

ARCHETYPAL PATTERNS:

SNOW WHITE – SHE WAS QUITE A NINNY, WASN'T SHE?!

JUTTA VON BUCHHOLTZ, PHD



Recently I re-read the fairy tale “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.” To my surprise, I was getting rather impatient with the heroine. Why did she adamantly refuse to understand that her step mother was trying to do her in? A few weeks later, my friend Susan Olson and I talked about Snow White and Susan recalled a Zurich analyst who observed laconically: “Snow White ... she was quite a ninny, wasn't she?!” That remark verified my most recent impression of the story. I happily grinned at the irreverence and decided to explore the fairy tale further. The result is this—naturally rather limited—attempt at a psychological view of the tale. My delight about the analyst's remark led the way.

I love fairy tales. I first heard fairy tales in a dark underground storage space turned bomb shelter during WW II in my grandmother's house in Gottingen. The empty cellar still smelled somewhat of coals and apples—reminders of a long gone security which was in stark contrast to the reality of constantly howling sirens, a warning that yet another air raid was in progress which had sent us scurrying once again in the dark of night down into the basement. My grandmother would tell fairy tales into the dark as we huddled near to her. The soothing effect of this ritual promoted a profound sense of comfort and safety for us children and, as I now believe, for the storyteller herself. While the bombs took their shrilly purposeful

Jutta von Buchholtz, PhD, is a Swiss Diplomat Jungian analyst. Her home is Birmingham, Alabama, where she has a private practice. She is a frequent lecturer at the Jung Society of Atlanta.

aim at us, we were safely under ground and under the spell of these old stories. The ritual telling as well as the stories' content spread a sense of being held by a mysterious, ancient patterning force—something larger than life which I later would understand as archetypal energies emanating from a power greater than life as we know it and which I refer to as the Self.

It took Wilhelm and Jakob Grimm fifteen years to collect and edit the stories from story tellers around the German country side, primarily in Hessia, the county that included the town of Gottingen where they taught at the University. Almost 200 years ago (1812) the brothers Grimm published the first volume of what was innocently entitled “Kinder und Hausmarchen” (Fairytale for Children and Use Around the Home). The second volume, which was published two years later, is almost entirely based on the stories Frau Viehmannin reported. Wilhelm and Jakob were impressed with the straightforward honesty and naturalness of the tales. A long time ago, when listeners crowded close to solid tiled stoves that warmed an entire thatch roofed old farm house in Germany, these drastic stories spoke of ancient truths, warming the intent listeners—who usually were adults rather than children - with the assurance that evil would not go unpunished, that good would win out and that there was order and justice in the world. In the foreword to the second volume of the fairy tales the brothers Grimm regretted that the custom of story telling was on the wane. They bemoaned that with the demise of the story telling ritual, a tradition which nurtured soul, was doomed. They

specifically remarked on a powerful yet humble sense of grace that permeated these stories—a connection to ground and a deeper source of spiritual nourishment. In the United States we are just now—almost 200 years later - beginning to appreciate the therapeutic power of story telling. Oneal Isaac of Baton Rouge, Louisiana and Kathryn Tucker Windham of Selma, Alabama are two outstanding living story tellers I know.

Jungian analyst Marie Louise von Franz, who spent her life interpreting fairy tales from around the globe, understood them as expressions and images of archetypal energies. She said that fairy tales are "... the purest and simplest expression of collective unconscious psychic forces." I wondered how do these "expressions of collective unconscious forces" express themselves in our everyday life—where can we find them? As an example, there is the 13th fairy in "Sleeping Beauty." I find her a convincing archetypal representation for the personal feeling toned "rejection complex." It plays itself out in the desire for revenge and retribution when we feel left out, or uninvited. Another example: we know what it feels like to wear shoes that are way too small, an image for finding ourselves in a situation that is painfully uncomfortable, a bad fit. The shoe, literally, does not fit Cinderella's two step sisters, who were ordered to amputate their toes and heels respectively, in order to win an acceptable bridegroom. An incorrect fit! Fairy tales express ancient psychological wisdom in symbolic form. These images, characters and stories are unlike novels: they are one dimensional, cartoon like, a blueprint for deeper meaning, powerfully energetic abstractions, just like the images and actions in dreams. Fairy tales are a good "training ground" for working symbolically with psychic material.

