

THE PSYCHIC FUNCTION OF MYTHS AND FAIRY TALES IN PSYCHOANALYSIS: AN ENCOUNTER BETWEEN THE UNCONSCIOUS, LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

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Abstract: This article proposes an articulation between psychoanalysis and mythology, emphasizing the symbolic function of myths and fairy tales in the psychic constitution process. Based on the contributions of Freud, Jung, Lacan, Bruno Bettelheim, and Marie-Louise von Franz, it investigates how mythical and fable narratives operate as clinical and cultural tools for the elaboration of the unconscious. The text discusses myth as the language of the unconscious, analyzes fairy tales as symbolic scripts of subjectivity, and examines their relevance in psychoanalytic clinical practice, especially with children. Concepts such as shadow, desire, sublimation, identification, and projection are also addressed, highlighting the therapeutic potential of myths and tales in the construction of the self. Finally, it shows how these narrative structures promote the symbolization of psychic conflicts and contribute to individuation and subjective transformation processes.

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between mythology, fairy tales and psychoanalysis constitutes one of the most fascinating bridges between culture and clinic. From the dawn of human thought, myths have emerged as a response to the anxieties and mysteries of existence (Skinner, 1973; Salis, 2011).

In modernity, with Freud, these ancestral narratives came to be seen as symbolic representations of desires, fears, and unconscious conflicts. The same goes for fairy tales: before being reduced to children's entertainment, they circulated as vehicles for the transmission of deep emotional knowledge.

This article proposes a reflection on the symbolic, therapeutic and clinical role of myths and fairy tales in the light of psychoanalysis in dialogue with Freud, Jung, Lacan, Hillman and other authors.

We will explore how these narratives are articulated with psychic functioning and become privileged instruments for understanding and treating the most primitive and universal human experiences. We will start from the Freudian conception of myths as expressions of the unconscious, advancing to Jung's archetypal vision and the contemporary clinical developments that involve the symbolic listening of mythological and fabular discourses.

In this context, we will see how characters like Oedipus, Narcissus, Hercules, Cinderella, Snow White, and Alice tell us much more about the human than they appear at first glance. More than stories, they are true symbolic maps of subjectivity. The psychoanalytic reading of these narratives allows us to access what is most hidden in the psyche: the familiar ghosts, the social interdicts, the ideals of the ego and the traumas that shape existence.



THE PSYCHOLOGICAL MEANING OF MYTHS

The understanding of myth goes beyond mere literary or historical analysis: it occupies a central place in the constitution of the subject, culture and the unconscious. Since the origins of humanity, myths have served as symbolic devices for interpreting reality, expressing internal conflicts, and transmitting collective values. In psychoanalysis, its epistemological and clinical value gains special prominence when they are considered structured representations of desire, anguish and subjectivity (Azevedo, 2004).

This chapter aims to explore the psychological meaning of myths under different psychoanalytic approaches. Through the contributions of Freud, Jung and Lacan, it is intended to discuss how myths operate as a form of language of the unconscious, offering symbolic scripts that organize the human experience. Freud understands myths as narratives that condense the unconscious fantasies of humanity; Jung interprets them as manifestations of the archetypes of the collective unconscious; Lacan understands them as signifying structures that articulate the subject to desire and language.

Thus, the study of myth in the field of psychoanalysis is not limited to its cultural or literary function, but extends to the clinic, subjectivity and the process of symbolization. Recognizing them as fundamental symbolic operators allows us to broaden the analyst's listening, deepen the reading of psychic suffering and offer the subject new ways of inscribing his or her history.

Myth as a language of the unconscious

Myths have always been ways of saying the unspeakable. They represent, according to Lévi-Strauss, more than stories: they are symbolic systems that structure human thought, operating by analogy, opposition and substitution. As the author states, “myth thinks of itself in the mind of man” (Lévi-Strauss, 1985, p. 17). They emerge, therefore, as a language of the unconscious, similar to that



of dreams, functioning by mechanisms such as condensation and displacement — the same ones that Freud identified in the dream process.

In psychoanalysis, they occupy a privileged place, as they dialogue directly with unconscious processes. Freud (1900/1996) went so far as to say that “myths are the distorted remnants of the collective fantasies of humanity” and, as such, they are equivalent to the dreams of the collectivity, crystallizing anguish and primitive desires. These narratives, in the Jungian analytical perspective, which are repeated in different cultures with some variations, address universal themes such as death, birth, incest, the struggle between good and evil, the hero, and the process of individuation.

