

Myths, Legends, Fables, Stories and Heroes: Keeping What's Important

The Waldorf Literature Sequence as Armament for the Challenges of Life

by Jeff Tunkey

Many North American Waldorf schools are working on thoughtful reviews of their canon of literary content from early childhood through high school. A knotty task: so many important considerations and viewpoints! Based on the research outlined below, I would offer the thought that “the more things need to change, the more they need to stay the same!” By this I mean that, absolutely, the sources do need a careful 21st century look at ways to bring in greater cultural diversity than was envisioned in 1919. However, the deepest layer of a school’s literature list, as it progresses from fairy tale, fable, myth and legend to modern biography and history, needs to maintain certain values if it is to continue to do the best possible job of helping to prepare students for life. This deepest layer could be defined as the universal motifs or archetypes, the soul-feeding qualities represented within the plots and characters.

I hope you’ll find it useful to hear about this topic of deeper meanings, of archetypes. We’ll look at a comparison of the writings and lectures on this subject from two contemporaries of the late 19th and early 20th centuries: Rudolf Steiner, who founded Waldorf Education and many other movements; and Carl Jung, the Swiss psychiatrist who founded analytical psychology. These provide a lens on the ways that oral and then written literature have always, since the beginning of time, reflected the unfolding of human consciousness and our universal attempts to find meaning in life. The Waldorf literature track reflects this historical evolution of consciousness, and also supports the way (the same way) that the consciousness of today’s children in fact continues to unfold year by year.

But first, three “housekeeping” notes.

- Rudolf Steiner cautioned at every opportunity that his presentations were not at all meant to be taken uncritically; rather, he wanted his audiences to listen, digest, and conduct their own research. Also, he sometimes noted that points he was making were meant to be taken as aphoristic descriptions, rather than as literal or dogmatic facts.
- Working to find parallels and differences between Steiner’s research and that of others is very helpful in two ways: it adds to the spirit of objective investigation; and it usually provides additional perspectives and accessible vocabulary for use in discussing Steiner in the wider community.
- Other than when I’m providing direct citations, the following reflects my attempts to do my own research and find helpful lenses on the topic. I hope you’ll encounter things here that lead you to also explore anew.

About Rudolf Steiner and Carl Jung

Rudolf Steiner (1861 - 1925) and Carl Jung (1875 - 1961) were contemporaries who had much to offer on human psychology in general and on this topic in particular. Their research methods differed, but

at least with respect to myths, legends, fairy tales and the underlying archetypes of this inherited literary canon, it seems that their thinking was both parallel and complementary:

- Steiner and Jung used different terminology for many very similar concepts or presentations.
- Both Jung and Steiner trace the emergence of human consciousness from the times of an ur-state of the antediluvian earth, pushing up out of a misty, muddy prehistoric world.¹
- They also both describe gender as a duality. Steiner indicates that a male is a feminine soul in a male body, and a female is a masculine soul in a female body.² Jung, in his theory of the collective unconscious, described the “animus” as the unconscious masculine side of a woman, and the “anima” as the unconscious feminine side of a man... each transcending the personal psyche and constituting the two primary anthropomorphic archetypes of the unconscious mind, the abstract symbol sets that formulate the archetype of the Self³.

Most of the background Jungian material in this article is drawn not from Jung himself, but from books by two of his students and colleagues, Erich Neumann, and Marie-Louise von Franz.

Finding the meaning of life, and in life

As hard as we may try with our modern minds and advances in science, there is ultimately no way our rational powers alone can explain to ourselves the ultimate riddle of human life with all its joys and suffering, and death. Yet, making sense of it all has been a perpetual human quest since time immemorial, and the historical trail of explanations – now labeled myths, legends, fairy tales, fables and stories – reveals three things at the same time, as will be discussed. First, the record of ancient times depicts the evolution of ways humans began to explain themselves and the world to themselves. Second the accumulated record of these efforts, dating as far back as fragmentary evidence from paleolithic times, also reflects how human consciousness itself developed; the incremental advance of the rational mind as it separated itself from the wide cosmos. And thirdly, we can see that there is wonderful congruence of the ancient “life explanations” that have been handed down from every continent and corner of the world.

