

that, the story continues, "the wife took ill, and seven months later she gave birth to a child. All of his parts were perfectly formed, but he was no larger than a thumb." Again, the various elements of this depiction will be understood differently by children than by adults, especially the seven-month pregnancy (which under primitive delivery conditions would probably not have produced a live birth).

The well-known story "Rapunzel" (Grimm 12) offers an example that was apparently too daring for the early-nineteenth-century public, and the Grimms removed the suggestive passage from the second and all following editions of their collection. Rapunzel, imprisoned in a tower, lets down her hair, thus allowing a prince to climb up and visit her. According to the first edition, her guardian learns of these forbidden trysts when one day Rapunzel says to her, "Frau Gothel, tell me why it is that my clothes are all too tight. They no longer fit me." Hearing this, the guardian punishes Rapunzel by cutting off her hair (a traditional punishment for sexual indiscretion) and banishing her to a wilderness. The naïve girl's complaint that her clothes no longer fit will mean nothing to a child hearing this story, but every adult will understand.

SYMBOLS IN FAIRY TALES

Natural and Traditional Symbols

Symbols are things or acts that communicate meaning beyond themselves. Countless objects from the natural world suggest extended meaning, and storytellers use such items repeatedly. For example, eggs and flowers suggest both fragility and fertility. Bread or grain make logical symbols for life. A forest, one of the most-used symbols in fairy tales, represents both freedom and danger. A pathway suggests order and security. The sun, with its life-giving rays, works well as a symbol for God. The uncountable stars symbolize eternity. Different animals have observable or purported qualities that lead to symbolic interpretation; thus lions represent courage, wolves viciousness, owls wisdom, ants and bees diligence, foxes cunning, bears laziness, and eagles nobility. Fantasy beasts and composite animals, such as dragons, unicorns, griffins, mermaids, and sphinxes, appear regularly in fairy tales and have special symbolic meaning. Bodies of water often symbolize a dividing line between two realms. In this regard wells and springs are often seen, symbolically or even literally, as passageways between this world and an underground world inhabited by fairies, elves, trolls, and a host of earth-spirits.

Institutions of all types—clans, guilds, fraternities, religions, armies, and nations—develop sets of symbols that provide identification and meaning for their members. These can be abstract designs (such as a Scottish plaid or the Star of David), designs drawn from nature (like the moon-inspired Islamic crescent), or special objects from a group's past (for example, a cross or a fish for Christianity). Crowns, orbs, chalices, rings, lamps, dragons, unicorns, and innumerable patterns from traditional heraldry all can and do appear in fairy tales, usually with symbolic meaning.

Number Symbolism

In a sense the most common number used in fairy tales is two. Although the number itself is not always named, the feeling of a universal duality of things is never far beneath the main text. Typical fairy-tale settings are both of this world and of another world. Humans consist of body and soul, and they are constantly faced with good and evil. Fairy tales thrive on simplification, focusing on polar opposites rather than on the complex continuum that connects them. A decision is right or wrong. One turns to the left or to the right. A secondary character is either for or against the hero.

Beyond this elemental dualism, the most common number in fairy tales is three. Possibly based on structures of the natural world and the human mind, three is universally seen as a special number. A triangle is the most stable of all simple designs. We start a race with the three-part command "ready, set, go." The basic family consists of father, mother, and child. And, of course, the Christian Godhead is a trinity, further endorsing the number three's positive character. Fairy-tale episodes are typically repeated three times. If a set number of wishes is granted, the number is almost always three.

Four, the number of cardinal directions and sides in a rectangle, is also a special number, often representing rectitude or completeness. Seven also symbolizes completeness, as derived from the seven days of creation and the seven planets of Greek antiquity. Twelve gains its special meaning from the Judeo-Christian tradition: the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles of Jesus. Thirteen brings unbalance to the stability of 12, as, for example, in the 13 participants at the last supper of Jesus. Two, three, four, seven, 12, and 13 are thus the special numbers of traditional folktales. When they occur within a fairy-tale plot they likely represent more than just arithmetic counters.



Arabic calligraphy in the shape of a triangle. Cover design for Richard Burton's translation of the *1,001 Nights* (1885–1888). *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night: A Plain and Literal Translation of the Arabian Nights Entertainments*, trans. Richard F. Burton, 10 vols. plus 6 supplemental vols. (Privately printed by the Burton Club, 1885–1888). Cover design on each volume.

