Revista Hambatu Science

Ambato – Ecuador / ISSN 3151-815X (en línea) / abril – junio 2026

Volumen 1, Número 2

https://doi.org/10.63862/rhs-v1n2-107-131-2026

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Volumen: 1, Número: 2, Año: 2026

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Fairy Tales and the Infant Psychology: TheNarrative Legacy of Charles Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, and Giambattista Basile and Its Psychological Implications for Early Childhood – Yesterday and Today

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Recibido: 2026-05-15

Aceptado: 2026-05-18

Publicado:2026-05-20

Revista Hambatu Science
Periodicidad: abril - junio
Volumen: 1, Número: 2, Año: 2026

Los cuentos de hadas y la psicología infantil: el legado narrativo de Charles Perrault, los Hermanos Grimm y Giambattista Basile y sus complicaciones psicológicas en la primera infancia, ayer y hoy

Resumen

Los cuentos de hadas constituyen uno de los mecanismos narrativos y simbólicos más influyentes en la construcción cultural y psicológica de la infancia occidental. El presente artículo analiza comparativamente el legado de Giambattista Basile, Charles Perrault y los Hermanos Grimm, considerando la evolución histórica de sus relatos y sus implicancias psicológicas en el desarrollo emocional, cognitivo y simbólico durante la primera infancia. A partir de una revisión integradora de literatura proveniente del psicoanálisis, la psicología del desarrollo, la teoría narrativa y la neurociencia cognitiva, se examinan las funciones psicológicas de motivos clásicos como el monstruo, la bruja, la madrastra, el abandono, la muerte y el héroe. El estudio dialoga con los aportes teóricos de Freud, Jung, Klein, Winnicott, Bettelheim y Lacan, sosteniendo que los cuentos de hadas operan como dispositivos simbólicos que permiten a los niños procesar ansiedades, deseos, conflictos identitarios y experiencias emocionales complejas. Asimismo, se analiza críticamente el proceso contemporáneo de sanitización narrativa impulsado por adaptaciones modernas, particularmente audiovisuales, y sus posibles efectos sobre la formación emocional infantil. Se concluye que los cuentos tradicionales continúan desempeñando una función pedagógica, terapéutica y cultural fundamental para el desarrollo psicológico temprano y la construcción de resiliencia emocional.

Palabras clave: cuentos de hadas; primera infancia; psicoanálisis; narrativa simbólica; formación de identidad; desarrollo emocional.

Abstract

Fairy tales constitute one of the most influential symbolic and narrative mechanisms in the cultural and psychological construction of Western childhood. This article comparatively analyzes the legacy of Giambattista Basile, Charles Perrault, and the Brothers Grimm, considering the historical evolution of their stories and their psychological implications for emotional, cognitive, and symbolic development during early childhood. Through an integrative review of literature from psychoanalysis, developmental psychology, narrative theory, and cognitive neuroscience, the study examines the psychological functions of classical motifs such as monsters, witches, stepmothers, abandonment, death, and the heroic journey. The discussion engages with the theoretical contributions of Freud, Jung, Klein, Winnicott, Bettelheim, and Lacan, arguing that fairy tales function as symbolic devices that allow children to process anxieties, desires, identity conflicts, and emotionally complex experiences. Additionally, the article critically addresses the contemporary sanitization of traditional tales through modern audiovisual adaptations and explores its possible effects on children's emotional development. The study concludes that traditional fairy tales continue to perform an essential pedagogical, therapeutic, and cultural function in fostering early psychological development, emotional resilience, and symbolic understanding of human experience.

Keywords: fairy tales; early childhood; psychoanalysis; symbolic narrative; identity formation; emotional development.

Introduction

The fairy tale as a psychological phenomenon

There is perhaps no cultural form more universally distributed across human civilizations than the fairy tale. Long before literacy, human communities gathered to tell stories of impossible transformations, encounters with the unknown, and the triumph or destruction of vulnerable protagonists. These stories arose from the deepest sediment of collective experiencie: from the anxieties of agrarian life, the terror of forests and famine, orphanhood, early death, and the arbitrary exercise of power.

The three authors central to this studty – Giambattista Basile (1575 -1631), Charles Perrault (1628-1703), and the Brothers Grimm (Jacob, 1785-1863; Wilhelm, 1786-1859) – did muy invent the stories they recorded. They were literary collectors, transformers, and codifies of and oral tradition far older than themselves, each bringing a distinct cultural context, ideological agenda, and implied readership.

