individual female potential. Max Lüthi states:
The fairy tale depicts over and over an upward development, the overcoming of mortal dangers and seemingly insoluble problems. . . . The image . . . is that of one who has the capability to rise above himself, has within him the yearning for the highest things, and is also able to attain them.

Viewed in this light, what more fitting fairy-tale motifs than these could Eliot and the Brontës have chosen for their positive projection of feminine potential to develop into full human beings?

NOTES


5. Opie, Classic Fairy Tales, p. 12.

6. Opie, Classic Fairy Tales, p. 11.


10. Opie, Classic Fairy Tales, p. 123.


18. Ibid.


