

"Into the Dark Forest: The Fairytale Heroine's Journey" by Theodora Goss (2017)

"Ladies. Has it ever occurred to you that fairy tales aren't easy on the feet?" –Kelly Link, "Travels with the Snow Queen"

Once upon a time, there was a teacher who taught a class on fairy tales. She taught all the fairy tales you've probably read, and ones you probably haven't. At some point during the semester, she started noticing an underlying pattern that she called "the fairy-tale heroine's journey."

That teacher was me. I'd been teaching the class for several years. We always started with "Little Red Riding Hood," then went on to "Snow White," "Cinderella," "Sleeping Beauty," "Beauty and the Beast," "Bluebeard," and the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen and Oscar Wilde. For each tale, we read older versions as well as modern rewritings, trying to understand their histories and the various ways they had been interpreted by scholars. We went in depth . . . and as we did, I started to notice that some of the tales followed a particular pattern. I was familiar with Joseph Campbell's idea of a "hero's journey," but this seemed different. It seemed to be a pattern specifically for heroines of fairy tales, and reflected the pattern of women's lives: particularly during the eras when many of the fairy tales were written down, from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries.

Of course, I was also familiar with the folklorist Antti Aarne's idea of tale types. Faced with the large number and variety of fairy tales, Aarne had tried to organize them based on important narrative events. For example, the "Snow White" tale type (ATU 709 in the classification system he created and that has since been revised) includes the following events: (a) Snow White's stepmother orders a hunter to kill her, but he spares her and brings back an animal's heart as proof of her death; (b) Snow White flees to the house of the dwarves, who adopt her as a sister; and (c) her stepmother, realizing Snow White has survived, attempts to kill her again using poisoned laces, a poisoned comb, and finally a poisoned apple. What I was noticing looked like more than a tale type, because it occurred in a number of fairy tales, specifically ones that were about a young woman maturing into adulthood — fairy tales that focused on women's lives and destinies. I came to think of it as a "meta tale-type," and started mapping that particularly female journey.

And here I have to confess that this was more than a scholarly endeavor. I noticed an underlying pattern not just because I was teaching a class on fairy tales, but also because it seemed to reflect my own life, and the lives of my female friends. We too had been through dark forests. We too had lived in dwarves' cottages, at least metaphorically. That's why I started trying to understand it, looking specifically at fairy tales that focused on heroines, such as "Snow White," "Cinderella," and "Sleeping Beauty," as well as less familiar tales such as "Donkeyskin" and "The Goose-Girl." Fairy tales are very old — they were oral wisdom before they were written down by literary figures such as Charles Perrault and Madame de Beaumont, or folklorists such as the Brothers Grimm. They still have a great deal to teach us. I wanted to know what that pattern could teach me . . .

I'm going to tell you what I think that map looks like, showing you the journey and its various steps. Of course, not every fairy tale I studied contains all the steps, and they can occur in different order. That's true for tale types as well: not every "Snow White"-type story has the same plot. Nevertheless, the tale type describes a central narrative pattern, which is what I'm trying to define here. So what are the steps of the fairy tale heroine's journey? I think they look something like this:

1. The heroine receives gifts.

At some point in the fairy tale, the heroine receives gifts. These gifts can be physical objects or personal attributes. Most famously, Sleeping Beauty receives gifts such as beauty, grace, and wit from the fairies at her christening. Cinderella receives three dresses and magical shoes, either from her fairy godmother or from a hazel tree that represents her mother's spirit, depending on whether you're reading the Perrault or Grimm versions. In "Donkeyskin," a fairy tale related to the "Cinderella" tale-type, the heroine also receives three dresses, this time from the father who wants to marry her, as well as the donkey skin that will disguise her so she can escape. In "East o' the Sun and West o' the Moon," which is a "Beauty and the Beast"-type tale, the heroine receives a golden apple, comb, and spinning wheel from three wise women. She uses these items to save her husband from the troll princess he's betrothed to marry.

