Who's Afraid of the Wicked Witch?

-- Janice T. Gibson

Once upon a time, a poor woodcutter lived with his wife and two children in a cottage at the edge of a forest. The family was so poor that they didn't have enough to eat. "What's to become of us?" the man asked his wife. "How can we feed our children when there isn't enough for us?"

Most of us remember how the woodcutter and his wife sent Hansel and Gretel into the forest. And we once delighted in hearing about the children's adventures in the forest and in the gingerbread house. Even now, all of us, preschoolers included, chortle with glee when we hear how the wicked witch tried to kill the children, and how the clever youngsters succeeded in doing her in instead.

But fairy tales do far more than entertain their audiences. Their heroes and heroines teach important lessons. And scholarly devotees point out that they help children understand the world. Critics of fairy tales worry, however, not all lessons that fairy tales teach are good for children. They point out that the messages that some fairy tales give, although possibly acceptable in earlier times, are inconsistent with what modern parents want for their children.

Just what do fairy tales teach?

- **Fairy tales teach what life is about.** Can children really understand much about life and death, or good and evil? And can fairy tales help them? We know that young children don't have adult powers of cognitive or moral analysis. But they understand far more than most of us usually think. What they often don't understand is that their worries, problems, and conflicts are normal and natural parts of everyone's life.

  Fairy tales help them by answering their timeless questions about the world and the roles they play in it. "What is the world really like? Is it a safe place, or does it contain a wolf waiting for me just like he waited for Little Red Riding

Hood?" They also answer questions about the most important relationships to children: those between parents and children, and those between children and their siblings. "What will happen if I'm left all alone like Hansel and Gretel in the dark forest? Is it wrong to have bad feelings about my sister, if she's as bad to me as Cinderella's sisters were to her?"

- **Fairy tales teach what happy and unhappy feelings mean.** Children have a lot of strong feelings, happy and unhappy. Fairy tale heroes and heroines do, too, but their feelings are exaggerated so that they're easy to recognize and understand. Exaggeration also makes them funny, so they're not so frightening. Fairy tale characters never feel rejected because people ignore them. (That's the kind of rejection that happens in real life.) In fairy tale rejection, characters are physically separated from their peers, like Cinderella, who has to stay away from her step-sisters and sit in the ashes.
  Fairy tales help children deal with their feelings too. Fairy tale characters *always* handle their emotions. And everything always works out well. Cinderella, for example, learns that crying or fighting doesn't get her what she wants. She just does her household tasks. In the end she is rewarded.

- **Fairy tales teach what people are like.** Young children interpret everything simply and concretely. Fairy tales describe the abstract qualities of people in concrete terms they understand. Cinderella is good; we know it because she's beautiful and hardworking. Her stepsisters are evil; they're ugly and lazy.
  Young children often can't understand that people can be bad and good at the same time. But they can understand fairy tale characters who are either good and beautiful (like Cinderella's fairy godmother) or bad and ugly (like her stepmother). There is no halfway in fairy tales.
  In fairy tales, sometimes several characters together represent a single person with many contradictory feelings. When this happens, each fairy tale character represents a different "part" of the same person. Children deal more easily with each separate "part" than they do with a single complicated

person. And they learn that they too, can have contradictory feelings. The story of *Little Red Riding Hood* provides a good example. Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother represents another "part" of her, a woman so uncautious at times that some interpreters of the tale describe her as wild. Look what the old woman does; she stays alone in a dangerous part of the forest.

- **Fairy tales teach through inanimate objects and animals who seem like people.** Adults know that inanimate objects can't come alive and that animals can't talk. Young children "know" they can. That's why four-year-olds talk to their dolls and expect them to understand, and why they have serious conversations with squirrels or goldfish. And that's why they're not surprised when fairy tale animals like the Ugly Duckling talk with other creatures.
  When young children are still at a self-centred stage of thinking, they expect their dolls and pets to think and worry only about their owners. So they're not surprised when fairy tale animals talk to people and care only about them, or when magic swords speak to their owners and guard them, and they're never surprised when frogs turn into handsome princes. This is the real world for children and it makes them feel comfortable.

- **Fairy tales help children feel strong.** Fairy tale magic is very important to young children who, in real life, feel stupid and weak when compared with their parents. It gives them vicarious feelings of power. Children are delighted when a good fairy, a magic potion, or a magic sword makes the hero of *Jack and the Beanstalk* strong enough to get what he wants.

- **Fairy tales teach what anger means and how to deal with it.** Children – healthy, normal children – often become angry, and they often act in hostile ways. So do fairy tale characters. When fairy tale characters behave badly (like Little Red Riding Hood, who disobeyed her mother's explicit instructions), they're usually punished. But their punishment is never permanent. And it never *really* hurts. Little Red Riding Hood learned her lesson. But she was rescued and lived happily ever after.
  Fairy tale violence is usually directed against evil characters, and it succeeds.

- **Fairy tales teach ways of dealing with dark and disturbing fears.** Fairy tales are allegorical. They describe complex and abstract problems simply and concretely, and provide thin veils for dark and disturbing fears. This hides them under the surface so that children don't have to examine them until they want to – or until they're ready.

  The story of Hansel and Gretel is a delightful example of what allegory can teach. The surface tale is simple (but not the allegory): Hansel and Gretel are forced out of their home into the forest by a weak father and cruel stepmother. They're afraid to leave. But they find their way through the forest to the gingerbread house, and they destroy the wicked witch. In the end, the children return home, and of course, live happily ever after.

  The allegorical tale is more complicated. It describes what many psychoanalytical thinkers describe as the most disturbing fear of children: fear of separation or separation anxiety.