The central claim of this article is that fairy tales, in their original and most complete forms, are psychologically functional. They provide symbolic containers for drives, fears and wishes that the child cannot yet consciously process. They offer narrative templates for identity formation, moral reasoning, emotional regulation, and separation anxiety, reassuring the child that the forces of human destructiveness and loss can be symbolically survived and overcome.

This argument was most systematically made be Bruno Bettelheim in The Uses of Enchantment (1976) – a text that, for all its subsequent critical revision, permanently established psychoanalytic inquiry as central to the academic study of fairy tales. The conversation between fairy tale scholarship and psychoanalytic theory, however, is rooted in Freud's own engagements with folk narrative, dream symbolism, the uncanny, and the mythological dimensions of unconscious fantasy.

The article is organized as follows: Section 2 offers a comparative historical account of the three authors. Section 3 develops the Freudian and post-Freudian theoretical framework. Section 4 analyzes key fairy tale motifs and their developmental functions. Section 5 examines

cognitive and neuroscientific perspectives. Section 6 addresses modern sanitization and its consequences. Section 7 conclusions for educational practice.

Methodology

Historical and comparative framework: from oral tradition to literary canon

1. Pre-Literay Origins: The Deep Roots of Fairy Tale

The scholarly consensus holds that fairy tales are among the oldest narrative structures in human cultural memory. Linguistic and structural analyses- including phylogenetic studies using computational methods (Tehrani, 2013; Ross et al., 2016) – suggest that some tale types, such as ATU 333 (Little Red Riding Hood) and ATU 425 (Beauty and the Beast), may have oral antecedents dating to the Bronze Age, between, 2,500 and 6,000 years ago.

These pre-literary tales served complex social functions: transmission of survival knowledge, ritual processing of death and social rupture, negotiation of gender and power norms, and mediation between natural and supernatural worlds. Children inevitably heard them. Their structural features-repetition, binary opposition, magical helpers, providential resolution – suggest as affinity with the cognitive and emotional of young minds.

2. Giambattista Basile (1575-1632) and the Pentamore

Giambattista Basile, a Neapolitan courtier, produced Lo cunto de li cunti (The Tale of Tales), published posthumously between 1624 and 1636, and known as the Pentamore. This constitutes the earliest literary collection of European fairy tales, containing the first written versions of Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Rapunzel, Snow White, and others.

Basile's versions differ strikingly from their later descendants. His prose is baroque and carnivalesque - full of grotesque humor, explicit sexuality, and moral ambiguity. In Sleeping Beauty, the princess is raped while unconscious and gives birth to twins; the stepmother attempts to cook the children. In Cenerentola, Cinderella actively kills her stepmother. These

tales engaged directly with adult sexuality, violence, and the social realities of seventeenth-century Naples.

Psychologically, Basile's versions are notable for female protagonists' high agency, absence of moralizing conclusions, morally ambiguous magical helpers, and explicit destructive maternal figures. For a Freudian readings, the corpus is particularly rich: id-level drives operate with minimal censorship, and the unconscious, has not yet been forced into the disciplinary structures that later adaptations would impose.

3. Charles Perrault (1628- 1703) and the Bourgeois Moral Tale

Charles Perrault, a senior official at the court of Louis XIV, published his Histoires ou contes du temps passé in 1697, a collection including Little Red Riding Hood, Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, Tom Thumb, Bluebeard and Puss in Boots. The word appeared under his son's name, a convention that allowed the sophisticated courtier to distance himself from popular genre. The tales were adapted from oral tradition filtered through Italian literary sources and living French oral culture.

Perrault's intervention is decisive: he subjects oral tradition to systematic moralization and bourgeois domestication, appending explicit verse morals to each tale. His Little Red Riding Hood ends with the girl devoured- there is no rescue – and the moral makes explicit that the wolf represents seductive adult males, disciplining female children into the behavioral requirements of the bourgeois sexual order.

Perrault's Sleeping Beauty introduces the good bad fairies and codifies the hundred-year sleep. Significantly for psychoanalytic reading, it divides into two movements: the familiar awakening, and a suppressed second movement involving the ogress mother-in-law who attempts to eat princess's children. This devouring maternal figure, representing profound developmental anxieties, was systematically excised from later adaptations.

