

Myths and symbols are in the language of the soul. A myth helps us to take a situation to heart and know what we must do.

— Jean Shinoda-Bolin, *Crossing to Avalon*, 1995

Redemption Motifs in Myth and Fairytale

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By exploring symbols buried deep within myths and fairytales, we get to look down Alice's rabbit hole at redemption motifs which help us learn what is relevant for change, healing, and transformation. Themes of descent and of suffering are part and parcel of a transformative journey along the path of individuation. What we learn from stories are very real in the sense that we find important knowledge about ourselves, how to survive frightening challenges, and how to make our lives more meaningful. Myths, and fairytales give us a universal language to explore this inner change and allow our experience to be understood.

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Redemption and salvation are not only terms associated with teachings of particular established religions. According to Jung, they are universal intra-psyche archetypal motifs, meaning redeeming the divine within, God, or the numinous from the darkness: that which has been unknown.

An injury to the developing self occurs when the “treasured” part of the psyche is bound, gagged, buried, or held prisoner by the unmet needs of an unwelcoming emotional environment. Psychotherapy welcomes a remembering of the child's own painful story of emotional imprisonment, early childhood narcissistic wounding, and emotional

abandonment. Such children, used by a narcissistically wounded parent, are helplessly left at the parent's disposal. The child's own developmental needs are “bewitched,” or left for dead. In such unhealthy parental interactions, the child survives by becoming invisible. His/her preciousness lies curled up in a corner, dying. He/she is unseen, unheard, and

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trapped into mirroring the ego needs and emotional manipulations of a wounding parental environment. Cinderella shouts out in behalf of

such emotionally abandoned children: banished to the attic, and left in a state of confusion and non-communication. The magical Fairy Godmother symbolizes the wise self, the intuitive inner voice within each of us, which knows our potential and pushes for transformation. Cinderella's childhood survival depends on masking the true self with achievement, and self-sufficiency, “working until weary” (Grimms, 1972), serving the needs of others. The telling and retelling of the soul's wound to an empathic ear awakens the deadened, wounded parts to its sleepy potential. It is in listening by “an other” with an empathic ear, hearing with the heart, telling and retelling until the wounded core feels touched, that the psyche begins healing the Self. Let your heart tune in to the richness of the underground world, the inner world, as told in myths and fairytales.

Viewed from a psychological lens, fairytale plots and motifs use symbolic imagery to illuminate an inner experience, provide insight into human behavior, real life experiences, and illustrate patterns [of life] that guide us along a journey of transformation. Because they are written in the language of the soul, their symbols and metaphors model ways to wrestle with life's challenges, face conflicting aspects of the self, and sow the seeds of change.

Redemption in fairytales refers specifically to a condition where someone has been cursed, bewitched, or condemned without cause, and, through certain happenings in the story, is redeemed (Von Franz, 1980). It is the task of the hero to redeem the bewitched person. By hook or by crook, it is also the hero's task to build up or strengthen the ego when it is in a fragile state. Psychologically speaking, depression is such a state and is often a phase along life's transformative journey. Such is the case with *Snow White*, abandoned in the dark forest with nothing but walls of thick trees around her — a metaphor for that depression and suffering experience from which she must free herself. In order to move to maturity, she must bring consciousness into dialogue with the unconscious. The characteristics of the Seven Dwarfs (Doc, Dopey, Sneezy, Bashful, Sleepy, Happy, and Grumpy) are seen as metaphors for the psychic energies within: the conflicting, dormant, shadowy impulses that can move and guide us.

In stories where the hero must search for buried treasure, that search is really a quest for the gold within, for the soul that is lost, hidden, or trapped in the unconscious. The hero must retrieve this gold in order to be redeemed, healed, or whole. Today, bewitched might resemble feeling out of sorts, off-center, or are unable to function as usual. When one part of the self feels lost or pulled off-balance, the whole person is then affected.

Redemption also occurs in the therapeutic environment. Recently, a client brought herself to therapy because of a recurring dream that frightened her: of being beaten with hazel sticks while imprisoned in a pool of water. Here was a lovely, intelligent young woman, bedecked with bangles and beads and veiled with a beautiful smile. Yet, her inner experience told a different story about a scared self that felt trapped and vulnerable. The water motif may indicate her belief that she needs cleansing. Yet the hazel sticks in her dream offered the potential for truthfulness and wisdom. Water, baths and beheadings are redemption motifs often found in fairytales and myths. They, like sweat lodges, baptisms, and mikvahs are about cleansing, purification, rebirth, and renewal.

The transformative journey of heroes and heroines represent a collective inner experience that can be understood as metaphors for psychological change. The slaying of the monster in fairytales and myths is really about slaying the monster within. Biting into the apple is a metaphor for the experience of awareness and enlightenment. We can all be heroes on our own journey, our own quest of self-discovery. Through myth we learn from the centuries of wisdom about life: leaving home, going on risky travels that are full of challenges, and finally returning, changed forever. Indeed, storytellers might conceivably have been our first psychologists.

As a psychologist, listening to a patient's story means tending to the inner language, soul, and that language often speaks through symbolism, dreams, and metaphor. Psyche's symbols can help move one past the concrete, the material world, towards the unfolding of a deeper layer of knowing, wholeness, and individuation, redeeming the buried treasure, the divine, the gold, within.