In all the tales, gifts are important: they help the heroine complete her journey and achieve a happy ending. Which is true for us too, isn't it? We also receive gifts. Some of them we are born with, as though they were given to us by the fairies: a talent for drawing, the ability to memorize obscure facts, naturally curly hair. Some of them we are given by friends and helpers: our parents may pay our college tuition, friends may let us stay in their apartment or give us their old clothes. Fairy tales teach us to be grateful for gifts and use them well. We don't want to be like the heroine of "The Goose-Girl," who loses a handkerchief spotted with her mother's blood and with it, her mother's protection.

2. The heroine leaves or loses her home.

Sometimes the heroine leaves her home, like Donkeyskin or the heroine of "The Goose-Girl," who sets out to meet her destined husband with her maid and a talking horse named Falada. Sometimes she is driven out, like Snow White. But some heroines stay right where they are and nevertheless lose the homes they've known all their lives. Cinderella's home changes fundamentally when her stepmother moves in and she must live as a servant in her own house. Sleeping Beauty stays in her castle, but when she wakes up her parents are long dead and her kingdom is gone. Eventually, her husband takes her to his castle, where his mother, who is an ogress, almost eats her and her two children. (If you're asking where this happens in "Sleeping Beauty," read the Perrault version!)

The heroine must leave or lose her home in order for the story to happen. And this is true for us as well: in our lives, we usually leave the homes we were born or grew up in. We go to college or move for our careers. We get married and form new families. Fairy tales tell us that leaving home is an important and necessary step. That's when the adventure starts.

3. The heroine enters the dark forest.

Remember Snow White running away from the huntsman, deeper into the dark forest? The dark forest is a continually recurring element in fairy tales, probably because it was a real and important element in the lives of the people who told them. The dark forest was where you could lose your way, where you could meet wolves or worse. But it was also where you could find adventure. The heroine often has to venture into the dark forest. In "East o' the Sun and West o' the Moon," the heroine tries to see her bear-husband's human face and is punished when he and his castle disappear, leaving her in the dark forest. She must seek him east o' the sun and west o' the moon, surely a confusing set of directions. Vasilisa the Beautiful is sent into the dark forest to bring back light from Baba Yaga's hut, surrounded by its fence of bones topped with human skulls. Sleeping Beauty's forest grows up around her, and it is the princes who must venture into it, often to their deaths. She lies at the heart of the dark forest, lost in it as she is lost in sleep.

We too have our dark forests, where we get lost: illness, misfortune, depression. The most important thing fairy tales have taught me about the dark forest is that the heroine never dies there. It's where she feels lost and alone, where she is frightened. It's dark, and there are mysterious noises. But the dark forest itself is not dangerous: the worst it can do is scare her for a while. And she will get out again. It's just a step on the journey.

4. The heroine finds a temporary home.

Rapunzel's tower, the cottage in which Snow White lives with the dwarves, Baba Yaga's hut: these are all temporary homes for the heroines. After they leave their own homes, fairy tale heroines must often find a temporary place to live and learn what they need to before they move on. For Cinderella, her own kitchen becomes a temporary home, and Donkeyskin must stay in the kitchen of the prince's castle before he discovers who she is and makes her his queen. "Beauty and the Beast" begins with Beauty's family losing its home and moving to a small house in the country, where Beauty must rise early in the morning to do household chores. She does not find her true, final home until Beast summons her to his castle.

Think about your temporary homes: college dorm rooms, cities that seemed like good places to live for a while although you knew they weren't your final destination. These are places to learn in, perhaps take refuge in. Most of us inhabit a series of temporary homes, trying to figure out where we fit, how to become the selves we want to be.

5. The heroine finds friends and helpers.

Fairy tale heroines always seem to find friends and helpers: Snow White's dwarves, Cinderella's doves in the Grimm version (called "Aschenputtel"), Falada the horse in "The Goose Girl." Even after Falada's head is cut off, he continues to speak, advising and advocating for his mistress. Vasilisa is helped by a magical doll that her mother gave her before she died. In "Yeh-hsien," a Chinese "Cinderella"-type tale, the heroine feeds and cares for a fish with golden eyes until her stepmother finds out, kills it, and serves it for supper. However, Yeh-hsien gathers the fish bones and puts them under her pillow. Whenever she prays to them, they give her food and clothes, including a cloak of kingfisher feathers so she can attend the cave-festival.