From the developmental psychology perspective, Perrault marks the beginning of the fairy tale's conversion into a specifically child-directed genre- a process that paradoxically both purified content while sharpening its regulatory function. The tales became instruments of

socialization into gender roles and sexual norms while retaining enough archaic symbolic content to remain psychically engaging.

4. The Brothers Grimm (1785/1786 – 1863/1859) and the Romantic Nation

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm published Kinder-und Hausmärchen in 1812, going through seven seven editions by 1857. Their nacionalist-Romantic framing as ethnographic rescue of German folk culture was largely mythological: many informants were educated, francophone women, and many of the tales had clear literaly antecedents in Perrault and the Italian tradition.

The editorial evolution of the Grimm collection is systematically coherent: sexuality is progressively suppressed; violence against by parents externalized onto stepparents and witches; female protagonists increasingly passive; resolutions made unambiguous. The Grimm Snow White began with the biological mother as the jealous villain; by the final edition she was replaced by the stepmother – serving both a defensive psychological function and an ideological one.

The Grimm corpus, represents the most systematically child-directed fairy tale collection in the Western tradition. This make it the richest site for examining fairy tale and early childhood psychology, explaining why it has been the primary reference for most psychoanalytic engagements with fairy tales, from Bettelheim (1976) to Cashdan (1999).

Table 1.
Comparative features of he three fairy tale corpora acroos editions.

Feature	Basile (1634-36)	Perrault (1697)	Grimm 1st ed. (1812)	Grimm 7th ed. (1857)
Primary audience	Adults / courtly	Adults + children	Children + adults	Children (primary)
Sexuality	Explicit	Implied /coded	Present (muted)	Largely suppressed
Violence	Carnivalesque, raw	Moralizing	Present and graphic	Selective, symbolic
Maternal figures	Ambivalent	Split (good/bad)	Bio-mother villain	Stepmother villain
Female agency	High	Moderate - passive	Variable	Predominantly passive
Moral explicitness	Low /ironic	High (moralités)	Moderate	High/Christian
Death	Frequent, graphic	Present, punitive	Present	Present but distant
Magical Helpers	Morally ambiguous	Benevolent fairies	Ambivalent	Clearly benevolent
Social critique	Satirical	Courtly/bourgeois	Nacionalist -Romantic	Conservative
Psychological function	Drive expression	Social regulation	Identity formation	Superego formation

Theoretical framework: psychonalysis, depth psychology, and the fairy tale

1. Freud and the Unconscious Foundations of Fairy Tale

Sigmund Freud did not produce a systematic theory of fairy tales, but his conceptual architecture provides the most generative framework for understanding their psychological dynamics: the topographic and structural models; the theory of dreams and primary process; the concept of the uncanny; the Oedipus complex; the theory of defense mechanisms; and the concepts of condensation, displacement, and symbolic representation.

Freud's structural model articulates the mind into id (pleasure principle), ego (the reality principle), and superego (internalized parental authority). Fairy tales, from a Freudian perspective, function analogously to dreams: they allow the disguised, symbolic expression of id-level content- forbidden wishes, aggressive impulses, erotic desaires, archaic fears – in forms tolerable to the ego, performing censorship operations analogous to the dreamwork.

2. The Uncanny (Unheimliche) in Fairy Tale Landscapes

Freud's 1919 essay Das Unheimliche argues that the uncanny arises not from simple external danger but from the resurgence of something once familiar and has been repressed. Is stems from: the return of the repressed (animism, magical thinking); the experience of the animate and inanimate; and the threat of bodily dismemberment – all elements saturating the fairy tale landscape.

Fairy tales are saturated with uncanny elements. The animate object – the speaking mirror, the enchanted spinning wheel- embodies the return of animistic thinking the developing rational mind is overcoming but has not yet relinquished. The wolf eating grandmother, the witch in her oven– these activate not the fear of a realistic threat but the archaic, somatic fear of bodily destruction that Freud identifies as among the deepest strata of unconscious terror.

For young children constructing the boundary between real and imaginary, fairy tale uncanniness operates at a particularly resonant level. The child's animistic thinking – characteristic of the preoperational stage (2 -7 years, Piaget) – means inhabiting a cognitive world much closer to the fairy tale's symbolic universe. Talking animals, the magical

transformations and personified natural are not violations of reality for the young children but expressions of it.