Myths, unlike rational explanations, do not seek exact answers, but give symbolic form to psychic chaos (Azevedo, 2004a). As the language of the unconscious, myths operate by condensation and displacement — psychic mechanisms that Freud identified in the dream. In other words, the myth does not say, it insinuates; it does not explain, it evokes; it does not narrate reality, but gives contours to reality that is impossible to be apprehended directly. Its function is to give symbolic form to internal chaos, enabling the processing of archaic and pre-verbal contents.

In this sense, as Jung (1917/2000) has already suggested, myths are “the oldest and most universal language of the soul”. The value of myth lies, therefore, in its ability to translate the primitive and the archaic into images that consciousness can elaborate. It works as a bridge between mythical time — timeless, cyclical and original — and the historical time of the subject. This symbolic mediation is essential for the psyche to integrate content that would otherwise be too traumatic to bear and avoid cleavage or compulsive repetition.

Freud’s perspective

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) was a pioneer in using myths as conceptual tools. His use of the myth of Oedipus, taken from the tragedy of Sophocles (429 B.C./2004), to describe the fundamental structure of human desire is paradigmatic. For Freud, the Oedipus Complex symbolizes the universal



dilemma of incestuous desire and rivalry with one's father. According to the founder of Psychoanalysis, "the Oedipus Complex is the nucleus of neuroses" (Freud, 1900/1996, p. 297), representing a universal condition of childhood that, when repressed, structures the subject.

He also drew on the myth of the primitive horde to formulate his theories about the origin of civilization, guilt, and repression—central elements of culture. In works such as *Totem and Taboo* (1913/1996a), Freud interprets myths as an attempt to make sense of humanity's traumatic origins.

In this myth, the children murder the domineering father who monopolized the women of the group, establishing the totem as a symbolic figure of the dead father and creating moral and social interdictions. For him, this parricidal act marks the birth of guilt and the superego.

Freud states that "morality was born of guilt and identification with the dead father" (Freud, 1900/1996, p. 190), indicating that myth provides a narrative model for original trauma. He sees in the myth the attempt to deal with the original repression and the demands of the nascent superego. For this reason, he claimed that his theory of drives was our mythology, that is, a narrative model to organize what is not subject to direct representation.

In addition, Freud used the myth of Narcissus to develop the concept of narcissism, essential to understand the construction of the ego. In *Introduction to Narcissism*, he explores the role of this stage in psychic development, stating that "narcissism is an intermediate stage between autoeroticism and object love" (Freud, 1914/1996b, p. 80).

His analysis is not limited to classical mythology, extending to literature and art. He also analyzed and interpreted characters such as Goethe's *Faust*, *Gradiva's* dreams and *Hamlet's* tragedy, revealing the depth with which he saw the intersection between literature, myth and psychoanalysis. Freud saw these narratives as symbolic manifestations of the same conflicts that emerge in the clinic, thus consolidating a psychoanalytic tradition that recognizes myth as a structure of desire.



Jung's vision and the collective unconscious

While Freud emphasized the individual unconscious, Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) proposed and introduced the existence of a collective unconscious: a common, transindividual reservoir of symbols of images and archetypes shared by all humanity. For him, myths are not only expressions of individual desires, but manifestations of universal psychic structures — the archetypes. In other words, “the collective unconscious is not a personal acquisition, but a psychic inheritance” (Jung, 1917/2000, p. 45). Archetypes are universal psychic structures that organize the human experience and manifest themselves in myths, dreams, and fairy tales.

Among the fundamental archetypes, Jung highlights the hero, the shadow, the sage, the Great Mother, the divine child, the trickster and others as archetypal figures that appear both in myths and dreams. They represent structural aspects of the psyche and appear symbolically both in cultural myths and in individual dream productions.

That is, these figures help the psyche to organize its experiences and guide the process of individuation, that is, the subject's itinerary towards the integration of its various parts. These archetypes not only reflect the subject's inner experience, but also function as guides in the process of individuation—the way in which the ego recognizes and integrates repressed or undeveloped aspects of the Self (Jung, 1917/2000).

