Cinderella

~ Debora Petschek

What is it about "Cinderella" stories that allows the motif to live in so many cultures? What universal archetypes does the story work with that have found resonance all around the globe?

While working on a marionette performance of the story of "Yeh-Shen," the "Chinese Cinderella," I recalled several other versions of this story that I had read. I began to wonder about the origins and meaning of the Cinderella story and how it migrated across the globe. What is it about this story, more than any other that I am aware of, that speaks across all cultures? Are the archetypes so strong that versions of the story arose simultaneously around the globe? To my knowledge, this is the only fairy tale that has versions in virtually every corner of the planet.

My research found that there are anywhere from 350 to 1000 different Cinderella stories. Many of these are just regional variations that were adapted to the culture where the story was being told. For this research, I limited the criteria that would qualify a particular story as a "Cinderella" story. Each story had to have a kind and hardworking young maiden (or lad in some cases) who is on her own as an orphan, servant, or motherless princess. The main character suffers cruelty at the hands of those who direct and control her. The character is assisted by a supernatural helper, such as an animal, tree, doll, and so on (we are most familiar with the Fairy Godmother and her magic). The maiden or lad performs a "task" that only she or he can fulfill. She is rewarded in the end.

Fairy Tales as Images of Human Development

In *The Interpretation of Fairy Tales*, Roy Wilkinson writes, "The reality of the fairy stories lies in the fact that their content portrays soul experiences, cosmic truths, the process of the individual's development, the elemental world, folk wisdom and apocalyptic imaginations. These 'reports,' however, are not couched in conceptual language, but in imaginative pictures. A whole world of spiritual scientific knowledge is contained in them" (p.7).

Wilkinson summarizes very succinctly what I learned about the meaning of fairy tales in the course of my research. Fairy tales are part of every culture's oral tradition. They originated in a time when humans were more connected to the spiritual world and could "see" and "hear" its realities. These tales speak directly to a person's heart and soul, bypassing the intellect, and are a reminder of how things used to be and where we came from. Rudolf Steiner describes fairy tales as astral experiences that affect one's soul in a spontaneous and elementary manner.

Fairy tales also teach us to be brave in the face of adversity, to not be afraid to rely on friends and helpers, to strive and never give up. They show humor and fill us with a desire to strive towards what is true and beautiful and good. They guide us on our journey toward becoming free human beings by planting seeds of moral strength and allowing us to develop a firm belief in the power of redemption and transformation.

Fairy tales are especially apt and important for young children, who are still very connected to the spiritual world and whose intellect hasn't yet engaged. They still think pictorially, so these stories speak directly to them. They "understand" the spiritual messages and images on a deep level. They have no trouble relating to the ancient wisdom imbued in these stories. And these images, in turn, nourish the etheric, formative forces of the child, providing a counterbalance to the hardening forces modern children encounter from quite a young age.

The Cinderella Story

This story has a long and rich history. The first known version is from Egypt and dates back to the time of the Christ event. In the 5th century BCE, the historian Herodotus wrote an account of Rhodopis, a Greek maiden from Thrace, who was captured by pirates and sold into slavery. She was taken to Egypt in the time of the Pharaoh Amasis. She served in the same household as Aesop and was eventually freed by the brother of Sappho, the lyric poet.

Around the 1st century CE, the historian Strabo adapted this historical account and wrote the first known version of what was to become the Cinderella Story. In this account, the slave girl Rhodopis is given a pair of dainty gold slippers by her master. As she is washing clothes by the river one day, having laid her slippers aside on a rock to keep them dry, an eagle swoops down, carries one of these slippers away, and drops it into the lap of Pharaoh Amasis.

This is the first known version of a story that is all about uniting with one's higher self and reconnecting with the spiritual world. Through a new awareness which awoke in human consciousness at this time, humans were also given the ability to become conscious of the spiritual world, an ability that had become lost as humanity descended into materialism.

It is interesting that in this story, spiritual help, in the form of an eagle, arrives without being summoned; in other words, unconsciously. It is as if humans needed to be made aware that the spiritual world is there to help. The marriage between Rhodopis and Amasis is also not consciously sought after in thr story, but comes about as a happy surprise. I imagine that this was what the experience of connecting with the spiritual world felt like when it first became available to humanity.