3. The Oedipus Complex and Its Fairy Tale Elaborations

Perhaps the most generative Freudian concept for fairy tale analysis is the Oedipus complex – the triangular drama of desaire, rivalry, and identification at its height between ages of 3 and 5. The Oedipal structure maps with striking precision onto the narrative structures of numerous canonical fairy tales, allowing symbolic working-through of the child's erotic attachment to the opposite-sex parent, rivarly with the same-sex parent, and fear of castration.

In Sleeping Beauty, the story encodes multiple Oedipal dimensions: the father protecting the daughter from sexual maturity (preventing contact with symbolically phallic spindles); the daughter's eventual sexual awakening through the prince; and the mathernal figure'sthe murderous envy. The story rehearses the girl's Oedipal journey through desire, prohibition, passive waiting, and rescue into the paternal symbolic order.

Cinderella encodes the girl's Oedipal competition with a rival mother figure, regression to a pre-Oedipal abjection (the ash-covered kitchen), and elevation through a magical helper replacing the dead good mother. The glass slipper -fitting only Cinderella – operates in Freudian symbolism as female sexual uniqueness, encoding the Oedipal wish for exclusive union with the paternal figure.

The Grimm tale Allerleirauh makes the Oedipal dynamic fully explicit: a father, proposes marriage to his own daugther. The daughter fleesunder an animal-skin cloak- a encompassing the disguise of female sexuality, regression to a pre-cultural state, and skin-as-boundary against paternal invasion. Bettelheim reads this as a narrative working-through of the incest wish.

4. The Id, Ego, and Superego in Fairy Tale Structure

Beyond specific complexes, Freud's structural model maps elegantly onto fairy tales character structures. Cashdan (1999) argues that fairy tale villains consistently represent ide-level drives: the witch represents envy and narcissism; the stepmother, vanity and selfishness; the wolf, oral aggression unchecked by civilization.

The heroes and heroines represent the ego's struggle to manage id impulses while navigating social reality – represented by the narrative's system of helpers and authorities. The fairy tale's resolution corresponds to the consolidation of ego strenght: the protagonist emerges from id-level danger with enhanced reality-oriented functioning, symbolized by marriage or kingdom.

This structural homology is not merely metaphorical. Developmental psychologists (Kohlberg, 1969; Turiel, 1983) documented children in the 3 – 6 age range moving from egocentric moral reasoning toward reciprocal moral thinking. Fairy tales provide symbolic rehearsal spaces for the developmental work children are already doing.

5. Post-Freudian Perspectives: Jung, Klein, Winnicott, Bettelheim, Lacan

5.1. Carl Gustav Jung and the Archetypal Dimension

Carl Gustav Jung's concepts of the collective unconscious, archetypes, and individuation - extensively developed in relation to fairy tales by Marie-Louise von Franz (1970, 1974)- provide a complementary framework. For Jung, fairy tales represent universal psychological patterns encoded in the collective unconscious and expressing themselves acroos cultures in remarkably consistent forms.

The principal Jungian archetypes operative in fairy tales include: the Self (the royal couple or the magical treasure); the Shadow (the dark forest, the villain); the Great Mother (split into the fairy godmother and the witch-stepmother); the Wise Old Man or Woman (the helper figure); and the Hero (whose journey enacts the individuation – the progressive differentiation and integration of psychic contents).

From a developmental perspective, the Jungian framework suggets that children's engagement with fairy tales constitutes a deeper process of psychic patterning – the activation and initial organization of archetypal structures the symbolic vocabulary through which experiencie will be organized throughout life.

5.2 Melanie Klein and the Paranoid-Schizoid Position

Melanie Klein's object relations theory, developed from clinical work with young children beginning in the 1920s, provides perhaps the most developmentally specific psychoanalityc framework for understanding fairy tales. Klein argued that infant mental life is from beginning

characterized by intense fantasy activity, splitting (into idealized good and persecutory bad obcjects), and primitive defense mechanisms - projection, introjection, projective identification.

Klein's paranoid-schizoid position is characterized by splitting objects into wholly good and wholly bad: the feeding breast is good; the withholding breast is persecutory. The developmental achievement of the depressive position involves recognizing that the good and the bad object are the same person generating both guilt and mourning.

Fairy tales operate powerfully at the paranoid-schizoid level. The splitting of maternal figures into the all-good (the fairy godmother, the dead good mother) and the all-bad (the evil stepmother, the devouring which) mirrors and supports the splitting defense that young children employ to manage the ambivalence in primary object relationships.

