

Learn to Explore Dreams by Interpreting Myths and Fairy Tales

by Elizabeth L. Bowen

The Spirit of the Van

Among the mountains of Carmarthen, lies a beautiful...piece of water, named The Van Pools. Tradition relates, that after midnight, on New Year's Eve, there appears on this lake a being named The Spirit of the Van. She is dressed in a white robe, bound by a golden girdle; her hair is long and golden, her face is pale and melancholy; she sits in a golden boat, and manages a golden oar.

Many years ago there lived in the vicinity of this lake a young farmer, who having heard much of the beauty of this spirit, conceived a most ardent desire to behold her.... On the last night of the year, he therefore went to the edge of the lake, which lay calm and bright beneath the rays of the full moon, and waited anxiously for the first hour of the New Year. It came, and then he beheld the object of his wishes gracefully guiding her golden gondola to and fro over the lake. The moon at length sank behind the mountains, the stars grew dim at the approach of dawn, and the fair spirit was on the point of vanishing, when, unable to restrain himself, he called aloud to her to stay and be his wife; but with a faint cry she faded from his view. Night after night he now might be seen pacing the shores of the lake, but all in vain. His farm was neglected, his person wasted away, and gloom and melancholy were impressed on his features.

At length he confided his secret to one of the mountain-sages, whose counsel was...to assail the fair spirit with gifts of cheese and bread! The counsel was followed; and on Midsummer Eve the enamored swain went down to the lake, and let fall into it a large cheese and a loaf of bread. But all was vain; no spirit rose. Still he fancied that the spot where he had last seen her shone with more than wonted brightness, and that a musical sound vibrated among the rocks. Encouraged by these signs, he night after night threw in loaves and cheeses, but still no spirit came.

At length New Year's Eve returned. He dressed himself in his best, took his largest cheese and seven of his whitest loaves, and repaired to the lake. At the turn of midnight, he dropped them slowly one by one into the water, and then remained in silent expectation. The moon was hid behind a cloud, but by the faint light she gave, he saw the magic skiff appear, and direct its course for where he stood. Its owner stepped ashore, and hearkened to the young man's vows, and consented to become his wife. She brought with her as her dower flocks and herds, and other rural wealth. One charge she gave him, never to strike her, for the third time he should do so she would vanish.

They married, and were happy. After three or four years they were invited to a christening, and to the surprise of all present, in the midst of the ceremony, the spirit burst into tears. Her husband gave an angry glance, and asked her why she thus made a fool of herself? She replied, "The poor babe is entering in a world of sin and sorrow, and misery lies before it; why should I rejoice?" He gave her a push. She warned him that he had struck her once.

Again they were, after some time, invited to attend the funeral of that very child. The spirit now laughed, and danced, and sang. Her husband's wrath was excited, and he asked her why she thus made a fool of herself? "The babe," she said, "has left a world of sin and sorrow, and escaped the misery that was before it, and is gone to be good and happy for ever and ever. Why, then, should I weep?" He gave her a push..., and again she warned him.

Still they lived happily as before. At length they were invited to a wedding, where the bride was young and fair, the husband a withered old miser. In the midst of the festivity, the spirit burst into a copious flood of tears, and to her husband's angry demand of why..., she replied in the hearing of all, "Because summer and winter cannot agree. Youth is wedded to age for paltry gold. I see misery here, and tenfold misery hereafter, to be the lot of both. It is the devil's compact." Forgetful of her warnings, the husband now thrust her from him with real anger. She looked at him tenderly and reproachfully, and said, "You have struck me for the third and last time. Farewell!"

So saying, she left the place. He rushed out after her, and just reached his home in time to see her speeding to the lake, followed by all her flocks and herds. He pursued her, but in vain; his eyes nevermore beheld her.

Dr. Bowen is a Jungian-oriented physician in private practice, based in Atlanta. She writes, gives lectures, and offers workshops locally, nationally and internationally. See: www.linkedin.com/pub/beth-bowen/10/18/11. Email: bethbowen9@gmail.com

In *An Introduction to the Interpretation of Fairy Tales*, Marie-Louise von Franz wrote that, according to C.G. Jung, it is in fairy tales that we can best study the comparative anatomy of the psyche. We may interpret fairy tales by circumambulating them with four functions of consciousness: thinking, feeling, intuition and sensation. Circumambulate means to walk around something, as in walking in a circular pattern while performing a ritual.