The therapeutic value of myths, in the Jungian view, in their ability to offer symbolic models for existential dilemmas. The myth not only reveals the conflict, but suggests a path of overcoming, a symbolic solution that the unconscious can metabolize. For this reason, for Jung, analytical work often involves identifying the personal myth that guides (or blocks) the patient's trajectory.

Jung himself stated that “myths are spontaneous expressions of the unconscious and represent natural attempts to elaborate the contents that arise from the psyche” (Jung, 1917/2000, p. 60). Thus, the analyst can, through symbolic listening, identify the personal myths that guide (or sabotage) the trajectory of the analysand.



For Jung, analytic work is often a symbolic rereading of the patient's psychic narrative. By recognizing which myth is repeated in his life (such as that of the hero, the devouring mother or the exile), the subject acquires new meanings about his conflicts, which can promote integration and inner transformation.

Lacan's approach and the mythical signifier

Jacques Lacan (1901-1981), when he states that “the unconscious is structured as a language” (Lacan, 1964/1998, p. 489), brings a new reading of myth in psychoanalysis: myth is not only a symbolic narrative, but a knot of signifiers that articulates the subject to desire and to the Other and to the signifying chain in which the subject is inscribed. From this perspective, myth comes to be understood as a discursive construction that organizes the place of the subject in the signifying chain.

Lacan makes use of myths — such as those of Antigone, Oedipus and Medusa — to illustrate the tragic structure of lack, castration and desire. Mythical language, according to him, offers a privileged field for the unconscious to tell itself. He states that “myth offers itself as a symbolic structure that reveals the truth of desire” (Lacan, 1998, p. 216).

Thus, myth operates as a metaphor that allows the inscription of the subject in language and culture, exposing the impasses of desire and symbolic Law. The myth is not just an old story, but a narrative that crosses the subject without him knowing.

By working with the notion of metaphor and metonymy — mechanisms of language also identified in dreams — Lacan shows that myths are condensations of meanings that help the subject to position himself in front of the real. The mythical metaphor replaces, displaces and resignifies repressed contents, functioning as a way of access to the Real. According to him, “it is through myth that the subject tries to say the unspeakable, the *jouissance* that escapes symbolization” (Lacan, 1964/1998, p. 320).

In the clinic, recognizing the mythical function of certain personal plots allows the subject



to re-inscribe his or her history under another logic, one that is not marked by repetition, but by the possibility of producing new meanings. Thus, myth ceases to be just a cultural heritage and becomes a clinical tool that reveals the subject's position in relation to the desire of the Other, re-inscribing his history under a less repetitive logic and more open to the new.

THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE OF FAIRY TALES

Far beyond simple entertainment or enchanted fictions, fairy tales reveal themselves as archetypal forms of expression of the unconscious, containing symbolic depth and inestimable psychic power. Its narratives cross generations, cultures and contexts, preserving a symbolic structure that allows the subject – especially in childhood – to give shape and meaning to the most primitive emotional experiences. In the psychoanalytic tradition, authors such as Bruno Bettelheim, Carl Jung and Marie-Louise von Franz have dedicated themselves to understanding how these reports operate as instruments of symbolization, mirroring and organizing the subject's internal conflicts.

In this chapter, we intend to examine fairy tales as psychic devices that favor the elaboration of unconscious contents. Its narrative structure — marked by losses, challenges, archetypal figures and resolutions — is configured as a metaphor for the emotional development and psychic crossing of the subject. The symbolic use of these stories in the clinic, especially with children, offers the analyst ways to access the analysand's internal universe with sensitivity and depth.

In addition, the symbolic functions of narrative figures, the mechanisms of identification and projection, and the organizing role that tales play in the child and adult psyche will be explored.

When interpreted in the light of psychoanalysis, these narratives reveal themselves to be symbolic maps of the soul, capable of integrating desire, anguish, shadow and sublimation in a transformative path that echoes in the paths of individuation and subjective construction.



Symbolism and metaphors in children's imagination

Fairy tales, much more than charming stories for children, carry an impressive symbolic depth. Bruno Bettelheim (1903-1990), in his classic work *The Psychoanalysis of Fairy Tales* (1976), showed that these narratives operate as true emotional maps for children in formation. As the author states, “the fairy tale is a symbolic dramatization of intrapsychic conflicts” (Bettelheim, 2004, p. 13).