  In the allegorical tale, Hansel's and Gretel's fear of being sent into the forest is a thinly disguised description of the fear of separation. And their cruel stepmother represents for us that "part" of our mothers that forces us to separate from them and take care of ourselves.

  Finally, when the allegorical Hansel and Gretel really do separate from home, they find that it isn't so bad. And when they come home at the end of the story, they bring the symbol of the witch's power – her jewels – with them. They prove they can take care of themselves, just like adults.

Are all the lessons that fairy tales teach good?

Critics say, "No," and point to potentially bad lessons.

- **Fairy tales teach violence.** Children learn by imitating. And psychologists point that when they see people, TV characters or fairy tale heroes and heroines rewarded for what they do, they learn to do the same things themselves. According to critics, the problem is that many fairy tale heroes and heroines commit violent acts and they are usually rewarded. Hansel

and Gretel live happily ever after because Gretel kills the wicked witch. And she does so in a particularly brutal way: by pushing her into a hot oven.

- **Fairy tales teach dependence on magic.** According to critics, fairy tales teach another dangerous lesson: if we're good and if we want something badly enough, someone – or something – will always come along to help. In *Cinderella*, a fairy godmother waves a magic wand and produces the coach and coachman so that Cinderella can go to the ball.
  In real life, none of us can count on a fairy godmother to help. Some critics worry that children are liable to learn to wait for magic to get them what they want instead of trying more effective ways.

- **Fairy tales teach questionable values.** Fairy tale heroes and heroines are often given rewards that many modern parents would disapprove of: power, material wealth, and physical beauty. Take the hero of *Jack and the Beanstalk*. His reward for outwitting the giant? Bags of gold, a goose that lays golden eggs, and a golden harp. In the story of *Snow White*, the heroine is rewarded by marriage to a handsome and wealthy prince. Cinderella receives the same reward, but she in addition, first proves herself deserving by magically acquiring a coach and horsemen as well as a magnificent wardrobe in which to come to the royal ball.
  Even in fables, animal heroes and heroines receive the same kinds of rewards. The Ugly Duckling, in a Hans Christian Andersen story, is rewarded with physical beauty. Born ugly, he is good, and his good behaviour leads to something that real homely children aren't likely to get: he changes (seemingly by magic for children who don't know about swans) into a beautiful creature.

Should we do anything about fairy tales or should we just enjoy them?

Some critics argue that we should remove the questionable messages. Some, like child psychiatrist Richard Gardner, M.D., have written "modern"

revisions, primarily for the purpose of working with children in therapy, which are intended to teach socially acceptable values. Gardner has published some delightful examples. Look at the heroes and heroines in *Dr. Gardner's Modern Fairy Tales* (Creative Therapeutics) and *Dr. Gardner's Fairy Tales for Today's Children* (Creative Therapeutics):

In a "modern" version of *Hansel and Gretel*, "Hans" and "Greta" never kill the wicked witch. They leave her in the cage where she had kept "Hans". "Greta" tells why the two children never take the witch's treasures home: "I want people to like us for the way we are, not for home many presents we give them."

Gardner's *Ugly Duck* never grows up to be a swan. This is really impossible, the author makes clear, because, after all, he's a duck. He does, however, learn to make friends with the other ducks.

Finally, "Cinderelma" gets to the ball in Gardner's modern fairy tale, but not in a magic coach. She walks. She lives happily ever after, too, but not with the handsome prince. After living for a while in the palace, "Cinderelma" tells the prince: "I no longer wish to marry you. We're different kinds of people and are interested in different things. I don't think we'd be very happy living together for the rest of our lives." The prince's response? "I have similar feelings and sadly I agree it would be best for us not to marry." Unlike Cinderella, "Cinderelma" moves into town and lives happily ever after with a hardworking young printer.

Does "cleaning up" fairy tales make them better? And do "modern" tales convey invaluable messages that enchant children? Yes and no.

Most "modern" fairy tales get rid of violence with no problem. Hansel and Gretel, for example, certainly don't need to kill the wicked witch to make children love the story. Children would delight in any method of putting the witch out of commission, including placing her in a cage. But children are already protected form the violence of fairy tales by allegorical techniques, so that violence doesn't pose the serious danger it does when they see it in real life or on TV. And everything can't be "cleaned up" without taking away some of what is best about

fairy tales.

The problem is that the same methods that "modern" fairy tales use to get rid of questionable values sometimes make the stories less relevant to children's real concerns. Hansel and Gretel, for example, don't need to *steal* the witch's jewels. But they really should *take* something home (there's nothing to eat there). Hansel and Gretel should have something tangible with them (food for the hungry family?) to symbolize the power that children know comes with adulthood.

In addition, many "modern" fairy tales replace magic with preaching. And this rarely improves them.

Finally, the delightful magic power of heroes and heroines in the original tales gives children vicarious feelings of strength that help them deal with real problems. And it doesn't make them dependent at all. Children gradually learn the difference between make-believe and reality as they get older, anyway. And by the time they're five or six years old, their experience in the real world teaches them that fairy tale magic isn't real.

In the end, fairy tales always have delighted us and always will if we let them.

Questions:

1) List three things that fairy tales teach children that are *positive*.

2) List three things that fairy tales teach children that are *negative*.

3) Would you tell fairy tales to your children/nieces or nephews/ younger siblings? Support your answer with examples from the article.

4) Describe, in your own words, the allegory of *Hansel and Gretel*.

5) What other examples of "modern fairy tales" can you think of (at least three and sequels do not count)