Why do Jungians learn to interpret myths and fairy tales?

One major reason is to learn how to interpret dreams without any preconceived hypotheses. By rejecting preconceptions, we explore each unique dream in an open and unbiased way, in contrast to approaching any dream or myth with prejudice, a fixed and predetermined opinion. One definition of prejudice, from the perspective of the feeling function, is an emotional commitment to a lie. If our highly charged emotions are attached to a falsehood, like a barnacle to a ship, it may be difficult to recognize the truth.

Considering the notion of prejudice, this time using the thinking function, one unfortunate outcome of prejudice is that assumption is the thief of reason. Thus, unbiased openness is an essential prerequisite to accurate dream work and to unlocking the mysteries of myths and fairytales, which were primarily meant for adults, by the way, not for children.

To **interpret each dream scientifically**, consider this checklist.

- Approach each dream with **no** hypothesis as to what meanings might emerge.
- Look at every dream as objectively as possible.
- Every dream is unique. It is a novelty. It carries a **new** message. Neither the analyst nor the patient knows its meaning or purpose.
- By practicing with mythical and fairy tale motifs, with no personal set-up and no previous knowledge of the conscious situation, we have no choice but to rely primarily on the images.[1]

Suggested Questions of Fairytales for Dream Interpretation

Begin with the exposition. Fairy tales usually set the stage with *once upon a time*, in a timeless eternity. However, if the story occurs in a specific time and place, briefly identify: *When?* and *Where?* In our example, **The Spirit in the Van** is an ancient Celtic story, set in Wales, among the mountains and waterways. *When?* After midnight on New Year's Eve.

Who is in the cast of characters? In addition to identifying the specific individuals involved, count the number of people at the beginning and the end. Does the tale begin and end with a single individual? Couple? Trinity? Quaternity? In dreams, myths, and fairy tales, specific numbers often hold symbolic significance.

The first character to appear is *The Spirit in the Van*. She is a mysterious being dressed in a white robe, riding in a golden boat. A young farmer, having heard of the beauty of this spirit, beheld her in the first hour of the New Year, on the lake, beneath the full moon. The two of them also appear in the final scene of the story.

The next task is to define the problem. Dr. von Franz wrote: "Some trouble always comes at the beginning of the story because otherwise there would be no story. So you define the trouble psychologically as well as you can and try to understand what it is." [2]

After the young farmer first discovered the Spirit on New Year's Eve, for a whole year, he paced the lake [shore] night after night, throwing in the traditional courtship offering of loaves of bread and cheeses, until New Year's Eve finally arrived again. This time, *the Spirit of the Van* agreed to marry him. However, the terms of the deal were clear: "One charge she gave him, never to strike her, for the third time he should do so, she would vanish." [3]

The essence of the problem is that peaceful progress depends on the transformation from force to grace. The husband is not able to maintain a state of grace in the marriage. Three times he resorts to the use of force and violence. Finally, *the Spirit of the Van* flees him, speeds with her animals to the lake, and vanishes once and for all, presumably to her other-worldly abode in the Great Beyond.

"Then comes the peripeteia...the ups and downs of the story." Dr. von Franz alerts us to watch out for any sudden reversals of fortune or circumstance. In this tale, three ups and downs lead to the tragic finale. The tale ends:

Her husband bade *the Spirit of the Van* to hold her peace, struck her, and she vanished forever from his sight.

Identify the Crisis, the Denouement. After the reversals, the story or dream comes to a decisive point, a crisis. It is the climax, with the height of tension. There is either a resolution or a catastrophe. The crisis in this tragic tale was a catastrophe. "Forgetful of her warnings, the husband now thrust her from him with real anger. She looked at him tenderly and reproachfully, and said, "You have struck me for the third and last time. Farewell!"

"So saying, she left the place. He rushed out after her, and just reached his home in time to see her speeding to the lake, followed by all her flocks and herds. He pursued her, but in vain; his eyes never more beheld her. "

The next step in this process is to analyze each of the symbols that appear in a fairy tale, myth, or in a dream.

"Amplification means enlarging through collecting a quantity of parallels." [4] Some of these comparisons may be personal, while others are universal. To focus on the symbols, whether individual or collective, is one means of exploring the comparative anatomy of the psyche.