In fairy tales, you never know who will be a friend and helper: it's always best to be kind to old women by the side of the road, and of course to all animals. One of the most important lessons fairy tales teach is that when you're in trouble, your friends and helpers will be there for you. If you treat them well, they will treat you well in return, whether they are old women, birds and fish, or even a doll.

6. The heroine learns to work.

When I started researching the fairy-tale heroine's journey, I was struck by how often it includes the heroine learning or performing some sort of household task, even when she starts out as a princess. Cinderella must cook and clean for her stepmother and stepsisters. Snow White, who probably never cleaned in her own castle, keeps house for the dwarves. Donkeyskin serves in the kitchen, and the goose-girl tends her geese. Vasilisa must cook for Baba Yaga. Perhaps the most important task is performed by the princess in "Six Swans": while she is in the dark forest, she sews her brothers six shirts made of asters, a small star-shaped flower, to break the spell that has turned them into swans. "Sleeping Beauty" shows us a variation on this step: the princess does not learn a domestic task, but falls asleep as soon as her finger touches the spindle. However, the message that a domestic task may be dangerous is unusual in fairy tales: in most tales, particularly those coming from an oral peasant tradition, it's important for the heroine to work so she can sustain herself and help others.

This step could be seen as sending a negative message to young girls: while fairy tale heroes fight dragons, heroines are relegated to domestic tasks. However, these stories come from a time when women's roles were in fact circumscribed. Under those historical conditions, they make the case that women's work is valuable and even magical. I think we can learn an important lesson from this particular step: we too must learn to work so we can sustain ourselves and help others. When we think of fairy tales, we tend to focus on the happy ending, but what happens along the way is just as important: the Tsar marries Vasilisa because the linen she weaves is so fine that it fits through a needle as though it were thread.

7. The heroine endures temptations and trials.

Temptations and trials are at the heart of fairy tales. Snow White is tempted by the corset laces, comb, and apple offered by the old peddler woman, who is of course the Wicked Queen in disguise. Sleeping Beauty is tempted by the spinning wheel and its dangerous spindle. Rapunzel is tempted by the prince who visits her, so handsome and different from the witch who has locked her in the tower. These heroines give in to temptation and pay the price for doing so. Yet the story could not proceed otherwise: temptations and trials are part of the journey. The heroine's trials include living with a Beast to save her father, as Beauty does; or traveling far to find her husband, as the heroine does in "East o' the Sun and West o' the Moon"; or sewing six shirts while staying perfectly silent for six years to save your swan brothers.

There are two lessons here. First, you will be tempted, and sometimes you will give in to temptation. That's all right: it's human and natural. But it may create trials, and anyway trials are part of the journey. I once said to a friend, "If you want to live in a fairy tale, you have to be willing to climb the glass mountains in iron shoes." There are always hardships between "once upon a time" and "happily ever after," but without those hardships, the story would not exist. So if you're experiencing trials, remember that spelled differently, a "trial" is an "adventure." Fairy tales promise us that through patience and persistence, the heroine will eventually find what she is looking for and become who she should be.

8. The heroine dies or is in disguise.

This is perhaps the strangest step in the fairy-tale heroine's journey. We all know of Sleeping Beauty's death-like sleep. Snow White dies three times: twice the dwarves revive her, and the third time she is awakened when her coffin is jostled by the prince's servants. However, some heroines die not literally but metaphorically: they are disguised for part of the story, like Cinderella in her rags or Donkeyskin under the donkey skin. This loss of identity is a symbolic death. In "The Goose-Girl," once the princess has ridden into the dark forest, her maid forces her to switch places and promise not to reveal who she truly is, on pain of death. She must serve as goose-girl until she is finally recognized. In "Six Swans," the heroine must also remain silent: she cannot reveal her identity until the six shirts are sewn, even when accused of murdering her own children. Like the dead, these princesses cannot speak. Not even Cinderella and Donkeyskin can speak up for themselves until they are identified by the magical shoe or ring.