Since the rational mind alone cannot solve the ultimate questions (and indeed can tend to tie itself in riddles and perplex itself), and since we nonetheless need an “anchor” of meaning for our path through this life in order to not collapse into chaos or despair, Jung and his colleagues emphasized the deep need for every human to create a personal architecture of belief, a values structure that helps prepare for and cope with the twists, turns and tragedies ahead. Indeed, modern researchers have shown that certain regions of the human brain evolved to process and hold belief systems or spiritual activity.⁴ Thus, helping students develop a flexible but resilient framework for adapting to life is the deepest layer, the real purpose, of the curriculum in the Waldorf school (or really, any proper school). The literature path as given by Steiner contains all the vital subtext elements for handing down to the next generation, in a powerful aphoristic way, the heritage of human morality and coping. Also, the steps in the literary repertoire for the grades prepare the necessary moral foundation for assimilating the study of the human failings and strife of the modern history content that will be introduced in middle school and beyond.

The Universal Challenge of the Current Era

Rudolf Steiner believed that evil would be the signature challenge for the world of the 20th century and beyond.⁵ Ms. von Franz, in her book *Archetypal Dimensions of the Psyche*⁶, has provided a vivid description of how fairy tales address the problem of evil:

From the standpoint of Jungian psychology, we may say that fairy tales do not recount consciously experienced human events, but that these “pure forms” make visible fundamental archetypal structures of the collective unconscious... they are archetypal images behind which the secret of the unconscious psyche is hidden.

By the collective unconscious we mean that part of man’s unconscious psyche which, regardless of all the differences between individuals, remains the same in all men and women, just as certain aspects of the anatomical structure of Homo sapiens are the same in all individuals precisely because they are human. Since fairy tales throughout the world disclose certain common themes and structures, we may assume that they spring from this most universal substrate of the human psyche. They might be termed the dreams of humankind, sprung from the deepest layers of the unconscious, and for this reason it is not at all surprising that the ethical problems of our cultural consciousness, which we know and discuss in other contexts, have no part in them. What we might, on the other hand, find in fairy tales is the guidelines of an ethos of the unconscious, that is, of nature itself.

Lüthi writes aptly that fairy tales are concerned not with the “justice” but with the “rightness” of actions. With their abstract approach they aim to “reflect not reality but the essence underlying it.” ... And here the question becomes acute: Is ethics an achievement of conscious man and his culture, or is there already an ethic in the unconscious and preconscious psychic structure of man as such? It is not difficult to give a general answer: Most fairy tales do indeed contain a kind of natural morality which is elucidated in the course of the action—an ethic of “appropriate” behavior which leads to a happy end, in contrast to inappropriate behavior, which leads to disaster. Accordingly, André Jolles speaks of a naïve moralité in fairy tales, in accordance with which “everything that happens is in keeping with what we expect and demand of a just course of events.” ... Thus fairy tales present a contrast to the world as we actually experience it.

But what are the “right” modes of conduct glorified in fairy tales, and can we really regard them as ethical? Let us first consider [by example] the problem of guile and honesty: Innumerable are the tales [like those] in which a peasant or shepherd outwits the Devil by making an agreement with him that everything above ground in his field belongs to the Devil while everything below ground belongs to himself; and proceeding to sow turnips. When the outwitted Devil reverses the pact for the coming year, the peasant sows wheat and again cheats the Devil, who finally goes off in a rage. ... The moral would seem to be that we should combat evil with guile. And yet, what of the tale about the bearskin? Here a young soldier faithfully keeps his pact with the Devil and makes no attempt to get around it. For seven years he goes without washing and wears his bearskin; the Devil rewards him amply for his “fair play,” and he too makes no attempt to circumvent the agreement.

In the first example unscrupulous trickery in dealing with the Devil triumphs; in the second it is shown that honesty is rewarded, even in dealings with the Evil One. Thus the question of the morality of fairy tales does not appear to be so simple.

I’ll return to the topic of evil in a bit. Let’s pick up the thread of the origins and development of consciousness. The following abbreviated citations, first by Steiner and then by Neumann, provide very thought-provoking insights on the evolution of archetypes—of primordial images—in human history, and on how these ancient insights can help us today to cope with the vicissitudes of life and find meaning.

Fairy Tales and The Beginning of Time

In a lecture titled *The Interpretation of Fairy Tales*⁷ (and in a number of others), Steiner described humanity in its earliest state as having emerged from out of a sort of misty, unformed earth-beginning, and as being much more closely connected to the spiritual world than is the case today.