5.2. Donald Winnicott: Transitional Objects and Potential Space

Donald Winnicott's concept of the transitional objetc -the first "not-me" possession- and of potential space (the intermidiate area between inner psychic reality and external shared reality, where play and cultural experiencie occur) provide a framework for understanding fairy tale's developmental function distinct from drive-theory and object relations approaches.

For Winnicott, the fairy operates as a collective transitional phenomenon: it occupies the potential space between the child's inner world of wish, fear, and fantasy and the outer world of shared reality, providing a symbolic container simultaneously real (it exists as a story) and not-real (it is fiction), offering a safe arena in which to enconunter and process inner experiencie.

The concept of potential space illuminates the developmental significance of reading fairy tales in the parent-child relationship. The shared storytelling creates a transitional space were difficult emotional material can be approached within the secutiry of the attachment relationship. The parent's containment functions as what Bion (1962) calls alpha-function: transforming unmetabolized anxieties into thinkable, representable thoughts and feelings.

5.4. Bruno Bettelheim: The Uses of Enchantment

Bruno Bettelheim's The Uses of Enchantment (1976) remains the most comprehensive psychoanalytic study of fairy tales in relation to child development. His central thesis – that fairy tales serve indispensable developmental functions precisely because of, not despite, their frightening and dark content – constitutes both a profound clinical insight and a passionate advocacy against the sanitizing impulses of modern child culture.

Bettelheim argues that the young child's inner life is dominated by anxieties and drives that the child lacks the resources to consciously understand. The fairy tale addresses these directly through symbolic, magical narratives whose very unreality signals to the child that the story is about the inner world. The fairy tale externalizes inner conflicts: the dragon is the child's own destructive rage; the witch is the terrifying aspect of the mother; the dark forest is the unconscious.

Bettelheim is particularly insistent on the developmental importance of the dark elements. The abandonment of Hansel and Gretel is not traumatizing but normalizing: it tells the child that the frightening fantasy of abandonment is a known, nameable experiencie that others have survived. The which's oven symbolic represents the child's management of oral aggression: the devouring bad mother is destroyed by the very oral aggression she represents.

5.5. Jacques Lacan: Language, the Symbolic Order, and the Subject

Jacques Lacan's rereading of Freud through structural linguistics offers resources for understanding the linguistic dimensions of fairy tale's developmental function. For Lacan, the subject's entry into language –the Symbolic Order governed by the Law of the Father – is both the constitutive event of human subjectvity and a fundamnetal loss: gaining access to the shared meaning at the cost of the primary narcissistic union.

Fairy tales, in a Lacanian perspective, simultaneously record and manage this foundational loss. The hero who leaves home, traverses the space of the Other, and returns transformed enacts the subject's entry into the Symbolic. The fairy tale's insistence on naming –secret name (Rumpelstilskin), the power of language over magical threat – reflects the Lacanian insight that language is the medium subject comes into being.

Thematic analysis: developmental functions of key fairy tale motifs

1. The Monster, the Wolf, and the Experiencie of Annihilatory Terror

The monstrous figure –wolf, giant, witch, dragon, ogre – is among the most constant and cross-culturally distributed elements of fairy tale narrative, analyzed from psychoanalytic (Bettelheim, 1976; Cashdan, 1999), cognitive developmental (Piaget, 1929), neuropsychological (Deacon et al., 2012), and evolutionary perspectives (Seligman, 1971; Öhman & Mineka, 2001).

From the psychoanalytic perspective, the monster externalizes the child's destructive aggression –projected outward into a manageable. The child's rage at the frustrating parent cannot be directly expressed without triggering intolerable guilt. The fairy tale monster provides a displacement target: the child's destructive wishes, projected onto the wolf or giant, can be vicariously satisfied by the monster's narrative destruction.

Evolutionary psychology adds a complementary dimension: Seligman's concept of biological preparedness suggests that fairy tale monsters' consistent features (large, carnivorous, nocturnal, hidden in dark spaces) reflect the activation of phylogenetically ancient threat-detection systems rather than culturally arbitrary choices.

Bettelheim's insight that children need the monster to be specifically defeated – not merely avoived – has been corroborated by developmental research on fear coping (Muris et al., 2000). Narrative representations of successful confrontationprovide models of mastery, building what Bandura (1977) call self-efficacy: the belief in one's own capacity to manage threatening situations.

