

Fundamental Distinctions between Fairy Tales and Myths as Presented by Bruno Bettelheim in “Fairy Tale versus Myth”

Bruno Bettelheim, in his Chapter titled “Fairy Tale versus Myth” from *The Uses of Enchantment*, examines the psychological significance of fairy tales and myths, particularly in the emotional and moral development of children. Drawing heavily on Freudian psychoanalysis, Bettelheim argues that although fairy tales and myths share common origins and symbolic functions, they differ fundamentally in their characters, tone, endings, and psychological effects. While both forms of storytelling explore universal human experiences, fairy tales are more beneficial because they offer hope, emotional reassurance, and practical guidance for overcoming life's challenges.

At the outset, Bettelheim points out that fairy tales and myths possess several important similarities. Both function as “models for human behaviour”, helping individuals understand life and discover meaning and purpose. Rather than merely entertaining readers, these narratives guide them through moral dilemmas, emotional struggles, and questions of identity. According to scholars such as Mircea Eliade, both fairy tales and myths have their roots in ancient initiation rites or *rites de passage*. These rituals symbolised the death of an immature self and the rebirth of a stronger, wiser individual. Similarly, the heroes in these stories undergo suffering, trials, and transformation before achieving maturity.

Another common feature is their symbolic appeal to the human mind. Bettelheim explains that both fairy tales and myths communicate through symbols rather than direct instruction. They speak simultaneously to the id, ego, and superego, the three parts of the human personality identified by Sigmund Freud. According to Freud, the id is the instinctive part of the mind that seeks immediate pleasure and gratification. It operates according to the pleasure principle and represents our basic desires and impulses. The ego is the rational and practical part that mediates between instinctive desires and the realities of the external world. It follows the reality principle, helping individuals make balanced decisions. The superego represents conscience, morality, and social values. It judges actions as right or wrong and often demands moral perfection. In simple terms, the id says, “I want”, the ego asks, “What is possible?” and the superego asks, “What is right?” Both myths and fairy tales engage all three levels of the psyche, allowing readers to understand their inner conflicts through symbolic narratives.

Despite these similarities, Bettelheim argues that the two forms differ significantly, beginning with the nature of the hero. In myths, the hero is exceptional, powerful, and often of divine or royal origin. Heroes such as Hercules, Perseus, or Oedipus are unique individuals whose extraordinary abilities and noble ancestry place them far above ordinary human beings. Their struggles appear heroic, majestic, and almost impossible for common people to imitate. Because of their exceptional status, children often admire these heroes but cannot easily identify with them.

The heroes of fairy tales, however, are quite different. They are ordinary people- an “Everyman” figure. They may be described simply as “a poor boy”, “the youngest brother”, or “a little girl”, or they may bear familiar names such as Jack, Hansel, Gretel, or Cinderella. Their ordinary background enables children to imagine themselves in the hero’s place. The fairy-tale protagonist succeeds not because of extraordinary birth or divine powers but because of

courage, patience, kindness, intelligence, and perseverance. This relatability makes fairy tales psychologically more meaningful and personally encouraging.

A second major distinction lies in the tone and presentation of the narratives. Myths are told in a solemn, majestic, and awe-inspiring manner. The miraculous events they describe are treated as sacred truths concerning gods, heroes, and the origin of the world. The atmosphere is elevated and spiritual, emphasising the uniqueness of the events and characters.

Fairy tales, by contrast, present even the most magical events in a remarkably simple and “homely” manner. Talking animals, enchanted forests, magic mirrors, or fairy godmothers appear naturally within the story, as though such wonders could happen to anyone during an ordinary “walk in the woods”. This casual style removes fear and distance, making the magical world familiar and accessible. As a result, children readily enter the world of fairy tales and imagine themselves participating in its adventures.

Perhaps the most significant difference between myths and fairy tales is their ending. Bettelheim observes that myths generally possess a tragic and pessimistic outlook. Even when mythological heroes perform noble deeds or strive to obey the gods, they frequently suffer defeat or destruction because they cannot satisfy the “implacable demands” of fate or the superego. Greek mythology offers many examples where heroic efforts end in suffering, punishment, or death. Although such heroes may ultimately attain glory or “eternal life in heaven”, their earthly lives often conclude in tragedy.

Fairy tales, on the other hand, are fundamentally optimistic. No matter how difficult the trials faced by the hero or heroine, the story ultimately guarantees a “happy” resolution. The wicked are punished, justice is restored, and goodness is rewarded. Unlike mythic heroes, fairy-tale protagonists do not receive distant spiritual rewards but enjoy happiness “right here on earth”. They marry, establish families, or live peacefully within society. This hopeful conclusion assures children that hardships can be overcome through courage, patience, and moral strength. It instils confidence rather than despair.

Bettelheim further distinguishes myths and fairy tales by examining their different psychological effects. Myths primarily emphasize the authority of the superego. Since the moral demands imposed upon mythic heroes are often impossible for ordinary people to fulfil, myths may increase a child's anxiety and feelings of inadequacy. Bettelheim uses the example of the myth of Oedipus, arguing that it can make unconscious childhood fears seem like “gruesome reality”. Instead of reducing emotional conflict, such myths may intensify feelings of guilt or helplessness.

Fairy tales perform the opposite function. Their central concern is ego integration—helping individuals balance instinctive desires with moral responsibilities. Rather than condemning natural feelings or desires, fairy tales acknowledge inner conflicts and demonstrate that they can be resolved successfully. They present symbolic solutions without preaching or forcing moral lessons upon the listener. The child is free to interpret the story personally and gradually apply its lessons to real life. Fairy tales therefore strengthen emotional resilience, encourage self-confidence, and help children believe that personal growth is possible.

Another important aspect highlighted by Bettelheim is that fairy tales respect the child’s imagination. Instead of explaining everything logically, they allow symbolic images to work

upon the unconscious mind. Children instinctively understand these symbols according to their stage of emotional development. This imaginative engagement makes the lessons of fairy tales more lasting and meaningful than direct moral instruction.

In conclusion, Bruno Bettelheim argues that although fairy tales and myths originate from similar cultural traditions and perform similar symbolic functions, they differ profoundly in their psychological purpose. Myths present extraordinary heroes, tragic destinies, and demanding moral ideals that often inspire awe but may also create anxiety. Fairy tales, in contrast, offer ordinary heroes, accessible adventures, and hopeful endings that reassure children and support healthy emotional development. By promoting ego integration, encouraging identification with the protagonist, and promising that difficulties can be overcome, fairy tales become powerful instruments of psychological growth. For Bettelheim, they are not merely stories for entertainment but enduring guides that help children understand themselves, face life's struggles with courage, and move confidently toward maturity.