Each character, scenario or event has a symbolic charge that mirrors internal conflicts, unconscious fantasies and repressed desires. Bettelheim (2004, p. 23) explains that “stories offer symbolic solutions to internal dilemmas that would otherwise remain speechless”. Thus, fairy tales work as small portable psychoanalyses, adapted to the children's emotional universe. The stories are almost rituals that allow psychic reorganization in the face of deep anxieties.

Tales such as *Cinderella*, for example, can be read as a metaphor for overcoming inferiority, waiting for internal transformation and recognizing one's own worth. The shoe that only fits her is not just a magical element: it is the symbol of the subject's uniqueness and true identity. The cruel stepmother, on the other hand, represents the dark, dark side of motherhood, the maternal function that denies acceptance, bringing to the surface anguish of abandonment and rejection — the rejecting, hostile and castrated part of the archetypal mother (Badinter, 1985).

In the same way, the forest in *Little Red Riding Hood* is the space of the unconscious, of the unknown, where the wolf is confronted – sexual drive, a figure of desire and infantile fears around autonomy and maturation.

According to Marie-Louise von Franz (1985), “fairy tales are symbolic representations of individuation”, functioning as archetypal initiation rituals that help the child to integrate unconscious contents in a safe way. Magical language, narrative repetition, and happy endings are not only aesthetic: they fulfill a psychic function of containment, ordering, and projection.

Rightly, the tales are didactic in the symbolic sense, since they teach how to deal with losses, with time, with maturation and with sexuality in a veiled way, without the child having to rationally



understand what is being processed.

Therefore, the metaphorical value of tales lies in the ability to allow the child to symbolize the unspeakable and find symbolic ways to solve his emotional dilemmas, without the need to rationally understand what he experiences in his internal world.

Since they work as initiatory narratives, allowing the child to symbolically represent their conflicts and find a safe way to elaborate their anguish.

Magical language and repetitive structure offer emotional security, while happy endings indicate that it is possible to overcome internal challenges and achieve a form of balance.

Therapeutic and organizational function

In the psychoanalytic clinic, especially with children, fairy tales have a special place. They act as symbolic mediators between the child's internal world and external reality, allowing fantasy to be the means by which unconscious conflicts are elaborated. As Bruno Bettelheim (2004, p. 12) states, "the fairy tale offers the child ideas on how to deal with universal problems of the human experience", functioning as a safe and playful way of emotional metabolization.

Identification with heroes and heroines, confronting monsters or stepmothers, crossing forests or enchanted castles — all these constitute symbolic scripts that reproduce the phases of psychic constitution. The short stories provide narrative structures with beginning, development and resolution, giving organization and meaning to the emotional chaos. According to Von Franz (1985, p. 27), these stories help the soul "to organize itself in the midst of suffering and uncertainty", favoring the process of individuation.

Frequently, in clinical practice, it is perceived that the child chooses to repeat certain tales. This repetition is not random: it reveals the insistence of a psychic content in search of elaboration. The figure of the fairy godmother, the dragon, the magic mirror or the prince charming are, in essence, archetypal figures that represent psychic functions (such as hope, desire, censorship or the ego ideal).



Hillman (1984, p. 19) points out that “the soul speaks through images – and tales are these images”, and that is why fairy tales are so effective in the clinic: they directly access the imaginary, without crossing the ego’s defenses in an invasive way. Storytelling, symbolic play or drawing become sensitive therapeutic devices in the clinic, allowing analytical listening that respects the language of fantasy and favors the resignification of the child’s internal conflicts.

By working with these elements in therapeutic sessions — whether through storytelling, drawing, or symbolic play — the analyst can access unconscious content in a less invasive way. This allows the construction of a more sensitive and respectful listening to the child’s defenses, while offering possibilities for reframing their internal conflicts in a more natural way.

Archetypal character interpretation

Each character in a fairy tale has a specific psychic function. In the Jungian reading, these figures are manifestations of universal archetypes that structure the human psyche. The hero, the witch, the king, the dragon, the stepmother, or the princess are not just narrative roles—they are symbolic expressions of parts of the self. Jung (1917/2000, p. 72) explains that, “the archetype is like a riverbed through which the human psyche has flowed since time immemorial”.

The hero, for example, represents the ego in his itinerary of individuation, towards the integration of the Self. To face the dragon is to face the deepest fears, to fight against hostile unconscious forces, such as fears, destructive drives or unelaborated complexes. The cruel stepmother embodies the classic figure of the shadow —the denied part, all that is repressed, rejected, hated, and projected from the psyche. The sleeping princess, on the other hand, is the Anima (the unconscious feminine), which needs to be awakened by contact with the other, the Animus (unconscious masculine) symbolized by the savior prince (Jung, 1917/2000; Franz, 1990).