The next known versions were recorded in China around 900 CE and in India around 1000 CE. In the Chinese story of Yeh-Shen, the spirit world reveals itself to the girl in the form of a wise old man who mysteriously appears and informs her of the magical properties of her fish's bones. In other words, help from the spiritual world still needs to be offered from above, but the fact that it is available for the asking is becoming more conscious. In the Indian version, recorded not too many years later, the availability of spiritual help is revealed by the magical (spiritual) helper itself, in this case, a water snake. A version recorded around this same time, in Arabia (part of the Arabian Nights collection), has the heroine discovering the magical properties of her "helper" on her own. Steiner's discussion of folk tales mirroring the evolution of humanity is reflected in the above timeline.

From these jumping off points, the story "travelled" all over the world, whether literally along trade routes, or spiritually, in that similar versions arose independently in various corners and cultures of the earth. There is an example from South America from the time of the Incas, before the arrival of European explorers. Other major pre-Columbian civilizations (Mayan and Aztec) may also have had a Cinderella story in their lore that was lost in the mists of time. It is interesting to note that these older versions portray a heroine who is self-reliant, devoted to family and ancestors, and willing to make her own future.

The earliest European version described is "Rashin Coatie" from Scotland, recorded in the 1540s. This was followed by the Italian version, "La Cenerentola," in the 1600s. The best-known version, adapted by Disney into a film, is the French "Cinderella" by Charles Perrault, dating to 1697. Here Perrault introduces the fairy godmother, the pumpkin and the mice, and the glass slipper. In a sense, Perrault's version anticipated the "Disneyfication" of the story, since it was written more for entertainment and did not stay true to the oral tradition.

The other best-known version, "Aschenputtel," was recorded by the brothers Grimm in 1812.

Interestingly, the version that travelled to North America with the pilgrims eliminates all "magical" elements. There is no magical helper or lost shoe. The Cinderella character is rewarded for her hard work and kind heart. It is as if the spiritual world is working internally and in secret, in recognition of the Puritans' sensibilities around the "occult."

There also exist several "Cinderlad" stories, where the spiritual seeker is male. In these, as in the female counterparts, the Cinderlad is mistreated by those in authority but is helped by a magical animal helper, most often a bull. He is revealed when he performs a heroic deed that saves either the princess herself or the community in which she lives.

My research revealed many different interpretations of the Cinderella story:

- In his book *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bruno Bettelheim describes "Cinderella" as a story

addressing sibling rivalry. He states that the degradation of Cinderella by her stepsisters reflects the inner feelings of a child caught in the throes of this rivalry. The hearth and ashes are the nurturing, safe heart of the home. Turning these into symbols of shame reflect a child's outgrowing the magical time of early childhood and starting to separate from the mother. The magical helpers symbolize the deep connection the child retains to its early nurturing and how this continues to "assist" the child later in life. The "losing" of the slipper and the later "finding" of its owner indicates an individual's desire to be seen as she truly is. Bettelheim's interpretation is rooted in the material world and arises from a psychological point of view, however, which does not consider the threefold human being as understood through Waldorf education.

- In his lecture series given in 1897, John Thackray Bunce claims all Cinderella stories are derived from the Hindu legend of the Sun and the Dawn. Ushas, the dawn maiden (Cinderella), is grey and dull when away from the Sun (the Prince), who is ever seeking to make Ushas his bride. Ushas is obscured by clouds (stepsisters) and night (stepmother), who try to keep the Sun from her. I found this interpretation really interesting, as Steiner describes folk tales as descriptions of spiritual events that humanity was once able to see when still connected to and aware of the spiritual word.

- Samuel Denis Fohr, in *Cinderella's Gold Slipper*, describes fairy tales as representations of the formation of the earth, the descent into materialism, and the break from the spiritual world. The death of a mother and her replacement with a cruel stepmother reflects this break from the cosmos and the emergence of a world that treats its "children" (humanity) with indifference or even cruelty. Cinderella is forced to perform menial tasks that are intended to keep her from searching and finding the connection to the spiritual world. These "tasks" focus entirely on materialism; spiritual pursuits fall by the wayside. The magical helpers come from Divine Spirit, revealing themselves when called upon. Cinderella represents the human's spiritual aspect and the stepsisters and stepmother the materialistic side. Tending and caring for the magical helper signifies spiritual practices. By dancing with the Prince at the ball, connection to the higher spiritual self is achieved through Cinderella's modesty and purified nature.