Color Symbolism

Color symbolism is often suggested by nature. Blood and fire are red, so red might represent danger or courage. Red is also the color of menstrual blood, and can thus suggest sexual maturity and fertility. A large number of fairy tales—two examples are “The Juniper Tree” (Grimm 47) and “Little Snow-White” (Grimm 53)—depict a young wife who pricks her finger and then sees drops of blood in the snow, which she correctly interprets as a sign that she soon will become pregnant. This interpretation is given added credibility when one considers that arranged marriages in preindustrial Europe often involved girls who had not yet come of age.

New plant growth is green, making that color a natural symbol for hope. The heaven is blue, leading to connotations of purity and piety (Saint Mary is traditionally clothed in blue). Old people's hair (and sometimes their skin) is gray, associating that color with both the problems (failing health) and the benefits (wisdom) that come with age. White, the color of new snow and bleached cloth, often symbolizes purity, as does colorless transparency, as in Cinderella's glass slippers.

Gold, both the metal and the color, appears in countless fairy tales, often symbolizing any positive quality, not merely its obvious representation of wealth. A good example of the word *gold* depicting something other than the shiny metal is found in “The Gold-Children” (Grimm 85), a tale that features twin boys “who were entirely golden” but (unlike King Midas's daughter) still able to function like ordinary people.

The symbolic meaning of some colors varies substantially from one culture to another. In English green suggests jealousy, and blue sadness, but these connotations do not carry over into other languages. The preference of pink for girls and blue for boys is by no means universal. In Western cultures black represents mourning, a role played by white in the Orient. In Norse mythology blue symbolizes death and mourning. Unfortunately, colors can also reflect prejudicial and racist attitudes inherited from the past, with expressions such as dark or black designating undesirable qualities and light or white suggesting positive attributes. An embarrassing example is provided by “The White Bride and the Black Bride” (Grimm 135).

Symbolic Images

In addition to natural and traditional symbols, fairy tales also contain innumerable images that beg for personal interpretation: a frog demanding to sleep with a princess (Grimm 1); a boy learning to shudder when his new bride throws a bucketful of minnows over him in bed (Grimm 4); a girl letting down her hair to allow a man access to the tower where she is imprisoned, then later discovering that she is pregnant (Grimm 12); two abandoned children killing a witch, then discovering that their abusive stepmother has died (Grimm 15); a confused suitor determining which woman is the right bride by how her shoe fits (Grimm 21); a wolf enticing a naïve girl to get into bed with him, then devouring her (Grimm 26); a girl refusing to carry an egg with her at all times, as demanded by her captor, and thus gaining control over him (Grimm 46); a creature, half boy and half hedgehog, riding on a rooster while playing bagpipes (Grimm 108); a boy seeking the key to a wild man's cage under his mother's pillow (Grimm 136). The list has no end.



The half-hedgehog, half-boy creature claims his bride (Grimm 108). Illustration by H.J. Ford (1892). Andrew Lang, *The Green Fairy Book* (London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1892), p. 309.

The symbols described in the previous paragraph have significance beyond their literal meanings. Apologists for a specific philosophy—be it solar mythology, Freudianism, Marxism, or a particular religious creed—may advance a single, exclusive interpretation of a given symbol, but in many instances unbiased reflection will suggest other possibilities as well. Indeed, one of the reasons for the longevity and wide distribution of folktales is that they, by their very nature, say different things to different people. Storytellers and



Cinderella's stepsister cuts off her own toe (Grimm 21). Illustration by John D. Batten (1916). Joseph Jacobs, *European Folk and Fairy Tales* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1916), p. 9.

their audiences have always recognized that an important part of a fairy tale's appeal lies in its extended meaning. It is not necessary, nor even desirable, for the storyteller to provide an interpretation of each symbol within a tale. Ambiguity is part of the charm. A child and an adult, a servant and a master, a believer and an agnostic can all hear the same story and feel satisfied, each listener for a different reason. But one conclusion is inescapable: The depiction of a half-human, half-hedgehog boy riding on a rooster while playing bagpipes represents something more than a half-human, half-hedgehog boy riding on a rooster while playing bagpipes.