By interpreting the characters in this way, it is perceived that the tales are not simple stories, but true symbolic scripts of the psychic crossing. They are not just enchanted stories, but maps of



the soul that indicate the path of separation, of trial, of overcoming suffering and the conquest of a more integrated psychic identity. Von Franz (1990, p. 35) points out that “short stories are symbolic projections of processes of transformation of the human psyche”, especially when accessed in clinical contexts. In short, they point to growth, to the need for separation, to the crossing of suffering and to the conquest of one’s own identity.

In the clinic, this archetypal interpretation helps the psychoanalyst to understand the symbolic universe of the analysand. The way a child or adult relates to certain characters can reveal a lot about their identifications, their traumas and their unconscious desires.

Furthermore, in analytical listening, the way children or adults identify with certain characters allows the psychoanalyst to understand traumas, defenses and unconscious desires. Working with these archetypal figures broadens the listening to the symbolic and opens space for a work of deep elaboration that favors emotional development and psychic reintegration.

GREEK MYTHOLOGY AND FREUDIAN THEORY

Since his first writings, Sigmund Freud has resorted to Greek mythology (Brandão, 1986) as a symbolic matrix for the formulation of his fundamental concepts, a relationship that this chapter discusses by examining how the main myths he used (Oedipus, Narcissus and the primitive horde) structure the bases of his psychoanalytic theory of subjectivity.

For Freud, these myths are not mere fictions, but symbolic expressions of universal and unconscious conflicts that cross all individuals, providing him not only with powerful images, but with true conceptual structures to think about the constitution of the subject, the emergence of desire, interdiction, the formation of the superego and the malaise in civilization. By exploring such narratives from a psychoanalytic perspective, it is understood how mythology becomes a clinical tool, capable of symbolizing desire, guilt, interdiction and the impasses of psychic life.

In addition to Freud, contemporary rereadings such as those of Jacques Lacan and other



authors, who expanded the understanding of these myths in a clinical and linguistic key, will be considered (Tavares, 2016). With this, it seeks to demonstrate that mythology continues to be a fertile field for the understanding of unconscious structures and that its archaic plots remain alive in psychoanalytic practice, functioning as mediators between the subject, desire and culture.

The Oedipus Complex and psychic destiny

Sigmund Freud considered the myth of Oedipus as a founding narrative of the human psyche, illustrating the conflict between desire and law. According to him, “no other complex is as important as the Oedipus Complex” (Freud, 1900/1996, p. 299). It is through this myth that Freud structures the relationship between drive, repression, guilt and the constitution of the superego. As Ávila (2005) observes, Greek mythology provided Freud with a potent symbolic matrix to model the pillars of his theory: the drive, the interdiction, the guilt and the emergence of morality, the formation of the superego.

The Oedipus Complex describes the conflict between desire for the parent of the opposite sex and rivalry with the parent of the same sex, something that occurs between the ages of three and five. Although incestuous desire is repressed, it leaves structuring marks on the subject’s formation and on his future object choices. In the myth, Oedipus kills his father and marries his mother, without knowing his true identity. When he discovers the truth, the horror of recognition leads him to the punishment of himself—a tragic image of human destiny marked by ignorance of desire and the force of guilt.

In the myth, Oedipus kills his father without knowing that he is his father and marries his mother, ignoring her kinship. Only later does he discover the truth, which leads him to despair and self-imposed punishment. For Freud, this plot expresses the symbolic representation of the unconscious desire that inhabits all of us and that needs to be renegotiated so that we can assume our position in the symbolic world. He states that “the myth of Oedipus [...] fulfills the subject’s infantile fantasy”



(Freud, 1913/1996a, p. 301).

Oedipus is more than a childish episode: it is the point of articulation between desire and law. The prohibition of incest is the first “no” that the subject encounters – a necessary barrier that organizes desire and enables entry into the world of culture and language (Souza & Rocha, 2009). This process is fundamental for the constitution of the superego and for the development of subjectivity.

