The Fairy Tale: An Introduction to Literature and the Creative Process

After teaching many courses that run the gamut from survey of world literature to intensive studies of single authors such as James Joyce, Thomas Mann, and Fyodor Dostoevsky, I decided for a variety of reasons to introduce into the curriculum a course in the fairy tale. Many former students registered for the course partly because they were intrigued with the mystique of the genre and partly because they conjectured that, for once, Markman was teaching a course that must necessarily be a more relaxed approach to literary analysis. After all, what could even she "get into" with a study of many already familiar fairy tales? The fact was, however, that we did "get into" a great deal of depth, and precisely because the stories were often familiar and fairly direct they were particularly accessible to every conceivable literary approach without the usual time-consuming concerns with ramifications of plot. By the end of the course students were positive and I myself was assured that if they had had this fairy-tale experience in an introductory course, they could have handled many complex and sophisticated works with much more confidence in their ability to analyze and with much more sensitivity to the nuances involved in developing their insights. They would also have been able to attempt a creative writing project with more certainty of approach and with an understanding of the dynamics of relationships in metaphorical structure. In fact, by understanding the process of the fairy tale as a metaphor of the creative process, they would have been more conscious of the procedure of their own creative activity and therefore aware of some of its inherent problems. It is my purpose to document these claims and to explore the methodology that would implement them.

Ideally, perhaps, such a course would be taught inductively and students would be immersed in fairy tales until they were ready to define terms and for-

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mulate basic assumptions from their own experiences with them. However, a semester is too short for that costly approach and some lecturing on definitions and principles is needed from the onset, if only to provide a common vocabulary with which to begin discussions while realizing from the beginning that whatever is set up in the lecture will be modified, qualified, and redefined as a result of the subsequent intensive study of the tales themselves.

Although there is always the temptation to begin the investigation of a genre with questions of origin, history, and scholarship, one is inclined to agree with J. R. R. Tolkien that "to ask what is the origin of stories (however qualified) is to ask what is the origin of language and of the mind." To investigate the origin of fairy tales in particular leads us into the scientific "pursuit of folklorists or anthropologists: that is of people using the stories not as they were meant to be used" ("On Fairy Stories," Essays Presented to Charles Williams [Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1968], p. 47). Certainly one cannot ignore the work of such scholars as Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson who first classified the tales, and of Vladimir Jakovlevich Propp, whose morphological approach to indexing the tales according to the function of the character (i.e., what must be done by the character) shows how, by structural analysis, all fairy tales could be examined as a chain of variants. Nor can one ignore the many other scholars who have made intensive studies of the variations and reappearances of particular tales. However these areas are not sufficiently related to my focus to demand attention here. On the other hand, there are four basic considerations that are important in an introduction to any course in the fairy tale:

1. the concept of "truth" and its relationship to "naming";
2. the meaning and potential (and ramifications) of metaphor;
3. the common ingredients of the sense of magic in the world of the fairy tale;
4. the distinction between masculine and feminine principles and masculine and feminine roles.

A brief consideration of each of these would be instructive.

1. How unfortunate that the words myth and fairy tale have such perjorative connotations in our society and that "truth" applies only to scientific experiment! The implications of falsity and the idea that a course in the fairy tale is necessarily a course in children's literature need to be dispelled early, and students must be encouraged to realize that what is unreal is not of necessity what is untrue. True reality, said Franz Kafka, is always unrealistic, and one must certainly understand this in a study of the fairy tale. Moreover, as Grace A. Wood, among many others, points out, fairy tales are primarily "adult tales reflecting life more profoundly than is sometimes expected" ("What Lies Behind Fairy Tales?" Contemporary Review, 185 [1954], 365).

One is reminded of Genesis 1:28 and 2:19 in which the task of naming the animals is given to Adam in order that he have dominion over them; human beings have always been intrigued by the power of the word and the challenge to "name" creatively their own insights into the human condition. Such naming is
dependent on imaginative perception and, as we shall see, it is the real contribution of the great myths and fairy tales.

They are true because they are capable of expressing the essence of things or "naming" them by telling a story and by restoring the imagination to a primary place in human consciousness through its function of associative, analogical thinking. Moreover, fairy tales can present this alternative truth without jeopardizing our conscious scientific categories of the reality of space, time, and causality. Understanding their ability to do this is dependent on an understanding of the meaning, the potential, and the ramifications of metaphor.