A storyteller meanders, circumambulates around themes. Time and leisure are necessary to be able to hear that "small inner voice" which speaks to us in our personal responses to archetypal material as we find it in fairy tales. This is difficult since we live in a fast-paced, extraverted, materialistic culture.

And now, after this little introduction, it is time to meander back to the point of departure, the fairy tale of Snow White. I'll tell it the way I heard it from my grandmother in that dark bomb shelter.



Once upon a time, in the middle of winter, a queen sat by a window whose frame was made of ebony. She was sewing. Suddenly she accidentally pricked her finger with the needle and three droplets of red blood fell into the fresh white snow. The queen sighed: "I wish I had a little girl, white as snow, red as blood and black as ebony." Within a year she gave birth to a little girl whose hair was as black as ebony, whose skin as white as snow and whose lips were as red as blood. She named her daughter Snow White. Soon thereafter the queen died. A year passed by and the king married again. This new queen prided herself on her beauty. She also had a magic mirror which she consulted regularly. She would ask it: "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?" The mirror would respond that she was the fairest in the land and the queen would be content.

Snow White grew up to be a lovely young girl. When she was about seven years old, the mirror responded to the queen's question that Snow White was

now the fairest. The queen was hugely upset and as time passed she became ever more afraid and angry. Finally she ordered one of her huntsmen to take Snow White into the forest and kill her. The hunter tried to obey, but the girl begged and pleaded for her life. His heart softened to her beauty and her pleas. He told her to run into the woods and never return. He then killed a young pig for its heart and liver which he presented to the queen as the required proof of his deed. The queen was satisfied.

Snow White ran into the forest and got more and more lost. Suddenly, close to nightfall and at the end of her strength, she stumbled upon a little cottage. She went in and found a tiny table neatly set with seven plates, seven bowls, seven cups, seven forks, seven spoons and seven knives. Along the wall of the room were lined up seven little beds, properly made up with white sheets. She ate a bit off every plate, drank a few drops out of every cup, tried all the beds—and the last one fit her. She fell sound asleep.

Soon the seven dwarfs, whose house this was, came home from their work in the mines where they were digging for iron ore and gold. They found Snow White and invited her to stay with the proviso that she would do all the household chores for them. She happily agreed. They warned her that the queen would surely try to continue to do her harm.



As she did regularly, the queen consulted her mirror and learned that Snow White was still alive and living with the seven dwarfs at a distance of seven mountains from her castle. She was furious and decided to use a lace to kill the girl. She disguised herself as an old peddler woman, crossed the seven mountains, appeared in front of the dwarfs' cottage, knocked at the door and Snow White opened. The queen easily persuaded the innocent girl to buy the colorful lace. Unsuspecting Snow White even asked to be laced up by her! The evil queen then laced her victim up so tightly that the





girl fell to the floor, unable to breathe, apparently dead. When the dwarfs returned home that evening, they found Snow White lying on the floor as if dead—but they quickly noticed that she was laced up too tight and cut the lace. Soon Snow White came to and was able to breathe. Again the dwarfs warned her—and again the queen found out that Snow White was still alive. This time the queen’s persuasive power and a very pretty comb proved stronger than the dwarfs’ warning. The disguised wicked queen stuck the poisoned comb into the girl’s lovely black hair and again Snow White fell to the floor as if dead—the dwarfs found the poisonous comb, pulled it out and saved the girl. They warned her even more strenuously not to buy anything from anyone and to let no one into the house. Snow White promised to heed their warning. Again the queen found out that her scheme had failed. This time she poisoned an apple which she took to the cottage. Snow White—persistently and tiresomely naïve!—took a bite of the apple and fell to the floor dead. The envious queen had won, as the mirror assured her. The seven dwarfs were inconsolable. Snow White looked so beautiful and as if she were only asleep—they were unable to put her into a grave. Instead, they had a glass coffin built and took turns watching over it by day and night.