In the psychoanalytic clinic, many symptoms, anguish and repetitions refer to the way the subject went through (or not) the oedipal experience. Love choices, patterns of suffering and ways of relating to authority are deeply marked by this complex. Working symbolically with this content — including resorting to myth — can favor the elaboration of structural conflicts and boost processes of subjective transformation.

Narcissus and the construction of the ego

The myth of Narcissus is a powerful metaphor for the constitution of the ego and the subject’s relationship with himself. According to the best-known version, Narcissus was so handsome that everyone fell in love with him — including himself, when they saw his reflection in the water. Unable to love the other, he drowns in his own image. For psychoanalysis, this narrative reveals the workings of primary and secondary narcissism.

Freud used the myth of Narcissus to develop the concept of narcissism, a stage where the subject invests his libido in his own ego. In primary narcissism, this investment is natural and necessary for the constitution of the self. He writes: “we call narcissism the libidinal investment made in one’s own self” (Freud, 1914/1996b, p. 78). In secondary narcissism, there is a return of libido to the ego, which can result in clinical conditions such as melancholy, depression, grandiosity, affective withdrawals or narcissistic disorders.

Lacan also appropriated the myth, in a rereading associating Narcissus’ mirror with his theory of the Mirror Stage. At this moment, the subject, when recognizing his reflected image, identifies



himself with an illusory totality that contrasts with his real experience of bodily fragmentation. This founding moment marks the emergence of the “I” as an imaginary construction: it is a deceptive formation that is constituted from an external image” (Lacan, 1964/1998, p. 97). Thus, the subject begins to depend on the Other’s gaze to recognize himself, which inaugurates a structural alienation.

In the clinic, narcissistic contents and issues appear in the search for recognition, approval, fear of abandonment or rejection, in the idealization of oneself or in the denial of lack, overvaluation of the self or refusal of symbolic castration. As Vianna (2014, p. 5) points out, the myth of Narcissus allows access to “the dimension of the mirror as a space of constitution and prison of the subject”. Clinical listening to this dynamic is essential to understand disorders of self-image and self-esteem, and to promote symbolic displacements that favor a more integrated relationship with one’s own desire and with otherness.

Understanding, finally, the psychic function of the myth of Narcissus allows us to access this delicate field of the subject’s constitution, enabling more precise and profound interventions on the image he has built of himself and on how he deals with his otherness. Finally, the clinical reading of this myth is essential to understand disorders of self-image and self-esteem.

Early horde and the myth of social origin

Freud uses the myth of the primitive horde to think about the symbolic origins of morality, law and the superego — pillars of the constitution of the subject in culture. In *Totem and Taboo*, he proposes a founding narrative of Western civilization: a primordial father monopolizes all the women of the tribe and prevents his children from exercising their sexual desires. Taken by hatred and envy, the children unite, kill their father and devour him. Repentant, they establish laws that prohibit incest and parricide, establishing the totem as a symbol of the dead father (Freud, 1913/1996a, p. 174).

This myth, for Freud, has scientific value: it is a symbolic narrative of the origins of culture, morals and religion. The “primordial crime” would give rise to the superego, understood as the



internalization of the dead father, now transformed into a moral instance. Freud states: “human culture was built on the murder of the father” (Freud, 1900/1996, p. 180), suggesting that all social order rests on the repression of original desire.

Despite criticism of the historical veracity of the primitive horde, the idea remains potent as a psychoanalytic metaphor. It allows us to understand how the subject is crossed by interdictions and guilt from the beginning of his psychic formation. As Winograd and Mendes (2012, p. 231) point out, this myth functions as “a narrative device that thematizes the tension between drive and culture, desire and interdiction”.

In the clinical field, this myth helps to understand family dynamics, especially those marked by fraternal rivalries, paternal idealization, or diffuse guilt. It also allows us to think of the malaise in culture as a repetition of the tension between individual desire and social law.

Thus, the primitive horde continues to live on in the ethical, moral and psychic conflicts of the contemporary subject, not as an archaeological past, but as a symbolic structure that is inscribed in subjectivity.

FAIRY TALES IN THE PSYCHOANALYTIC CLINIC

Fairy tales, long integrated into the Western cultural imaginary, have also conquered a significant place in psychoanalytic listening. Far from being just children’s stories, these narratives operate as symbolic expressions of unconscious conflicts, offering deep metaphors for anguish, desires, fears, and subjective transformations. The magical language, the archetypal characters and the ritualized structure of the tales constitute devices that enable the psyche to project and organize its internal contents.