2. Students usually learn early in their education that a metaphor is an implied analogy that identifies one object with another. But they rarely understand the basic relationship of the two objects, their transformative power as they impinge on each other, or their ability to serve as catalysts between the unconscious layer of the psyche and the outer manifestations of experience. Nor do they understand the ramifications of the extended metaphor which an entire fairy tale often becomes. It is important for students to realize that, although a metaphor suggests that there are significant analogies between the two things involved, it is clearly not an expression of a literal truth nor can it be replaced by paraphrased statements; the two frames of reference of which a reader must be simultaneously aware are held in dynamic tension for which there can be no substitution without destroying the new configuration that they form by juxtaposition. Metaphors are not symbols, not part of a communal language; the tension and energy they create exist only momentarily in a particular context and are an immediate expression of insight into relationships and feelings through external events and visible objects. The two realms that are joined are no longer distinct, and although for the moment the two are inseparably one, they do not unite as one symbol, but rather as one process in the tension of interaction during which each of the components loses its individual character in the formation and transformation of the energy that holds them together in a moment of transcendence. It is this ephemeral aspect of the metaphor that helps to create the aura of magic that one associates with fairy tales.

3. In addition to the sense of the ephemeral that is a basic component of metaphor, there are several other ingredients that contribute to the magical aura of the tales. The "once-upon-a-time" beginning of most fairy tales has several different effects. Eric Rabkin in Fantastic Words (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979) points out that these words open into a world that is an "alternative to our own" with its own rules that allow for, and even insist upon, the existence of fantastic characters and events. Everything is possible except for the "disconcertingly ordinary." Jack Xipes in Breaking the Magic Spell (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979) makes a similar point:

Paradoxically the magic power of folk and fairy tales stems from the fact that they do not pretend to be anything but folk and fairy tales, that is, they make no claims to be anything but artistic projections of fantasy. (p. 18)

Once we enter the world of the work, truth is defined from within it and not from something we bring into it from the outside. Moreover, the "once-upon-a-time"
beginning is not an allusion to any particular time. It therefore takes us out of
time into timelessness, to action recurring in all time. Like metaphor itself it is
always in the process of transformation, ending only to begin its process anew.

This sense of magic is also enhanced by the repetitive pattern of words and
events that we have come to expect in fairy tales. Far from resulting in
monotony, such repetition produces the effect of fantasy by creating a sense of
sacred ritual, and it contributes to the abstract, stylized effect of the tale that
also serves to remove us from everyday reality. Moreover, the nuances of the
differences in each of these repetitions are crucial to the sense of process, since
each repetition adds to and changes the first event just enough to keep the total
action, including its repetition, in motion. And of course there are other ramifications
of repetition. Wassily Kandinsky in his Concerning the Spiritual in Art
(New York: Wittenborn Art Books, 1947) states that:

the apt use of a word (in its poetical sense), its repetition twice, three times or even
more frequently . . . will not only tend to intensify the internal structure but also
bring out unsuspected spiritual properties in the word. Further, frequent repetition
of a word (a favorite game of children, forgotten in later life) deprives the word of
its external reference. (p. 34)

Similarly the repetition of a function intensifies its significance and separates it
from the specific reference so that it transcends space and time and becomes
part of a world from which the mundane is excluded.

One expects most of the important fairy-tale experiences to be performed
three times. To some extent this kind of repetition is different from those dis-
cussed above; it is often more specifically indicative of two opposites or ex-
tremes of choice with the third as the synthesis or reconciliation of the other
two, but certainly all three are part of the dynamic process and important to it.
Even in this sense the repetition suggests the transcendence of the temporal.

However we get there, once we enter that place of once-upon-a-time of
ritualistic repetition and feel the tensive rhythm of continual process, we have
entered a place and time where all is possible. Consider Sebastian in Shake-
peare’s The Tempest who, after watching the strange shapes that brought forth
the banquet and after listening to the marvelous music of Prospero’s island, is
ready to see a different reality as he exclaims, “‘Now I will believe/That there are
unicorns’” (III, iii). Like Sebastian as readers of fairy tales we are ready both to
expect and to accept the realm of the fantastic as reality. The world of the fairy
tale, like Prospero’s island, provides an initiation into the imagination where
truth resides, even if, as Gonzalo tells Sebastian, no one in Naples would believe
it. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that there are no gods in this world; it is
not a cosmic realm. The metaphor brings us obviously into the personal world of
the human condition.

4. There is, of course, a great temptation to limit the characters of fairy tales
to a literal consideration of their roles as men and women and to narrow the
reading of the tales to the concerns of their promotion of female acquiescence to
male power, their idealization of marriage as the ultimate goal of life, and their
demonstration of the need for women to accept passive roles that relegate them
to lives of motherhood and domesticity. However, to do so is both to ignore how
metaphor in the fairy tale externalizes inner processes and to disregard the stylized world in which the dynamics of universal life-in-process is the basic focus. The alternative to this temptation is a fruitful and viable one: to consider the masculine and feminine principles as energies within all of us rather than as masculine and feminine roles. Almost every fairy tale demonstrates by its “happily-ever-after” ending that the union or synthesis of these principles is essential for life to continue. One is reminded that the earliest primitive folk myths saw the world as being created from the undifferentiated egg or single figure. The unified “one” split to become two. Teiresias, the Greek seer, was both male and female, appearing first as masculine, then as feminine, and then as masculine. The later differentiation of masculine and feminine which related to the sun and the moon makes the symbology even clearer. Although the following listing cannot be considered as complete or even as a carefully constructed division, it gives a sense of the duality suggested by the tales that makes the relationship of masculine and feminine principles a viable consideration:

**Masculine**

- Sun
- Apollonian
- Intellect, reason
- Movement, action, penetration
- Outer form
- Mind-related, logic

**Feminine**

- Moon (mystery, changing), menstrual cycle
- Dionysian
- Feeling, soul, mystery
- Being, in process of changing
- Inner (intuition, impulse)
- Earth-related, creative

Since neither of the principles has meaning without its relationship to the other, they must as principles be held in tension in the process of their interaction. And we will find that many of the fairy tales are concerned with the dynamics of their relationship and the necessity of their “marriage” or integration for the creative process to continue. To see this marriage in terms of roles would demean the potential of the tales to work out these larger relationships and lessen the importance of their universal appeal.

Generally, the implications of some of the images are made clear from the context of the tales or from the personal experiences one brings to them, but it can be useful to discuss some of them in the abstract if only to alert students to the need to “think symbolically” as they read. Moreover, by discussing a few specific ones, students begin to trust their own abilities to stretch their imaginations. Some images might include: 1) the forest as a symbol of the feminine principle (related to the Great Mother and the uncharted, perilous aspect of the unconscious) as opposed to the sun’s power which is associated with cultivated land, a planned (i.e., logical) city; 2) water, which is identified with intuitive wisdom and is related to both death and rebirth (baptism) since old forms are destroyed (flood, washing) and recombined to generate the emergence of the new; 3) jewels as spiritual truths often hidden in the earth or the unconscious in the form of intuitive and superior knowledge which is also related to the snake; 4) the oven or furnace as a womb or feminine/mother symbol and the vessel in
alchemy in which the transformation takes place; and 5) the king as the symbol of judgment, control, and supreme consciousness, and the sick king indicative of the sterility of the land. Often without imposing these meanings in a lecture a class discussion will make them clear, because students do realize that their own experiences or the relationships set up within the tales themselves will reveal the implications of most of the symbols they encounter.

With the establishment of a working vocabulary and with a readiness to see the fairy tale as metaphor and to enter a world of magic and fantasy in which male and female characters can be understood in terms of male and female principles, students are prepared to experience the dynamics of the process of "truth" within the world of fairy tales. We can now proceed to a discussion of a few specific representative tales to show how and to what extent a background in the fairy tale can provide a valuable introduction to the study of literature. The sampling of tales here is necessarily a limited one, but even this limited sampling will manifest many suggestions for, and applications to, the literature students will analyze later on; the possibilities are endless. The brevity and directness of fairy tales permit the instructor to do much that is prohibitive with a longer work. Whereas it would be impractical (I know because I have tried it) to cover all of the interpretive possibilities of War and Peace, the brevity of the fairy tale makes it possible for the student to keep the details and the structural pattern of the whole in mind. The study of the fairy tale also helps to dispel students' notions that professors are privy to "hidden meanings" that they keep as secrets in their Pandora's box to be let out from time to time simply to baffle students; developing readers are able to see that these details do, in fact, have an organic function and meaning intrinsic to the work itself. The study will also enable students to see that the single work can be examined profitably from several angles of vision without concluding that one interpretation is "right" and all others need be rejected. The essential consistency of any interpretive approach and the validity of each of several perspectives can be demonstrated far more convincingly for the inexperienced reader in the discussion of a fairy tale than they can in the discussion of longer works for which the students need a single interpretation if they are to comprehend the whole.

Because the narrative of "Hansel and Gretel" is familiar to most students, it is a good choice with which to begin. The specific details that may have been forgotten by some students will inevitably come out in the discussion of this tale because it is written with such great economy that nothing in it can be dismissed as irrelevant. Moreover, students learn from this observation how important it is to take all specifics into account in the analytic process. It is particularly useful to begin with a personal or psychological approach to the tale because students are able to relate to it more readily from that vantage point. Interestingly, there is both a scientific and a historical precedent for using a psychological approach to the interpretation of fairy tales. In The Uses of Enchantment (New York: Random House, 1977), Bruno Bettelheim refers to the frame story of Thousand and One Nights in which Scheherazade, whom he has named as the world's first therapist, saves her own life by telling fairy tales that ultimately cure King
Shahryar from his intense depression and homicidal tendencies because he begins to understand his own psychic reality as he listens and identifies with them.