In such intermediate states man becomes aware of one or other part of the spiritual surroundings ... man sees all those spiritual beings in his surroundings that are inwardly connected with the ordinary forces of nature and live in the elements of nature. He does not himself see the play of the nature forces, but he sees that which lives in the play of the nature forces, in the wind, and the water, and other phenomena of

nature. ... Now let us ask what the intellectual soul can see in such intermediate states. It can see that things were fashioned in accordance with a certain wisdom. Through that which is the giant in man, through strength, everything was fashioned. Through the intellectual soul, man, when he lives in this intermediate state, sees beings around him who bring wisdom into everything, who regulate everything wisely. Whereas the giants are generally seen in male form, he sees in the pictures of the intellectual soul constructive female beings who bring wisdom into the fabric of the world. These are the "wise women" who are at the back of all formed things and who themselves construct everything. In these figures he continually sees ... the wise rulers at the back of things. And, because he sees himself intimately related to them, he often feels, when in such an intermediate state: "What I see there as the wise female beings is something really related to me." Therefore, we often see the idea of sisters arising when these female beings appear [in tales].

At a later epoch, Steiner continued:

"...when humanity was far removed from the nature-forces, when it could no longer look into the secrets of being ... shrewdness, skill of aptitude became the quality of the soul, but this is far removed from strength or any great power." Such beings "can do very little, their powers are small; and as man sees their forms in pictures they reveal their real nature as dwarfs." A thoughtful man may say to himself, Steiner added: "What actually happens in life is that the rough forces are overcome by the results of man's shrewdness. And, moreover, to those powers behind us which are related to us and have caused a force within us to rise to consciousness, he owes the rough forces that were part of us when at the stage of the giants. ... Whenever the overcoming of the rough forces or the giants appears in fairy tales it is founded on the perception in such an intermediate state. Man wishes to gain a clear insight about himself; he has lost sight of the spiritual world, but he says to himself: "I can gain a clear insight when I am in such an intermediate state. Then I shall be so wise that intelligence and shrewdness will gain the victory over the rough forces!" Then appear the powers that are indeed in the spiritual world and that correspond to our powers of intelligence. They appear and act, and enlighten man as to what happens in the spiritual world. He then relates what has happened in the spiritual world, and must relate it in such a way, that he says: "What I have seen and related happened once upon a time, and is still happening behind the world of sense, in the spiritual world, where there are different conditions of life." It may be that every time he has seen it under such conditions, the event is already past, together with the conditions which made such an action possible. Yet it may still be there. The point is, whether anyone entering an intermediate state observes it. It is neither here nor there, but everywhere, where there is anyone who can observe it. Therefore, every orthodox fairy tale begins with: "Once upon a time it happened—where, then, was it? Yes, where indeed was it not?" That is the correct beginning of a fairy tale, and every fairy tale must end with "I once saw this; and if what happened in the spiritual world did not succumb to death, if it is not dead, it must still be alive to-day." [This ending phrase from Steiner is not used in Waldorf grade schools, so far as I know; a more common ending is simply "so it was, and so it shall be."]

The Earliest Historical Records

The myth of Gilgamesh is accounted as one of the oldest, or perhaps the very oldest, recorded literary tale, dating from around 2500 B.C. It likely incorporated elements from even earlier spoken tales. But: there is a record of archetypal forms that depict aspects of the development of human consciousness from as far back as the paleolithic period, i.e. 10,000 B.C. or earlier. Erich Neumann, in his books *The Origins and History of Consciousness*⁸ and *The Great Mother*⁹, draws on the depths of ancient world mythology to show how, even today, individual consciousness awakens and grows through the same archetypal stages of development as did human consciousness from early humans onward. Neumann shows how the stages begin and end with the symbol of the Uroboros, The Great Round in which man's consciousness and ego

were still small, the tail-eating serpent image encircling both positive and negative, male and female, chaos and consciousness. The urobos is the symbol of the undifferentiated. (*See image gallery below.*)

According to Neumann, the development of consciousness proceeded by a process of bifurcation. The Great Mother archetype emerged and then split into The Good Mother and The Terrible Mother; The Separation of The World Parents—of Earth and Sky—followed; and then The Great Father was divided into The Good Father and the Terrible Father. Other intermediate stages of consciousness evolution are projected in universal myths of the The Path, Birth of the Hero, Slaying of the Dragon, Rescue of the Captive, Transformation and Deification of the Hero, and many others. Throughout the sequence, the Hero represents the evolving ego consciousness.