One day a prince came into that part of the woods, saw Snow White in her coffin and fell in love with her. He asked the dwarfs to allow him to take her with

him, but neither gold nor other gifts could persuade them to give up the coffin with its precious content. But, when the prince said he would surely die without her because he loved her so, they took pity and allowed him to have his men carry the coffin off to his castle. But the prince’s men were clumsy and accidentally stumbled over a root. The coffin was jarred which dislodged the poisonous piece of apple in Snow White’s throat. Soon she was sitting up, wondering where she was. She rode off with the prince to his castle to celebrate a splendid wedding. They also invited the evil step mother who, in the meantime, had learned that the young queen of the neighboring country was more beautiful than she. She trembled with rage and fear but set off to the wedding ceremony anyway. There she discovered that the young queen was none other than Snow White! The evil queen’s feet were forced into red hot iron shoes and she was made to dance in them until she fell to the ground, dead.



his is a long and complex fairy tale. Not only the content but the ritual telling of the story can have a therapeutic effect. As I mentioned earlier, there is a sense of profound security in the rhythm of the story as it is told (not so much when it is read, I’ve found!): we children in the cellar knew what the outcome would be, and happily anticipated the jingles, repetitions, and rhymes within the story. Storytelling implies an unending chain, an underly-

ing rhythmic cycle which is natural to our universe and which keeps the dread of danger and of death at bay: everything belongs and has its place in the fullness of nature's patterns.

There is not the space here to fully explore all the symbols and so I had to skip many interesting images and issues. For example, I will not explore why the dwarfs went to work and left the girl at risk—but watched over her once she is dead in the coffin? Why did the stepmother bring an apple to tempt Snow White rather than a pear, a peach or even a banana? I will skip associations to the motif of the mirror, the color symbolism, the prince, etc. It would also be very interesting to compare the fairy tale to the Walt Disney cartoon version and explore the differences in the collective.

Jungians look at fairy tales, dreams and life symbolically. We read symbols to understand the personal complexes and stories that are based on archetypal patterns which inform them. We try to glean the underlying message from the personal or collective unconscious as it might relate to the individuation process. Often the information we thus receive is complementary to our rational approach to everyday reality, providing food for our soul, a nourishing symbolic soul food stew for individuation!

The story starts out with a queen, alone. A sharp object “accidentally” penetrates her skin, draws blood and a pregnancy results. How sexually explicit can it get? The queen immediately fantasizes a baby into existence—a girl made up of cold white snow, hard black ebony and blood-red lips. Of the color symbolism here I just want to mention that white and especially snow white has a cold, virginal quality. The insistence on the whiteness of the girl implies that darker, shadowy aspects are not wished for by the biological mother; they are missing in her child, although the black of the hair hints at deep darkness and the blood red lips imply sensuousness. “Snow White”—the name alone sets the stage and the theme: the story will be about the heroine's - or a female psyche's - confrontation with and integration of shadow aspects. We will accompany her growth from innocent girl to mature married queen. The girl's virginal and cold ethereal beauty necessarily constellated an evil queen. The innocent maiden and evil stepmother point to a polarization in a psyche, which plays itself out in projections. To make an analogy to our present day issues: could it be, here in the South, that our black brothers and sisters are carrying—of necessity—some of our unintegrated shadow aspects? Or, continuing with the theme of unintegrated and therefore projected shadow: what does it mean when we say that the preacher's children will be “wild?” In this fairy tale the libido connected with the evilness of the queen is strong enough to initiate a development in a female psyche—or the anima.

This brings us to the stepmother. Stepmothers are proverbially “evil” and “bad”. In many fairy tales there are two mother figures: one is totally and absolutely good while the other is just as unequivocally dark, sinister or evil. Our tale shows a split in the mother archetype and in the feminine. What does projected polarization look like in everyday life? The old adage “The pot calling the kettle black” is an excellent example as is seeing the splinter in another's eye but being oblivious to the beam in our own.

The wicked queen is envious of Snow White because the young girl is becoming very beautiful, eventually more beautiful than the queen herself. Jealousy and envy between a mother and daughter are taboo topics in our society. Our understanding

of motherhood heavily emphasizes a self-sacrificing mother as the desideratum and we label that the “positive” pole of the archetype. We simply cannot fathom that a mother could possibly be envious and jealous of her daughter. Only a wicked step mother is capable of such “unnatural” impulses. Yet, the older woman's envy of the younger one's beauty, sex appeal, desirableness is obvious in our culture, attested to by the booming cosmetic industry. Many a middle aged woman considers it a fine compliment if she is told that she looks as young as her daughters. We consider, as did the evil queen, beauty to be one of our most precious commodities, an important power tool in our lives. The myth of the judgment of Paris illustrates that the need to be the most beautiful is thought to be an ancient attribute of the feminine. Hera, Pallas, Athena, and Aphrodite, vied for the title of the most beautiful woman. This Olympian beauty contest resulted in the tragic Trojan War. When a mother notices that her daughter gets the admiring male attention while they stroll along a shopping mall or down the Champs Elysee, she is envious ... if she is brave enough to face her own shadow by acknowledging these feelings. If we understand this fairy tale to be about female maturation (or the development of the anima) in symbolic terms, this story could be a case study in maternal jealousy in its most pernicious and pathological form.