Students are fascinated with fairy tales for the same reasons that therapists have used them successfully for their patients. Clearly fairy tales do portray events for all of us that can be understood as images of psychological or cosmic processes without being forced into any strictly defined Freudian or Jungian formulae. As students listen to or read the tales they surely recognize (know again) something meaningful in their lives, and they can experience the tales as metaphoric representations of what is basic to the human condition even while they are mindful that each tale has its unique application on an individual level. Stated in Jungian terms: fairy tales permit us an essential exposure to our personal unconscious. It is interesting to note in the first few moments of discussing “Hansel and Gretel” how quickly students manifest their awareness that they are involved with a world that is not entirely physical, and they are fascinated by the process of relating that world to their own as well as to other literary experiences.

Early in a discussion of “Hansel and Gretel” students recognize the familiar fairy-tale technique of expressing contradictory attitudes and feelings by splitting, in this story, one parent into mother, stepmother, and witch. They readily recognize this technique as one used, for example, by Dostoevsky in The Brothers Karamazov, and they can learn to look for it when they come to study such works as Sartre’s No Exit and Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter.

Secondly, a sensitivity to the basic thematic structure of “Hansel and Gretel” and to some of the dominant motifs within it will similarly enhance the students’ understanding of more sophisticated, multi-layered literature. The pattern of this simple fairy tale can be seen in the form of a spiral that follows closely both the personal development of consciousness and the basic pattern of the creative process.

1. The comfortable home or security of the tradition that exists on the edge of the forest is no longer really comfortable or creative: “A great dearth falls upon the land.”

2. The potential heroes are reluctant to leave the womb to enter the forest of uncharted paths: Hansel marks the way with stones for an immediate and direct return. When he looks back to the house, he says he sees his little white cat on the roof, an image of the territorial security and fireside warmth and comfort that “home” still signifies to him.

3. The second journey outward is less formidable. The heroes are more spiritually ready for departure as indicated by the cat’s being replaced by Hansel’s little white pigeon just before he throws the crumbs on the path. This substitution makes the possibility of return more tenuous since the way back is eventually eradicated by birds, who do, in fact, represent and encourage the transcendent flight the children seem now better emotionally prepared to take.

4. Once into the interior, cut off from the tradition, the initiates manifest a total lack of control, indulging in a gluttonous night journey of utter
abandon and reveling in all the witch’s enticements even before she offers them. Her house in the center of the forest initially is their idealization of the home from which they had been expelled. They “thought they were in heaven” as long as they ignored the ambivalence and complexity of their condition.

5. The reversal begins only after their awareness of the destructive forces that threaten them (i.e., after the fall) and after the animal-like unproductive impulse is countered by the power of the super-ego1 to “name” and overcome that destructive, unleashed potential by motivating the spiritual and human resources from within to transform it to a creative force. This process is symbolized in the tale by Hansel and Gretel’s ability to take the jewels which represent spiritual truths and superior knowledge from every corner of the witch’s house after the witch is destroyed and “they had no longer any need to fear her.”

6. The return journey can begin, and they can return with the jewels. They know now that the witch’s forest, like the scar of Odysseus, contains the potential of both destruction and creativity.

7. Ultimately the mode of their return presents a test of that awareness: they must take a different route from the one they took into the forest. They must, in fact, cross a body of water, a symbol that we have already noted is identified with intuitive wisdom and the washing away of old forms to permit the emergence of the new ones. The spiral pattern of the piece is evident from the higher level of consciousness demonstrated by the process of their return and the concommitant respect for nature that is manifested by Gretel’s realization that together they will be “too heavy for the little duck” that will take them across the water. Each of them must be transported separately.

8. They return with the jewels or the residue of the experience to infuse the sterile land with the spiritual potential for revival. The woman, the old feminine principle, is gone so that the heroes’ return brings a new sense of life, enabling them to live with the father “in perfect happiness” without fear of what was once unknown and repressed.

“Hansel and Gretel” is, of course, hardly Dante’s Divine Comedy, and I am fully aware of the danger of making the comparison. Yet by juxtaposing the two pieces, I have seen the students’ imaginations stretch far enough to think of Dante in personal and psychological terms with new insight into his initial fear of “waking to find myself alone in a dark wood . . . the very memory [of which] gives a shape to fear.” Whether that “shape” is left ambiguous or formed as a

1. In his rather convincing discussion of the mistranslation of Freud’s term id, Bettelheim suggests the more exact impulse which he insists comes closer to Freud’s intention than any other English word because it suggests “a motive or tendency coming from within.” See “Freud and the Soul,” The New Yorker, (March 1, 1982) pp. 52-93. Bettelheim also argues that Freud meant more than “conscience” by super-ego. It includes “that wider aspect of the psyche which comprises both its conscious and fairly reasonable controlling aspects and its unconscious, unreasonable, compulsive, punitive, and persecutory aspects” (p. 84). It is in this sense that I use the term here.
demonic witch, Dante's early attraction to, or sympathy with, the various manifestations of it and his gradually developed ability to "name" and overcome them as he proceeds to a higher level of consciousness open up a new possibility for students to relate to the work. He too after being "diverted by false pleasure" (Paradiso, Canto II, 135) must cross a stream. And he too makes his return with the jewels of new insights into the profound truths of the universe:

In heaven's courts, from which height I have come, are many gems so precious and so lovely that they can not be taken from the kingdom.