2. Abandonment, Separation, and the Absent Parent

The absent, dead, or abandoning parent appears with remarkable consistency across all three corpora and across cultures (Lüthi, 1962; Zipes, 1994): children abandoned in the forest in Hansel and Gretel; the good mother dying and being replaced by a persecutory stepmother in Cinderella; the biological mother seeking the child's death in Snow White.

The absent good mother reflects the inevitable experiencie of every child: the omnipresent mother of early infancy becomes progressively less available as the child develops, and this withdrawal is structured by unconscious fantasy as abandonment. The dead-mother motif

preserves the child's idealized image of the primary object while attributing real frustrations to the bad stepmother.

From an attachment theory perspective (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980), the fairy tale's recurring parental loss constitutes narrative rehearsal of the child's deepest developmental anxiety: the fear of losing the attachment figure. The fairy tale's providential resolution – the reunion, the new family, the recovered kingdom – provides a secure base in narrative form: the reassurance that exploration is possible because return to safety is ultimately guaranteed.

3. The Stepmother, the Witch, and the Splitting of the Maternal Imago

The stepmother-witch dyad is among the most psychologically sophisticated constructions in the fairy tale canon. As Bettelheim (1976), Tatar (1987) and Warner (1994) have argued, the splitting of the maternal figure into the good dead mother and the bad living stepmother is not a reflection of historical social reality but a psychic operation: the projection of the child's ambivalence toward the primary object.

This splitting defense protects the child from the terror of ambivalence – from recognizing that the most loved person is also the target of m the most intense rage. The fairy tale allows this to be externalized and narratively resolved: the good mother is mourned and idealized, while the bad stepmother is freely hate and destroyed without guilt, because she is experienced as categorically other than the loved object.

The witch figure operates at simultaneously as: pre-Oedipal mother (omnipotent, terrifying); the oral-sadistic bad breast that withholds, poisons, and devours; the projective repository of the child's own aggressive impulses; and the representative of the id unbound by civilizing constraint – living outside the social order, in the forest.

4. Death, Rebirth, and the Developmental Function of Narrative Mortality

The presence of death in fairy tales is among the most contested issues in contemporary early childhood practice. But young children already encounter death in the natural world, in their fantasy life, and in the aggressive play. What they lack is a symbolic fraework for processing is – and this is precisely what fairy tale provides.

Fairy tale death, characteristically, not permanent: Sleeping Beauty 'dies' into a hundred-year sleep and is restored; Snow White is apparently killed and restored. This narrative structure of

death-and-rebirth- a universally distributed mythological pattern (Campbell, 1949)- corresponds psychologically to what Bettelheim calls the fairy tale's expression of the child's deepest developmental hope: that regression and apparent destruction are transformative, not terminal.

Neuropsychological research (Slaughter & Lyons) suggests that children ages of 4 and 7 are constructing of death as universal, irreversible, and non-functional. Fairy tale narrative, with its non-biological treatment of death (magical sleep, transformation, rebirth), may in assist this developmental construction by providing symbolic representations at an appropiate level of abstraction.

5. Gender, Sexuality, and the Socialization of Desire in EarlyChildhood

Feminist fairy tale scholarship – from Simone de Beauvoir through Lieberman (1972), Warner (1994), and Zipes (1994, 2012) – has documented the role of fairy tales in constructing of gender ideologies. The canonical Grimm and Perrault tales consistently associate femininity with passivity, beauty, and obedience; masculinity with activity, courage, and dominance. The heroine's primary virtue is beauty; her primary role is to be rescued; her primary aspiration is marriage.

Research on gender schema development (Bem, 1981; Martin & Halverson, 1981) demonstrates that children begin constructing gender schemas between the ages 2 and 3, actively using to filter and organize information. Fairy tales, as a culturally prestigious and repeatedly consumed narrative genre, constitute an important input to this schema construction. Whether this input is beneficial is empirically complex and context-dependent.

The sexual content of fairy tales – largely suppressed in canonical versions but evident in Basile- raises questions about fairy tale and early childhood sexuality. Freudian theory posits that children are from the beginning sexual beings who develop complex fantasies about sexual difference. The fairy tale's coded erotic symbolism (the rose and the thorn, the key and the lock, the glass slipper) resonates with pre-existing psychic contents rather than introducing them.