Snow White and the queen are connected by their need to be beautiful. Their pursuit of beauty is potentially deadly for both: Snow White naively wants to adorn herself with a lace and a comb. She is as yet too young to properly handle these implements of female vanity. It reminds me of the sad story and murder of little Jonbenet Ramsay, who was a child beauty queen, dressed and made up like an adult. The queen's obsession with reigning as the most beautiful in the land leads her to the lethal dance in red hot iron shoes. In his essay “Eros and Psyche”, Erich Neumann delineates three kinds of beauty: the self-contained beauty of a young girl, oblivious to anything but herself, the seductive beauty of Aphrodite which has a natural purpose in mind, and the beauty of a woman in love who wishes to be beautiful for her beloved (p. 123). Snow White will have to develop a beauty beyond that first kind.



ne striking aspect of the story is the prominence of the number seven. The girl is seven years old when the mirror first informs the queen that she has a rival in her own, deadly beauty contest; there are seven dwarfs and these seven little men live seven mountains removed from the queen's castle. Because the number seven seems central, I want to look at its symbolism; to do so I consulted several Dictionaries of Symbols.

Seven corresponds to the seven days of the week, the seven planets, seven rungs of perfection, seven sphere or celestial stairs, the seven petals of the rose, the seven branches of the shaman's cosmic and sacrificial tree and so on. Seven denotes the fullness of the planetary and angelic orders, the fullness of the heavenly mansions, the fullness of the moral order and the fullness of the energies and principles of the spiritual orders. It symbolizes the dynamic perfection of a complete cycle: each phase of the moon lasts for seven days and the four phases of the moon (4 x 7) complete a cycle. Seven is a worldwide symbol of a dynamic wholeness. It indicates the passing from the known to the unknown: one cycle ends, but what will succeed it? The I-Ching is based on that cyclical pattern. The centrality and dynamics associated with the number seven in connection



to Snow White point to the development of a girl from pre-adolescence to maturity. During the first phase of life—birth to pre-adolescence—Snow White lives in her parental castle literally as well as psychologically. A threatening step mother’s increasingly malevolent energy (suitable image for a powerful negative mother complex) propels the heroine into the next, the transitional phase. During this phase the young girl is being prepared for her life as an adult, as a married queen. In order for her to understand fully all aspects of life, she’s “dropped” into the woods, at a distance of seven mountains - seven worlds! - away from the castle. She lives in a secret world. If you have had teenage children, you may have noticed that they, too, live in their own secret world. There they struggle with powerful, often chaotic inner urges. Their absolutely messy rooms so clearly show what goes on inside them.

Snow White has to spend this transitional time in service to seven little men. She has to do routine, boring, daily chores, humble tasks and that activity grounds her. In his article on “Individuation as a Journey of Grief, Grace and Glory”, Bud Harris points to the connection between humility and humus, between ground and the ground of our being which is to the earth, where things can grow. The stay with the dwarfs emphasizes this close connection to ground, to potential for growth and change. The danger for Snow White lies in her stubborn adherence to ignorance and innocence—in modern day clinical terms we would call this “denial” of the reality of evil. The lace and the comb and finally the apple slowly infect her with the shadowy substance that has formerly been only the queen’s. The dwarfs warn her about the queen. Working deep in the earth, they have an appreciation of the dark, more instinctual aspects of human nature. They understand what makes the queen tick and repeatedly warn the girl of the impending danger. The girl needs to know about the danger inherent in beauty

and become “dirtied” with the uglier sides of life. Like a hunter, who needs to know intimately about his prey’s life style in order to have a successful hunt, Snow White needs to learn about all aspects of life, which includes an understanding of the dangers of beauty. Only then can she be a truly mature queen.

In this fairy tale the dwarfs are a helpful, positive force—which is not always the case. Carl Jung thought of the dwarf as a representation of natural wisdom, sort of street-smartness. They are clarifications of hidden forces of nature as well as teachers and foster parents. After his mother Siglinde had died, Siegfried was raised by dwarfs. Jung also connects dwarfs with dactyls and Cabiri which have a phallic and creative aspect. It seems important to me that at this point in her development Snow White is introduced to masculine creative energy in a diminutive form preparatory to the union with the prince. Snow White’s past understanding of the masculine was limited to an absentee father and an encounter with a kindly huntsman. (He would be an image for feeling and related masculine energy.)