Of such those splendors sang. Paradiso (Canto X, 70-73)

By the end of the canto he too reaches the sound of total harmony and "joy becomes eternal" (Paradiso Canto X, 148). Once students learn from fairy tales to think in terms of basic structure, there is an excitement in examining the details and the fleshing out of this great masterpiece with readers who might otherwise find the most literal interpretation as the only acceptable one.

Other comparable possibilities are endless—Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse, Joyce's Ulysses, and Mann's The Magic Mountain. But perhaps no work is more directly amenable to this approach than is Andre Gide's Theseus (New York: Vintage, 1950) in which the ironic posture of the author (a difficult one for students) is more clearly obvious by playing out the juxtaposition with "Hansel and Gretel." Gide's Theseus is ready to go into the labyrinth because "he despised comfort and idleness" (p. 52). Daedalus had constructed it so that whoever entered would have no desire to leave and "therefore assembled in this one place the means to satisfy every kind of appetite" (p. 76), so that most of those who entered there reveled in its lack of "order, logic, or substance" (p. 76) and failed to emerge. Like Hansel and Gretel at the witch's house, they thought they were in heaven, but unlike them they are tempted to stay in a paradise that keeps them out of time and therefore out of life. Theseus, however, has been given a thread which Daedalus describes as

"the tangible symbol of duty . . . for nothing can begin from nothing, and it is from your past and from what you are at this moment, that what you are going to be must spring." (p. 77)

By using the thread Theseus must and can make the return journey for life to continue into the future. It is the same return that Homer's Odysseus must make after he loses his men to similar temptations with the Sirens, Circe, the Lotus-eaters, and others; the same that Quentin in William Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury does all he can not to make when he tries to trick his shadow in order to remain out of time and to avoid the confrontation of what Eugene O'Neill in his "Great God Brown" refers to as "looking into your own dark."

Theseus, unlike Icarus, does realize that the labyrinth is within himself; and as a creative hero like Dante, Odysseus, or Mann's Hans Castorp, he cannot stay to indulge himself in its temptations. He must return to the world he is now more capable of understanding and transforming. The creative process is evi-
dent: the string, like the duck, is the mediator between sky and water and serves as a bridge between the unconscious or feminine principle and the conscious masculine one. The momentary interaction of the two makes harmony or integration possible, whereas staying comfortably in either one changes the potential artist hero into what Sherwood Anderson in his introduction to *Winesberg, Ohio* defines as "a grotesque."

Much of the great literature to which we expose our students, from Euripides’ *Hippolytus* to Hermann Hesse’s *Steppenwolf*, becomes accessible, relevant, and exciting from an awareness of this approach to the material, but other possibilities need also to be explored.

Many fairy tales set up existential dilemmas, albeit briefly and pointedly, and although there are several that lend themselves more directly to an existential analysis, the consideration of "Hansel and Gretel" within an existential framework is an instructive one. The children enter the forest, which is a symbol of all potentialities, and they are left there without any determined forms or answers; there are no roads. They attempt to hold on to the tradition, but the string is a tenuous one and disappears. Their first experience, when they eat the witch’s gingerbread house without consciousness of their action, is on what one might call the Kierkegaardian aesthetic level. When they are confronted by crisis and a threat to their lives, they are faced with the responsibility of their own decisions and the need to act on an ethical level without answers from the traditional sources and without any assurance as to the consequences of their actions. That which offered heaven is also that which offers destruction. They confront the absurdity of the void and in spite of it decide to act. Having made the decisions to act responsibly, they move, each in isolation, as they cross from one side of the water to the other. In effect, they cross from an inauthentic existence to the beginning of a true one that is represented by the jewels with which they return. The stepmother, the principle that dictated their lives before, is now dead, and they have their moment of integration (would Kierkegaard allow us to call it a leap to faith?) in their return to the world to determine the essence of their own lives. What began as their fall from the garden of Eden is an important step in the development of consciousness; they return with the jewels of their experience and an insightful awareness of their own essence. It is interesting that even the strange ending of the tale supplements this interpretation: "My tale is done, there runs a mouse, whosoever catches it, may make himself a big fur cap out of it." We must shape what confronts us to determine our own existence; "Hansel and Gretel," like many fairy tales, suggests a way to self-realization within the limits of what is given.