This chapter aims to analyze the clinical use of fairy tales in psychoanalysis, especially in contexts involving children, but not restricted to them. Aspects such as the symbolic function of the stories, the presence of the shadow, the trajectory of desire, the processes of sublimation and the



mechanisms of identification and projection present in these narratives will be discussed. Authors such as Bruno Bettelheim, Marie-Louise von Franz, Carl Gustav Jung and Freud will serve as a theoretical basis to understand how these narrative structures help in psychic elaboration.

By mobilizing elements of the collective and individual unconscious, the tales allow the subject to reorganize their emotional experience, resignify traumas and develop new forms of symbolization.

In the clinic, these stories become instruments of listening and intervention, offering the analysand — especially the children — playful and profound resources to deal with suffering. The symbolic analysis of characters such as Snow White, Cinderella and Alice illustrates how such narratives can facilitate processes of transformation, integration and psychic maturation.

Snow White, Cinderella, Alice: symbolic analysis

Fairy tales constitute a privileged terrain for psychoanalytic listening, since they give symbolic form to deep unconscious contents through images and narratives accessible with softness and playfulness, but with deep contents. As Bettelheim (2002, p. 11) explains, “fairy tales deal with universal human dilemmas, particularly those that occupy the child’s mind”. These are stories that speak directly to the child psyche, using metaphors that resonate with the fears, desires and fantasies of the subject in formation.

In Snow White, for example, she can be seen as the symbolic incarnation of the feminine in formation and in the process of maturation. The envious stepmother represents the persecuting superego—an internal instance that condemns desire and enforces unattainable ideals of beauty and perfection. According to Von Franz (1990), these hostile figures symbolize “the dark side of the maternal function” (p. 44), a fundamental element in the formation of female identity.

The seven dwarfs represent different aspects of the child’s personality, and the magic mirror is the voice of the Ideal Self. The poisoned apple is a symbol of the death drive, disguised as pleasure.



Snow White's deep sleep symbolizes the repression and suspension of instinctual activity, and the prince who awakens her embodies the return of desire and the possibility of integration between conscious and unconscious.

Cinderella, in turn, represents the desire for recognition, self-esteem, and transformation. The stepmother and sisters reflect internal rivalries and social pressures, while the fairy godmother embodies the caring presence of the positive feminine. The ball is the symbolic space of the wish fulfilled, and the lost slipper — symbol of singularity — represents the true identity that only the Other can recognize. As Bettelheim (2002) states, “the small shoe that only fits Cinderella's foot indicates its exclusivity and authenticity” (p. 234).

Alice in Wonderland, on the other hand, offers a dive into the dreamlike world of the unconscious. The fall into the hole, the change in size and the sudden growth, the encounters with absurd creatures, illogical characters — everything refers to the dream mechanisms of condensation, displacement and the distortions of desire. Alice represents the subject facing the enigma of desire, trying to find meaning in a world that escapes rational logic.

These tales, when worked on in the clinic, function as symbolic devices that facilitate the elaboration of conflicts, traumas, the symbolization of anguish, the resignification of traumas and the construction of more integrated and healthy narratives of the self. As Marie-Louise Von Franz (1990, p. 22) points out, “fairy tales offer archetypal images capable of stimulating inner transformation”.

The role of shadow, desire and sublimation

In fairy tales, the shadow — a fundamental concept of Carl Gustav Jung's analytical psychology — often appears through characters such as villains, stepmothers, witches, and monsters. These archetypal figures condense the aspects of the psyche that the ego rejects, represses, or is unaware of. For Jung (1917/2000, p. 146), “the shadow represents the qualities and impulses that the ego denies, but which undeniably belong to the subject”. To face the villain, therefore, is to face



oneself; It is the first step towards individuation.

Von Franz (1990) emphasizes that the presence of the shadow is essential in short stories, as it forces the hero to confront his deepest fears and transcend unconscious impulses. She states that “without confrontation with evil, the process of individuation cannot take place” (Von Franz 1990, p. 53). The symbolic walk of the hero is, in this sense, a metaphor for the internal confrontation and the integration of the shadow into the field of consciousness.