In his very fascinating book, *The Great Mother*, Neumann examines sculptural and pictorial artifacts of archetypal representations of the feminine dating from all the way back to the paleolithic period, far before Gilgamesh. Richly illustrated, this landmark book further illustrates the evolution of the feminine qualities from paleolithic times to the present.

The Great Mother divided into The Good Mother and the Terrible Mother. These over time reappear as Sophia, Mary, Sophia; but also Kali the Devourer, the Furies, Baba Yaga. The feminine has been represented as goddess, protectress, mystery, Great World Tree, monster, gate, pillar, tree, moon, sun, vessel, and every animal from snakes to birds. Neumann portrays a universal experience of the maternal as both nurturing and fearsome, beauty and chaos, an experience rooted in the dialectical relation of growing consciousness, symbolized by the Child, to the unconscious and the unknown, symbolized by the Great Mother.

One of the benefits of the artistic representations collected by Neumann is that, unlike literary tales from long, long ago, they come to us straight from their ancient creation; not passed from teller to teller with modifications and modernizations that by now may have redirected or watered down their archetypal wisdom and illustration of how the ancients thought about things.

From Ancient Times to the Present - A Gallery of Artifacts of the Birth and Development of Consciousness



UROBOROS
Medieval illustration



UROBOROS
Medieval sculpture, Slovenian castle



VENUS OF WILLENDORF
Paleolithic sculpture discovered in Willendorf, Austria. Dating to 28,000–25,000 B.C., it has been variously suggested that she is a fertility figure, a good-luck totem, a mother goddess symbol.



GODDESS
Thrace, neolithic



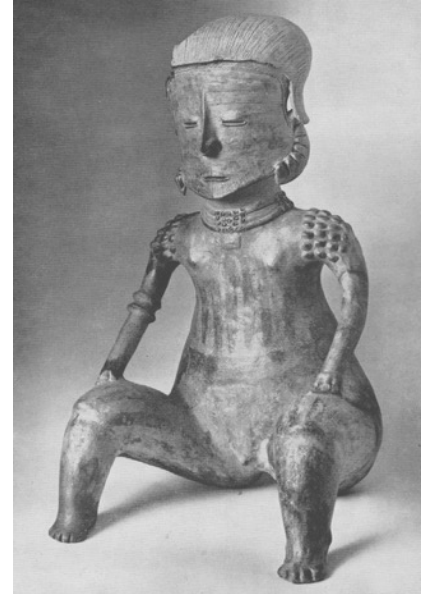
GODDESSES
Cyprus, c. 2500 B.C.



MOTHER AND CHILD
Congo, date unknown



MOTHER AND CHILD
Peru, pre-Columbian



FEMALE FIGURE
Mexico, pre-Columbian



KALI THE DEVOURER
Copper, northern India, c. 1700



COATLICUE WITH SERPENT SKIRT
Stone, Aztec



DEMETER AND KORE
Stone, Thebes



MADONNA AND CHILD
Henry Moore, 1943

Implications for Literature Reviews

Again, my purpose in writing is to suggest a flexible look at what might lie beneath the surface when drawing on wider sources for a literature curriculum. Especially in the early grades, we can help children enjoy youth for what it can be and also arm them with deepened instincts for adapting to the difficult paths ahead, by offering them a rich diet of the archetypes cloaked inside the world's myths, fables legends and heroes. Heroic figures (both male and female) lived in the practical world and at the same time exhibited principles of the divine world. The progression of literature themes, rather than relying on intellectualized presentation, serves to develop students' picturing of the lives, issues and struggles of earlier periods. In this way, the symbolic and the practical are integrated.^{10 11}

In short, broaden the sources, search the four corners of the earth, but keep the deeper meanings. For instance, in the light of the foregoing, one might ask: "Is *Hansel and Gretel* about (or only about) two German children and a wicked witch? Might it even *not* be about a brother and sister per se, but rather or also about our dual male/female bodies and souls? In finding a different source with similar elements, it would be important to note the presence of a witch with a gingerbread house and consider alternatives like a Russian tale with Baba Yaga with her house on chicken bones, or the South African tale, *The Two Brothers* – to maintain the motif of *The Terrible Mother*. As well, consider something that also has the archetype of *The Path*, a motif which reflects the deep need we all have to find our way to a spiritual meaning for all that is to happen.