- In explaining the Grimm's story "Aschenputtel," Roy Wilkinson equates the death of the mother to the loss of ancient spiritual wisdom. By visiting her grave, Cinderella acknowledges that the spiritual world still has an influence, even if it is difficult to perceive. The stepsisters and stepmother represent the negative forces that are trying to cut off all connection with the divine. They are only concerned with materialistic endeavors. By asking her father to bring her a twig from a living tree, Cinderella is cognizant of the soul spark within her and wishes to nourish it and see it grow (the twig grows into a beautiful tree). The little white bird symbolizes blessings from the spiritual world. The trials and tribulations Cinderella endures are symbolic of the path of initiation, where the seeker must learn to distinguish the essential from the transitory (separating lentils from ashes) and her three successive ball gowns represent stages of enlightenment along the path. But as the soul is not yet fully conscious of these stages, Cinderella must return to her rags. Fitting the shoe is indicative of the soul finding the right balance between the earthly and cosmic forces; marriage to the Prince symbolizes the true ego uniting with the purified soul. The stepsisters are blinded as all those who follow a strictly materialistic path become blinded to the next world.

- In *The Wisdom of Fairy Tales*, Rudolf Meyer also analyses the story of "Aschenputtel." He describes this Cinderella story as a striving by the human soul to make itself worthy of connecting with spirit. It is a path of initiation, of uniting with one's higher self, beginning with the death of the mother (the loss of primal wisdom) and her snow-covered grave (the onset of spiritual winter). The stepsisters represent the Luciferic forces of pride and vanity and the Ahrimanic forces of hard materialism. Cinderella is caught between them, retaining a spark of recognition for the ancient wisdom that has not failed (daily visits to her mother's grave). She nurtures this wisdom and coaxes it to grow (hazel branch grows into a tree). The little white bird that perches in the tree's branches grants her all her wishes just as spiritual grace descends on those who go deep into their souls and search the divine with honesty and integrity. Cinderella's task of separating lentils from ashes is a test for the spiritual seeker to distinguish the essential from the non-essential, to exercise judgement in discerning the eternal

from the transient. Donning the ball gowns, going to the party and returning to her rags is equivalent to the journey the astral body and the ego make every night into the spiritual world during sleep. There the soul meets its higher self, where a union is sought. Everything returns to "rags" (unconsciousness) upon awaking, but the feelings engendered by the night's experience linger. When the true Cinderella rides off with the Prince, the soul is beginning to unite with its higher self and is raised to the level of inspiration. The two stepsisters, who try to win the Prince through deceit, are blinded by doves pecking out their eyes. One cannot attain entry into the spiritual world by cheating; first, the lower realm of the senses must be overcome. This story instructs us in the way to spirit, and the pitfalls that await those who try to take shortcuts or force their way in.

With all these interpretations in mind, I read over 55 versions of the story, from as many different lands as I could find. It came to me that this is a story about perseverance in the face of adversity and that the spiritual world is always there to help; one need only ask. All will be resolved in the end, no matter what the actual outcome. For me, the shoe symbolizes the spiritual journey of the heroine, and its beauty reflects the pureness of her heart or striving. Marrying the Prince pictures a symbolic connection to one's higher self. It is a story to reassure humanity that while we are still in the depths of its materialistic existence, there is a way back to the spiritual world. ◆

Resources:

- Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group 2010)
- John Thackray Bunce, *Fairy Tales, Their Origin and Meaning* (Victoria, Australia: Leopold Classic Library 2015)
- Samuel Denis Fohr, *Cinderella's Gold Slipper: Spiritual Symbolism in the Grimm's Tales* (Chennai, India: Theosophical Publishing House 2017)
- The Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *The Complete Grimms' Fairy Tales* (Pantheon/Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group 19`76)
- Roy Wilkinson, *The Interpretation of Fairy Tales* (Fair Oaks, CA: Rudolf Steiner College Press 1993)
- Rudolf Meyer, *The Wisdom of Fairy Tales* (UK: Floris Books 1995)

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