At medieval courts, dwarfs, jesters and buffoons were often the only mouthpiece for the naked truth: they were reality checks for royals; they serve that very same function in this fairy tale! The seven dwarfs are closely linked to nature whose secrets they are said to know as they toil underneath the surface in the belly of the Great Mother Earth. (Again, the sexual innuendo is striking!) I wondered about an equivalent in today’s world for being in service to seven tidy dwarfs. Some time ago a young woman, beautifully educated and sophisticated, consulted me: she was deeply depressed and had tried various workshops and meditative practices for help. Nothing worked. I suggested a daily routine of ordinary household chores. This was not at all palatable to her, but she was desperate and so she tried. After several weeks she reported feeling better and a few months later she even took on a humble job, way beneath her fine college education. After some more months she reported feeling grounded, deeply connected with herself, no longer depressed.

Snow White failed to listen to the dwarfs three times. Why was she such a “ninny?” I have wondered whether she needed to absorb some of the queen’s “piss and vinegar” attitude (by way of the poisoned comb and apple) in order to become a well rounded queen. Curiosity and disobedience seem to represent the feminine as a subversive element. Why did Eve disobey when everything was hunky-dory in paradise? Why did Psyche open the box of ointment she was strictly admonished to leave closed? Why did the young wife of Bluebird open the forbidden door? Erich Neuman suggests that irresistible feminine curiosity mingled with vanity is a hallmark of the feminine psyche. It is the very failure to obey that brings victory, an increase in consciousness. By being disobedient Snow White not only gets inoculated with the necessary and crucial amount of poison but she also demonstrates an emancipation from the dwarfs’ dictates. She learns about the pernicious dangers inherent in beauty, an increase in consciousness which nearly costs her life.

Finally the queen is successful and Snow White dies—this time she is truly dead. The dwarfs are unable to revive her. Looked at symbolically, she had finally died to her former way of being in the world and in a sense was incubating her new self in the coffin. Her time of being a ninny, a Kore, was over. Interestingly it is an apple that finally does her in—and a few associations to apple can help elaborate the theme of feminine maturation. Eating of the apple of the knowledge of the differ-

ence between good and evil comes to mind. After their fateful meal, Adam and Eve were forced to leave the womblike blissful garden of paradise and commence to become engaged with life. In the glass coffin Snow White remains in the state of beauty of the maiden. Neumann calls this a regression induced by the bad mother to the “barren, frigid beauty of mere maidenhood ... womanhood slumbers” (p. 128 - 129). But, in secret, the poison from the apple is being absorbed into her system. How often does it happen, that nothing seems to change in the course of an analysis—but the dreams point out that there is activity on a deeper layer of the psyche, which prepares for the next phase of life.

Carl Jung proposed that the story of Snow White “... contains clear indications of the myth of the seasons.” He understood the time in the coffin to correspond to the time earth is “held fast by winter’s cold, awaiting the liberating sun of spring.” Interpreted inner psychically, the fairy tale is about the sexual awakening of a young woman. (CW 4, par 496 + 497)

And, finally, I was curious about the role “accidents” play in this fairy tale. The accidental prick by the needle awakens the longing for and constellation of the heroine. Snow White accidentally finds the dwarfs’ cabin in the woods. Her relationship with the earth-bound dwarfs, and her humble work in service to them, connects her to the ground of her feminine being. The prince accidentally finds the coffin in the woods—what lead him there? And finally, the prince’s servants accidentally stumble over a root - as if rootedness had not been brought to our attention enough! That accident dislodges the piece of poisoned apple and Snow White comes to life—now an archetypal image for female energy that is ready for a coniunctio. Throughout the fairy tale invisible forces seem to be at work moving the plot along according to ancient, profound patterns. We sense the archetype of the Self at work in these “accidents”.

I love fairy tales. At times I will tell one to a client when I think it might be helpful. Then the very telling of the story brings about a different atmosphere in the room, similar to what happened in the air raid bunker years ago when my grandmother told fairy tales: there is a sense of safety and security, of being connected to ancient wisdom that wells up from a deeper source, which underlies the old stories and which comes to light and can continue to inspire, assist and enrich us in everyday life ■

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