Having been exposed to even this brief and oversimplified introduction to existential analysis, students might approach such works as Gide’s *Theseus*, Sartre’s *The Flies*, or Albert Camus’ "Myth of Sisyphus" with at least a fundamental vocabulary for an opening discussion that will necessarily involve more precise distinctions and qualifications as it develops. But once again the imagination of the reader has been challenged to search out the possibilities for yet another angle of vision and the potential of new perspectives.

There are many other possibilities that provide equally provocative and re-
warding analytic approaches to ‘‘Hansel and Gretel.’’ A socio-political approach would consider the implications of the tale for its original audience of poor, rural people who sometimes had to resort to horrifying extremes, even to the abandonment of children, when there was not enough food to feed a family. The plight of the parents, who are not condemned for turning the children away, can be seen as a recognition of the force of dehumanizing social conditions, just as the courageous action of the children expresses a hope that when evil destroys itself, the worthy will take what is rightfully theirs. For the Grimms’ nineteenth- and twentieth-century audiences too the fantasy and magic of the story can be interpreted as instruments to establish or restore social and economic justice, as the creative process with its transformative power to effect change is manifested now in the political-economic area.

Some instructors will find yet other approaches readily applicable to some of the other tales they assign. For example, a religious approach to ‘‘Our Lady’s Child’’ (Grimm) works well and stimulates interesting discussion. An introduction to a study of the alchemical paradigm as it is applicable to such tales as ‘‘The Spirit in the Bottle’’ (Grimm), ‘‘The Juniper Tree’’ (Grimm), and Klingsohr’s Märchen in Novalis’ Henry von Ofterdingen has proved to be very exciting to my students. Critical theories such as structuralism, poststructuralism, and theories related to the hermeneutics of consciousness can be particularly instructive for those students with a background in literary theory when they are applied to such tales as ‘‘Snow White and Rose Red’’ or ‘‘The Water of Life’’ (Grimm); and the application of strict Jungian or Freudian theories will be illuminating for those students with an appropriate background in psychology.

There are many fairy tales in which the hero or heroine is described or specifically named as a dummling or simpleton; these tales have proved particularly valuable for purposes of literary analysis and for understanding some important elements of the creative process. In the Grimms’ ‘‘The Three Feathers,’’ for example, the old, weak king must decide who of his three sons is most capable of inheriting the dying kingdom, that is, who will be able to initiate the creative process to restore the land. The tale has a dual focus: the specific objects demanded from the quests to initiate the process of renewal and the experiences of each of the three brothers in attaining them. Students easily recognize that the first two objects, a beautiful carpet and a beautiful ring, are symbols of integration. That recognition in turn provides the insight that indicates a need for the third symbol, a beautiful woman who ‘‘could leap through a ring which hung in the centre of the hall.’’ The carpet or weaving symbolizes the integration of the warp (the masculine, Apollonian vertical plane) and the weft or woof (the feminine Dionysian horizontal plane). Where they cross there is a union of masculine and feminine principles, and all the meaning that we have already seen is inherent in them. The ring adds the dimension of cyclic time and eternity and suggests the symbolic spiritual connotations of the union. Moreover, the ring which Simpleton returns sparkles with jewels and manifests, as we noted in ‘‘Hansel and Gretel,’’ an insight into higher truths. The third object, a beautiful woman, would bring the feminine principle to the land that is dying because it
has none, and her ability to jump through the center of the circle, rather than fall earthbound as did the women who were brought by the two “clever” brothers, certainly accentuates the metaphoric implications of the quest: the union transcends the earthly and mundane by taking the feminine principle into the realm of a new union in the sphere of the spiritual.

The achievement of these quests emphasizes still another focus. Each of the “clever” sons follows his feather to its worldly uninspiring place and both return with nothing more than the useless sterility of the external world. However, Simpleton’s feather, a symbol of instinctual knowledge, points to a door in the earth which he enters to find “a great, fat, toad,” a lunar animal symbolic of the earth mother or feminine principle and the embodiment of the missing ingredient from the dying land. It is she, of course, who can supply the carpet and the jewelled ring, and it is through her—and we note that she does not actually do this task for him—that Simpleton can transform one of her offspring into a beautiful maiden so that the integration can be completed and the renewal achieved.

It is an instructive and profitable experience to permit each student an opportunity to explore a literary work into which the discussion of “The Three Feathers” gives new and important insight. Although many limit themselves to specific allusions, the most perceptive students are able to stretch to the concepts essential to an in-depth literary analysis. Certainly each of these insights deserves a fuller discussion than is permitted here, but the following will serve to indicate the breadth and depth of possibilities inspired by my experience with the exercise.