6. The Hero's Journey and Developmental Identity Formation

Joseph Campbell's analysis of the hero's journey- the monomyth encompassing departure, initiation, and return - maps with striking precision onto the developmental trajectory of early

childhood identity formation (Eriksson,1950; McAdams, 1993). The fairy tale hero who leaves safety, traverses a dangerous unknown, overcomes trials through courage and the help of wise others, and returns transformed enacts a symbolic rehearsal of the child's developmental journey.

Erikson's stages (1950) provide a particularly illuminating parallel. The hero's departure enacts trust and mistrust (Stage 1): internalized resources provide basic trust for venturing forth. The forest navigation enacts autonomy versus shame and doubt (Stage 2): acting independently against external threat. The hero's problem-solving enacts initiative versus guilt (Stage 3): taking action, planning goals, and resolving guilt through narrative justice.

Neuroscientific and cognitive perspectives on narrative and early childhood

1. **Narrative as a Fundamental Brain Function**

The neuroscientific study of narrative has advanced rapidly in the twenty- first century, providing empirical grounding for developmental claims regarding fairy tales. Damasio (1999, 2010) has argued that narrative is not merely a cultural practice but a fundamental feature of conscious experiencie: the brain constructs a continuous narrative of the self as the basic format of self-awareness, with evolutionary roots in social coordination and learning from others.

Developmental research has documented the earliest precursors of narrative competence in the second year of life. By the age of 2 -3, children produce simple narratives; by 4-5, they demonstrate capacity for complex structures including embedded stories and múltiple perspectives (Nelson, 1989; Fivush & Haden, 2003). This canonical age range for fairy tale engagement (3-8 years) corresponds precisely to the period of most rapid development in narrative competence.

2. **Theory of Mind, Empathy, and Perspective- Taking**

Theory of mind – the capacity to attribute mental states to self and others and understand that others' beliefs may differ from one's own – is typically demonstrated via the standard false-belief task 4-5 (Wimmer & Perner, 1983; Baron-Cohen et al., 1985), though recent non-verbal measures suggets implicit competence appears considerably earlier (Onishi & Baillargeon, 2005).

Fairy tales, whose structure dependes on attribution intentions, desires, and beliefs to characters, constitute a form of theory of mind training. Mar and colleagues (2006; Mar & Oatley, 2008) have demonstrated significant correlations between lifetime exposure to fiction and theory of mind performance. Kidd and Castano (2013) experimentally demonstrated that reading literaly fiction immediately enhances theory of mind performance.

For young children whose theory of mind is still under construction, the theory tale's morally extreme characters – the wholly good hero, the wholly bad villain-may be easier to engage with than the psychologically complex, morally ambiguous characters. The child's developing theory of mind can more readily model extreme and consistent mental states, providing developmentally appropiate scaffolding.

3. Emotional Regulation, Fear, and the Therapeutic Function of Narrative

The neuroscience of emotional regulation has identified the prefrontal cortex (PFC) and its regulatory relationship with the amygdala as the key neural substrate of mature emotional regulation (Davidson & McEwen, 2012). The development of PFC-mediated regulation of amygdala reactivity extends through adolescence, meaning young children are relatively poor at self-regulating emotional responses and particularly dependent on external regulatory scaffolding.

Fairy tales function as cognitive reappraisal stimuli (Gross, 1998): they provide narrative contexts in which threatening emotional contentactivates the amygdala response while simultaneously providing narrative scaffolding (the hero's survival, the providential resolution) that supports PFC-mediated regulatory response. Repeated exposure within the relational context of the caregiving may contribute to developing the child's own regulatory capacity.

Discussion

The sanitization of fairy tales in modernity: developmental consequences

1. The Historical Process of Sanitization

The progressive sanitization of fairy tales begins with Perrault's moralizing adaptations, continues through successive Grimm editions, and reaches its apogee in the twentieth-century Disney adaptations (Snow White, 1937; Cinderella, 1950; Sleeping Beauty, 1959; The Little Mermaid, 1989; Beauty and the Beast, 1991) that now constitute the primary fairy tale reference for most children in the Western world.

Disney adaptations are remarkable for their sanitizing thoroughness. The Grimm Cinderella's stepsisters, who have their eyes pecked out at the wedding, become merely petulant. The Andersen Little Mermaid - who in the original does not get the prince, experiencies excruciating pain, and ultimately dissolves into sea foam- becomes a triumphant romantic heroine. Original narrative's darker implications –failure, pain, irreversibility of loss - are replaced with guaranteed, cost-free resolution.