Why must heroines die in these fairy tales? The anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep, who studied rites of passage in many cultures, showed that such rites often involve a symbolic death: the participant symbolically dies in one social state before being reborn in another. Before our modern era, rites of passage were more common in women's lives: during the teenage years, they would mark when a girl became marriageable. I suspect these fairy tales reflect ancient rites of passage that occurred in the peasant societies from which they sprang. Recently, fairy tales have been criticized for showing us passive, silent heroines. But in these tales, passivity and silence are temporary, and serve an important purpose. They are transformative, like

the chrysalis stage during which the caterpillar turns into a butterfly, and show us that the story goes on even when nothing seems to be happening.

9. The heroine is revived or recognized.

This step is the logical corollary to the previous one. Snow White and Sleeping Beauty wake up from their death-like sleep. Donkeyskin and the goose-girl are restored to their rightful places. Cinderella's slipper fits and identifies her as the woman from the ball. The heroine of "Six Swans" can finally speak and defend herself. "East o' the Sun and West o' the Moon" shows us a variation on the pattern: here it is the prince who falls into a deep sleep each night, drugged by the troll princess, and the heroine who must revive him. Only then can he recognize her and trick the trolls into letting them go. In this step, the fairy tales seem to be telling us that although it's all right to sleep for a while, eventually you must wake up. You must become who you truly are. There is no other way to "happily ever after."

10. The heroine finds her true partner.

In fairy tales, the heroine's true partner is usually a prince or king. In some stories, he finds her: the prince simply happens upon Snow White. In others, she must make an effort to find him: Aschenputtel asks her hazel tree for a dress and shoes so she can go to the ball, and when Donkeyskin bakes a cake for the prince, she drops her ring into the dough so he can later identify her. Vasilisa is equally crafty: when the linen she wove is given to the Tsar, she knows he will come for her, because she is the only one skillful enough to sew it into a shirt. In other stories, the heroine leaves or loses her true partner and must find him again. Beauty must return to the Beast, who has almost died of grief in her absence, and the heroine of "East o' the Sun and West o' the Moon" must travel to the ends of the earth to free her husband from the trolls.

Certainly, this step reflects a time when women were expected to marry, and when marriage determined a woman's material circumstances. We no longer live in that world, but the idea of finding a true partner still resonates. We still want to find the person who will recognize us for who we truly are: who will see the woman covered in ashes or hiding under the donkey skin. Fairy tales tell us that we can find such a partner in a number of ways: by accident or through deliberate action. It also tells us that we may not initially recognize a true partner, who may seem like a frog, pig, or bear. We have to look beyond external appearances. The psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim believed that fairy-tale characters represent parts of the self, and that the stories dramatized our psychological processes. If so, then perhaps the true partner can also be a part of us, the part that recognizes our worth even when we can't acknowledge it ourselves.

11. The heroine enters her permanent home.

At the end of the fairy tale, the heroine finds the home she will remain in "happily ever after." In this permanent home, she can finally rest. The temporary home she found earlier in the tale was a place of danger: Snow White was menaced by the Wicked Queen while she lived with the dwarves, Rapunzel was imprisoned in her tower, and Vasilisa had to do Baba Yaga's housework — or be eaten! But once she reaches her permanent home, the heroine is safe. Why is it so often a castle? Because in the societies where fairy tales originated, the castle represented wealth and safety. We can think of these terms symbolically as well as literally: wealth can mean having what you truly need, and safety can mean finding a refuge from the world in which you can be your true self, without censure or criticism. Just as we long for a partner who understands us, we also long for a home where we can rest from our adventures, even if our castle is a one-room apartment in a big city or a split-level ranch in the suburbs.