Students were excited by the parallels with Goethe’s Faust and the difficult concepts in it that the discussion of “The Three Feathers” clarified for them, such as Faust’s confrontation with the Earth Spirit who “working on the roaring loom of time” weaves into God’s living garment the polarities of the rise and fall, the womb and the tomb. Faust is unable to comprehend the interrelationships of these polarities although he is himself tortured by the earthly and spiritual souls that are constantly at war within his own breast. By understanding the intensity of Faust’s emotional conflict in the face of the horrendous ambiguity of the human condition, students are able to realize that when he makes his pact with Mephistopheles, Faust clearly does not seek pleasure, but that he is committed to a quest “to seize the highest and the lowest” and to juxtapose all manifestations of good and evil, pain and pleasure, success and disappointment. Through this experience he hopes to achieve an insight into the unity and the cyclical pattern of life: “show me the fruit that rots right on the tree, / And trees that every day leaf out anew!” (Faust: Part I and Part II, trans. Charles E. Passage [Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965], I, Part 2, II. 6275-76). Metaphorically his quest is to experience the process of integration that is epitomized in “The Three Feathers” by Simpleton’s return with the carpet and the ring. Faust’s subsequent journey also takes him into the earth and to the sacred realm of the Mothers where, by transcending space, time, and reason, he is able to confront the formlessness that precedes the form and eventually to achieve his own union with the Eternal-Feminine as he too comes to understand the underlying relationship of all things. Although his journey is more complex than Simpleton’s,
Mephisto’s important comment as he leaves applies equally to both: “Sink, then! I could as well say: Rise!/It makes no difference” (Act II, Part 1, ll. 1686-87).

Students were ready to identify many literary heroes who experience a similar kind of “fall” or symbolic death before a return to life on a higher level of consciousness, and they realized that the creative journey, like that of Odysseus, was one that exposed them to the unformed chaos of all potentialities away from the language of tradition and the inflexible rules of past forms. They saw this exposure to potentiality in both “Hansel and Gretel” and “The Three Feathers,” and they recognized in many of the fairy tales we read that it was also manifested by the heroine’s or hero’s relationship with helping animals and an understanding of animal languages, which symbolized a free interchange between the unconscious levels of the psyche and the needs of conscious actions. As a result students for the first time were able to understand such characters as Anselmus in E. T. A. Hoffmann’s “The Golden Flower Pot” who, after being hermetically sealed in a glass bottle, is freed by the power of love. Tolstoy’s General Kutúzov in War and Peace, after sleeping through a critical staff meeting, can emerge victoriously over the great intellectual tactician, Napoleon, because Napoleon kept himself out of tune with the forces of nature and never allowed himself the experience of a symbolic death that Freud in his essay on “The Theme of the Three Caskets” (1913) will equate with “dumbness”: “dumbness is to be understood as representing death” (On Creativity and the Unconscious [New York: Harper and Row, 1958], p. 68). It is a condition in which one, like Hans Castorp in Mann’s The Magic Mountain, can “take stock” of what is possible and from which one can return alone with new creative energies.

Before this experience students were tempted to dismiss a character with whom they could not spontaneously identify and empathize; it is difficult for an inexperienced reader to care about a hero who is not immediately admirable. Simpleton is not the clever, rich, or powerful brother, yet his are the experiences on which the tale focuses and each of his adventures is carefully designed to serve a catalytic function in his transformation. However, after reading “The Three Feathers” even naive students were far less reluctant to accept Stendhal’s rather distant attitude toward Julien in The Red and the Black or Mann’s toward Hans Castorp as “the delicate child of life,” or the many other literary “heroes” to whom by distance or description a narrator seems disturbingly ambivalent.

Students were also impressed with the effect of the repetitive elements in “The Three Feathers.” These elements intensified its ritualistic power and sharpened its stylized abstract quality. The repetition of events, while providing a unifying structure for the piece, also calls attention to the nuances of the differences with each reiteration of the experience. Students were able to reread Jean Genet’s “The Blacks” with a new appreciation of what Genet called his “ceremonial style”; they were also able to read such works as Mann’s “Death in Venice” and O’Neill’s “The Great God Brown” in which the repetitive motifs build as they impinge familiarly on the consciousness of the reader who is alerted to the nuances with each subtle change in their reappearance.

The most innovative students were delighted by the clear progression of the
creative process that is delineated in the tale as one that they could recognize as their own experience in their artistic endeavors as well as in the development of many heroes in great literary works: the task given, the need to leave the already existing models they had studied and emulated, the frightening stare at the blank canvas or paper, the discovery of inner resources and new paths, and the need to return with that discovery to the existing forms until the spiritual moment when the two are interwoven and the new creation is born. No wonder, they realized, that Huck Finn cannot stay home for long or that the young intellectual in Zorba the Greek must join with Zorba as the embodiment of his own repressed feeling and passion before he can learn to dance, a symbol of his creativity.