As the wonderfully rich archetypal motifs, plots and characters from early experience were passed by oral inheritance through hundreds of generations, they became less cosmological or universal in nature, and more bound to the specific language, customs and societies of their retelling; and even more fixed in nature with the advent of writing and printing. It's worth noting in this regard that Rudolf Steiner pointed here and there to the important difference between mathematical learning and language learning: that math inspires flexible, free conceptual thought, but that language can tend to promote conventional thinking, i.e., thinking bound to commonplaces, or fixed ideas. Thus, the emphasis on timeless tales for early childhood and the younger grades in the traditional curriculum is an antidote to the onset of critical or one-sided cognition, not only in childhood, but for a future which will, unavoidably, be imperfect at best. As history since *The Fall* has shown, humanity can all too easily be lead down a path to evil—and great tragedy—when one-sided ideas become more and more fixed in a society; when defining others as "the other" consume humanity's better nature.

¹ This theme appears in the origin stories of cultures world-wide. Iroquois myths, for instance, “emphasize the unformed character of the previous worlds; these worlds are sometimes underwater, enclosed in darkness or have none of the features that the present world contains.” From *Native American Myths*, Jake Jackson, ed., Flame Tree Publishing, 2014.

² See for instance *Man and Woman in Light of Spiritual Science*, lecture given in Munich on 18 March, 1908

³ Adapted from wikipedia. See also <https://carljungdepthpsychologysite.blog/2020/03/06/carl-jung-and-the-anima-and-animus/#.YN8r5h0pDOY>

⁴ “Spiritual practices have been proposed to have many beneficial effects as far as mental health is concerned. The exact neural basis of these effects is slowly coming to light and different imaging techniques have elucidated the neural basis of meditative practices. The evidence though preliminary and based on studies replete with methodological constraints, points toward the involvement of the prefrontal and parietal cortices. The available data on meditation focus on activated frontal attentional network. Neuroimaging studies have shown that meditation results in an activation of the prefrontal cortex, activation of the thalamus and the inhibitory thalamic reticular nucleus and a resultant functional deafferentation of the parietal lobe. The neurochemical change as a result of meditative practices involves all the major neurotransmitter systems. The neurotransmitter changes contribute to the amelioration of anxiety and depressive symptomatology and in part explain the psychogenic property of meditation. This overview highlights the involvement of multiple neural structures, the neurophysiological and neurochemical alterations observed in meditative practices.”

E. Mohandas, M.D., monograph published by the National Institutes of Health
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3190564/>

⁵ See for instance: *Goethe's Faust in the Light of Anthroposophy*, vol. 2, Anthroposophic Press, Great Barrington MA, 2016. Also, Dr. Michaela Glöckler speaks of compellingly on this issue in a lecture now collected in *A Healing Education: How Can Waldorf Education Meet the Needs of Children*, Rudolf Steiner College Press, 2000.

⁶ Franz, Marie-Louise Von *Archetypal Dimensions of the Psyche*, Shambhala, 1999. Ms. von Franz (1915 - 1998) was considered the foremost living follower of Jung, with whom she worked closely from 1934 until his death in 1961.

⁷ Steiner, Rudolf, *The Interpretation of Fairy Tales*, a lecture given in Berlin, December, 1908, available at the Online Waldorf Library.

⁸ Neumann, Erich, *The Origins and History of Consciousness*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1949. Neumann was a student and colleague of Carl Jung.

⁹ Neumann, Erich, *The Great Mother - An Analysis of the Archetype*, Bollingen Foundation, New York NY, 1955.

¹⁰ The pedagogical place of fairy tales doesn't need to end with the early grades. *Walk in the Light and Twenty-Three Tales* is a wonderful anthology of stories by Leo Tolstoy that I have found to be well received and appreciated by middle school students. Plough Publishing, 1998.

¹¹ Suggested Further Reading:

Wehr, Gerhard, *Jung & Steiner - The Birth of a New Psychology*, Anthroposophic Press, Great Barrington MA, 2002.

Includes a foreword by Robertt Sardello

Heuscher, Julius E., *A Psychiatric Study of Myths and Fairy Tales - Their Origin, Meaning and Usefulness*, Charles C. Thomas Publishing, Springfield IL, 1974