In ancient mythology, Van (plural: Vanir) refers to gods and goddesses of the ocean, air, fountains, and streams. In this tale, the Spirit of the Van may represent a goddess, or be symbolic of the Self. Goddesses may symbolize the Anima, the female principle.

The young farmer may represent the ego, seeking union with the Anima, and seeking conjunction with the feminine principle.

The lake may represent the unconscious, the depths, descent, and the world beyond.

The moon often symbolizes the unconscious, illuminating the dreamtime. The moon also may represent the maternal principle.

The gifts of cheese and loaves of bread are reminiscent of breaking bread together, and of sacrificial offerings.

The infant's birth, swift life, and early death symbolize the very transitory nature of this earthly journey. We are spiritual beings who are on a very temporary human path, not human beings who may or may not choose a spiritual approach to life and death. The infant may also represent the divine child, re-birth, and creativity.

In the wedding scene, the young wife was portrayed as mere property, with loss of autonomy, and loss of humanity, evoking the grave psychological and physical health hazards associated with arranged marriages and child brides. The tension of the opposites prevails, and tragedy ensues.

The flight of the Spirit, vanishing into the Lake may be the most powerful image. The Spirit, representing the Self or the Anima, may flee back into obscurity, vanishing into the depths of the lake.

The next step is to construct the context. The terms of the deal were clear: "One charge she gave him, never to strike her, for the third time he should do so, she would vanish." The couple's struggles are the main context of the story. One central challenge is to hold the tension of the opposites with grace, without resorting to force or violence.

The final task is the interpretation itself which is the translation of the amplified story into psychological language. This is a highly individualized process.

What personal or universal reflections arise in relation to this fairytale? Some readers may wish to reflect on relevant dreams and visions. Dreams, recorded verbatim, may illustrate, in the language of images, what the psyche is seeking. Visions may illuminate needs.

Closing Circumambulation: Did We Cover the Waterfront?

- Setting: When? Once upon a time? On New Year's Eve.
- Where? In the wilderness? On a mythic lakeshore in Wales?
- Who are the cast of characters? Were any numbers significant?
- Define the Problem: What is the trouble? Who is in trouble?
- The Peripeteia: Review the sudden reversals of fortune or circumstances.
- The Crisis: Is there a Denouement? A climax? A resolution?
- The Symbols: Throw them together. Be selective. Be specific. Keep associations close to the evidence. Keep going back to the original story. Focus on specific images. Stay with the original images to focus on this message rather than wander in free association. Search for personal associations and by using library and internet research resources to discover universal implications.
- The Context: What is the context surrounding a particular dream in relation to the dreamer's ordinary daytime reali-

ty? What's happening that the dream may be commenting on?

- The Interpretation: What is the meaning to the dreamer, myth-maker, or storyteller? This is a highly individualized process.
- Reflections: Personal and universal...Why this story? Why now? Is it in a series of dreams, or a chapter in an unfolding book?
- Is it reflecting an individual struggle or more universal challenges?

To explore further, see Marie-Louise von Franz's several scholarly and practical books on dreams, myths, and fairy tales. C.G. Jung's **Memories, Dreams & Reflections** is another treasure trove full of gems about his dreams and dream interpretations.

References

- 1) *An Introduction to the Interpretation of Fairy Tales*, by Dr. Marie-Louise von Franz
- 2) von Franz
- 3) *The Spirit of the Van*; <http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/celt/tfm/tfm161.htm>
- 4) von Franz

For the two of you, by Ginger Murchison

it comes down, at last, to the old dog
that settles on the bed between you,
wanting his dull yellow coat stroked,
to the yellow on your hands, the color
of sunsets you'd once stop the car to watch,
the two closets of woolly sweaters, gray hairs
you'll brush off his shoulder before a party,
his prescriptions and yours, test results,
to the one thing we finally learn—the heat
of a hand, the amount of heart in the touch.

Ginger Murchison is editor of *The Cortland Review*, the first online journal to publish in audio as well as text and now publishing its prize-winning *Poets in Person* feature in HD video at www.cortlandreview.com. A graduate of the Warren Wilson M.F.A. Program in Poetry, she helped found POETRY at TECH where she has been a McEver Chair in Poetry since 2009.