Certainly every instructor of literature has had the experience of a student’s insistence on imposing his or her conception of reality or the “rules” of a personal world onto the world of the narrative, with the result that the work that was written is left unanalyzed. Yet while reading “The Three Feathers” students were perfectly willing to enter its world and accept as possible what would be literally impossible in their own: a toad who speaks and who is able to open the box of treasures from which all that Simpleton needs will come and who is able to give instructions for the transformation of a baby toad into the essential aspect of the feminine principle.

Students realize then that rather than requiring a suspension of disbelief, the fairy tale encourages a willing belief in the reality of Simpleton’s world. Once they are ready to enter that world and move around within its parameters, they will soon find it almost frighteningly enticing to enter a world such as the one in which Gregor Samsa in Kafka’s “Metamorphosis” wakes up from unsettling dreams to “find himself changed in his bed into a monstrous vermin.” Kafka was not confined to a literal description of reality because, as Northrop Frye points out, realism limits the imagination while the distortion of it makes it possible for all energies to be devoted to elaborating the design of the work and to creating a world that is abstract beyond logic and plausibility (Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology [New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963], pp. 29, 31). Furthermore, since the world of the work must be created from within the work itself, students can be encouraged to work closely with the specific details of the text and to study their relationships to its carefully wrought design. The class discussion of “The Three Feathers” emphasized this need as well as the importance of an immediate entry into the world of any work of art. Students realized that this awareness made accessible much twentieth-century literature and art such as Eugene Ionesco’s “Rhinoceros” and his other plays, Mann’s Confessions of Felix Krull, and all of Kafka’s fiction. And several students were excited by the realization that Stephen in Joyce’s Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (New York: Random House, 1916) was synthesizing what we had clearly recognized at the end of our study of this and other tales: wholeness (“the esthetic image . . . apprehended as selfbounded and selfcontained upon the immeasurable background of space or time which is not it”), harmony (the rhythm of structure formed by the “balanced part against part within its limits,” and radiance (“a spiritual state” like “the enchantment of the heart”) (pp. 248-250). Whether or not we agree with Joyce about the nature of art, we could now
discuss his complex aesthetic theory with an understanding of his key terms because on a lower frequency we had applied them quite naturally to our study of the tales.

Although there are numerous literary works that would have served my purpose equally well, the final application of our study of the fairy tales was crystalized by our reading of Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook*, in which the potentially creative heroine, Anna, tries to record the various fragments of her life in four separate notebooks: the black about writing, the red her political involvements, the blue a diary of the events of her life factually reported, and the yellow her attempts to fictionalize them. Creativity is impossible until, in a single transcendent vision during a film experience that is clearly a symbolic trip to the Mothers, she becomes “faced with the burden of recreating order out of the chaos.” It is only then that she is able to bring all the fragments together in a metamorphic wedding of the masculine and feminine principles that those four notebooks represented and to create an integrated weaving, a work of art that has a chance “to live happily ever after,” and to be appropriately named *The Golden Notebook*.

As I noted earlier, there are some obvious dangers in juxtaposing a study of the fairy tale with more sophisticated, complex works of literature. It is always possible that some student will leave the class with the memory that *Moby Dick* is “just like” Lucius Apuleius’ “Amor and Psyche” or that all dumlings are ultimately the heroes of the world. But I am willing to take that risk very happily when after a study of the fairy tale, I have enticed my unsophisticated readers to enter the complex world of *Moby Dick* with a readiness to accept Melville’s metaphoric conception of Ahab’s white whale. Or to understand Faulkner’s fragmentation of point of view in *The Sound and the Fury* as a reflection of the split image of a potentially whole entity. Or to think of each episode of Hans Castorp’s visit in Mann’s *The Magic Mountain* as a more advanced stage in Cinderella’s tasks of sorting the lentils in order to continue the creative process that is most productive when the helpful spirit of nature in the figure of Mynheer Peeperkorn flows through him. Or to recognize in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* the implications of Alyosha’s frenetic movements between the spiritual and the experiential worlds that keep the essence of his life in process; or to interpret, after reading “‘The Frog Prince,’” Holga’s sustaining philosophy in Arthur Miller’s *After the Fall* (New York: Bantam, 1964) when she explains to Quentin that:

“I dreamed I had a child, and even in the dream I saw it was my life, and it was an idiot, and I ran away. . . . Until I thought, if I could kiss it, whatever in it was my own, perhaps I could sleep. And I bent to its broken face, and it was horrible. . . . but I kissed it. I think one must finally take one’s life in one’s arms, Quentin.”

(pp. 30-31)

In fact, it would be a risk worth taking even if some non-affected student in the back row were innocently to ask, “Dr. Markman, sometimes isn’t a fairy tale just a fairy tale?”