Desire is another essential narrative engine. Every mythical narrative begins with a desire: to find home again, to discover the truth, to marry the prince, to recover something lost or to save a loved one. Desire moves the subject and, at the same time, exposes him to trials, losses and risks. In Freud’s reading, this path of desire represents the path of drive elaboration, in which the conflict between the pleasure principle and the reality principle unfolds symbolically (Freud, 1913/1996a).

Sublimation emerges as a possible resolution of this conflict. It is the psychic process that transforms unconscious impulses into socially accepted and creative actions. Freud (1900/1996, p. 119) states that “sublimation is a high form of channeling drives, allowing their expression without repression”. In fairy tales, this transmutation appears in the final victory of the hero, who manages to transform pain into courage, hatred into compassion, fear into wisdom.

The symbolic victory of the hero is, therefore, the realization of three great psychic movements: the integration of the shadow, the elaboration of desire, and the sublimation of drives. This path, when worked on in the clinic, can favor the elaboration of unconscious conflicts and promote subjective maturation.

Child identifications and projections

Children, when they have contact with fairy tales, establish strong identifications with the characters. These identifications do not occur randomly: they are guided by the unconscious contents that the child seeks to elaborate. The rejected princess, the brave prince, the cruel stepmother or



the menacing dragon are figures that embody inner feelings such as fear, anger, desire, hope and abandonment.

Freud already warned us that identification is one of the main mechanisms of ego formation. For him, “identification is the most primitive form of emotional bond with another person” (Freud, 1913/1996a, p. 63).

By identifying with heroes or heroines, the child rehearses, in a symbolic way, imaginary solutions to his internal conflicts (Bulfinch, 2006; Campbell, 1995; Franchini & Seganfredo, 2007). Fairy tales, due to their repetitive and symbolic structure, provide this psychic exercise in a playful and safe way (Anzini, 2025).

The repetition of themes such as loss, separation, reconciliation or ordeal does not occur by chance. According to Bettelheim (2002, p. 14) “these narratives help the child to organize his deepest anxieties and to offer hope for conflict resolution”. For this reason, certain tales become preferred by certain children – they are those that best symbolize their unconscious dilemmas.

At the same time, the undesirable characters — the villain, the stepmother, the witch — allow projections. The child projects onto these characters his own aggressive impulses, feelings of anger or envy, creating a safe distance to elaborate such emotions. History, therefore, functions as a symbolic field where the unconscious plays, expresses itself and reorganizes itself.

Bettelheim (2004) points out that “the tale allows the child to divide the world into good and bad, before being able to deal with ambivalence” (p. 45), this division being an essential stage of emotional maturation, these dynamics symbolically elaborate oedipal roots and fraternal rivalries.

In clinical practice, observing which characters the child most identifies with or fears the most can reveal important aspects of the child’s psychic dynamics. Analytic work, in this context, can favor the integration of these projected figures and allow the child to recognize parts of themselves in them, thus promoting a healthier and more elaborate emotional development.



FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The intersection between mythology, fairy tales and psychoanalysis reveals an incomparable symbolic richness. These cultural elements are not just old or children's stories: they are languages of the unconscious, bearers of deep meanings, metaphors of the most intense and true human experiences. By immersing ourselves in these universes, we touch the most archaic layers of the psyche, rediscover the original dramas and we can, through speech and analytical listening, promote transformations.

Freud, Jung, Lacan and many other thinkers understood that myth is not an illusion: it is a symbolic truth. It organizes the internal chaos, gives shape to the formless and enables the subject to endure the unspeakable. Fairy tales, in the same way, should not be despised as children's fictions, but valued as scripts of psychic initiation, true symbolic rites of passage.

In the clinical context, working with these narratives is to open space for the patient to reconnect with their own plot, with their internal characters, with their traumas and fantasies. It is to allow him to rewrite his history, to resignify his losses, to find new meanings for his existence. Like the hero who returns from the journey transformed, the subject who submits to analytical listening can be reborn symbolically, more whole, more aware of his shadow and more open to desire.

Indeed, myths and fairy tales are more than cultural or children's narratives: they are languages of the unconscious that organize emotional experiences, structure the subject and offer paths for symbolic healing. In the clinic, its use enriches listening, expands therapeutic resources and sustains a psychology that respects the subject's imaginary.

Therefore, let us not lose sight of the value of myths, fables and fairy tales. After all, in them dwells an ancestral wisdom, a listening to the soul, a mirror of humanity. And in the clinic, as in life, they continue to guide us, to teach us, to heal us.



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