Bettelheim's critique of sanitization – first articulated in 1976, argued that this process removes precisely the elements that give fairy tales their therapeutic power. By guaranteeing the happy ending regardless of moral engagement, removing the genuine threat, and eliminating psychological darkness, sanitized fairy tales fail to provide the symbolic container the child needs. They offer comfort without recogniticion – reassurance without prior acknowledgment of what needs to be reassuring.

2. Contemporary Research on Fairy Tales and Child Development

Empirical research has produced consistent findings. First, engagement with fictional narrative is associated with enhanced theory of mind, empathic accuracy, and moral reasoning (Mar et al., 2010; Djikic et al,. 2013). Second, exposure to frightening narrative content within an appropriately regulated relational context is associated with better long-term and tolerance for ambiguity (Woolley & Cox, 2007). Third, exposure to gender-traditional fairy tales is associated with more gender-stereotyped attitudes (Diekman & Murnen).

Crucially, no empirical research supports the assumption that exposure to dark content in traditional fairy tales is harmful to young children in normative development. Research suggets, rather, that such exposure - mediated by the parent-child storytelling relationship - is neutral to beneficial, while deprivation through excessive sanitization may limit children's development of emotional regulation, symbolic processing, and psychic resilience.

3. Implications for Early Childhood Education and Clinical Practice

The convergente of psychoanalytic, developmental psychological, and neuroscientific, findings has clear implications for early childhood educators, who are among the primary mediators of fairy tale narrative for children between ages of 3 and 6. Their choices about whichs stories to tell, and how to facilitate emotional responses are consequential for developmental trajectories.

A critically informed approach to fairy tales in early chilhood settings should include: selection of more complete, less sanitized versions appropriate to children's developmental level; creation of relational storytelling contexts for emotional expression; facilitation of dramatic play and drawing through which children engage with fairy tale material at their own pace; critical discussion of embedded gender and power frameworks; and deliberate inclusion of non-Western tale traditions.

Conclusions: toward a psychologically informed pedagogy of the fairy tale

This article has argued that fairy tales – in the forms documented by Basile, Perrault, and the Brothers Grimm - are among the most psychologically sophisticated instruments human culture has devised for the symbolic processing of the children's inner experiencie. They perform this function through: externalization and management of drive-level content; scaffolding of separation-individuation, identity formation, and moral reasoning; provision of symbolic containers for archaic anxieties; and rehearsal of the passage from dependence to autonomy.

The Freudian conceptual architecture provides the most generative single theoretical framework, requiring supplementation by Klein, Fairbairn, and Winnicott; the archetypal analysis of Jung and von Franz; the narrative developmental theory of Bettelheim, Bruner, and McAdams; and the empirical contributions of contemporary developmental psychology and cognitive neuroscience. The convergence of these diverse traditions on consistent claims about fairy tale's developmental function constitutes strong narrative is among the strongest forms evidence for its validity.

The three authorial traditions– Basile's carnivalesque expressiveness, Perrault's moralizing courtly refinement, and the Grimm Brothers' Romantic nationalization- represent successive stages in cultural management of the fairy tale's psychic content, each preserving, in more or less disguised form, the archaic symbolic content that gives these stories their enduring power. Contemporary Disney adaptation represents the most thorough sanitization in this history.

Early childhood educators, developmental psychologists, and curriculum designers need working knowledge of the psychoanalytic and developmental dimensions of fairy tale narrative, in order to make informed choices about selection, presentation, and facilitation of narrative experiences. They must resist the impulse toward sanitization – an impulse that reflects adult anxiety rather than child need - and recognize that the dark, frightening, morally complex dimensions of traditional fairy tales are precisely the features through which these stories perform their most important developmental work.

The child who te embles at he wolf, grieves the dead mother, rages at the wicked stepmother, and triumphs vicariously with the hero is not being damaged by narrative darkness – she or he is using the fairy tale for exactly the purpose for which the human species developed it: to encounter, symbolically process, and ultimately integrate the full complexity of human inner experience, in the safety of story, before life demands that confrontation in earnest.

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Declaraciones finales

Conflicto de intereses: Los autores declaran que no existe conflicto de interés posible.

Financiamiento: No existió asistencia financiera de partes externas al presente artículo.

Agradecimiento: N/A.

Nota editorial: El artículo no es producto de una publicación anterior.