12. The heroine's tormentor is punished.

Sometimes, writers remove this aspect of a fairy tale. In "Aschenputtel," the stepsisters cut off heels and toes so their feet will fit in the gold shoe, which fills with blood. At the end of the story, doves peck out their eyes for their deception and cruelty. However, in the Perrault version, Cinderella forgives her stepsters and even finds them aristocratic husbands. Perrault may have decided that a gruesome ending would be inappropriate for his aristocratic audience, but it's an important part of most versions. In "Snow White," the Wicked Queen is given red hot iron shoes, in which she dances herself to death. At the end of "Beauty and the Beast," Beauty's jealous sisters are turned to stone statues until they learn the error of their ways, whenever that might be. One of the worst punishments occurs in "The Goose-Girl," in which the goose-girl's maid is put in a barrel filled with nails and dragged along the street by two white horses. Ironically, this is the penalty she herself recommended when the king asked how a false maid should be punished.

Fairy tales imply that we punish ourselves, and many of the punishments are metaphors for the villains' emotional states. The Wicked Queen's jealousy burns her up, as though she were dancing in iron shoes. Beauty's sisters have always been emotional statues: they are turned into literal versions of what they truly are. Aschenputtel's stepsisters mutilate their own feet, and their blindness reminds us that they refused to see the girl who was dressed in rags, sleeping among the ashes. When she appeared at the ball, they could not recognize their own sister. In these punitive endings, fairy tales provide an ancient warning with a very modern message: don't be a troll.

The "fairy-tale heroine's journey" can teach us important lessons about our own journeys. After all, our society isn't as different as we sometimes think from the societies in which fairy tales were told or written. And women's lives aren't as different, either. We may be CEOs and university professors and artists, but we still leave our homes, enter dark forests, find temporary places of shelter. We must still learn to use the gifts we were given, find friends and helpers along the way. We must certainly still learn to work, so we can make our way in the world. And we still long for true partnership, for a home where we can rest. Unlike fairy tale heroines, we will probably make this journey not once, but many times during our lives. Fairy tales can help us understand where we are going and the steps along the way.

Fairy tales endure both because they teach us about ourselves and because they can be endlessly rewritten. Writers such as Angela Carter, Emma Donoghue, and Kelly Link have rewritten the old tales for a modern audience, and that's all right — fairy tales are continually being retold, revised, made new. We are all on the journey, and it can take new forms as well as old, appropriate to the continuing journeys of women's lives.

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Dec 2017

The process Theodora Goss has detailed could be used as a questionnaire for the creation of fairytale-flavoured Healing stories.

When considering one's life as a story in which one is the central character, it may be interesting and helpful to look at one's life as a fairytale. In many fairytales, the following 12 plot elements occur. In each case, one is invited to wonder: "Have I ever experienced anything like this?"

- 1) What are some of the gifts that you have received? Some we are born with and some we receive. A talent or an object that is received. What would this be for you?
- 2) When did you leave home. This is true for any heroine (!) as she leaves home, she discovers herself and also sets off on an adventure. When did you feel you truly left home?
- 3) The heroine enters dark forests. Which in reality are the misfortunes, weakness, or even depression that one enters in this journey? What and when were such moments in your life.
- 4) Finding a temporary home. A school college, places that we arrive at that helps us find ourselves
- 5) Helpers and friends. The protagonist has friends who help her on the way. These could be objects or even people
- 6) Learning a craft. In this journey the main character now learns a craft and hones it. Which may be learning to do mundane chores that helps her stay grounded or even a special craft
- 7) Enduring temptations and trials. On this journey there will many temptations and trials that shape the character who either falls for it or resists it. What were some of these in your life?
- 8) The Heroine is in disguise. The protagonist may be temporarily hidden, and in disguise or even invisible to her true self and will go through a transformative process which will reveal her true self. This can even happen multiple times.
- 9) The Heroine is revealed, recognised or revived. Here the person's true worth is acknowledged.
- 10) The heroine finds her true partner. Which could be discovering a part of oneself and or a person who stands outside as a protector, companion.
- 11) Entering their permanent home. Finally there is a space that the heroine can identify with, on entering this she feels at home.
- 12) Tormentors may be punished.

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