



## Psychoanalytic Interpretation of Fairy Tale “Hansel and Gretel”

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### Introduction

The fairy tale *Hänsel und Gretel* is one of the most iconic stories in the Brothers Grimm collection and has captivated readers for generations. Beyond its simple plot and memorable characters, however, this tale carries deep psychological significance, particularly when analyzed through a psychoanalytic lens. According to Bruno Bettelheim, an influential child psychologist and author of *The Uses of Enchantment*, fairy tales serve as a means for children to explore and resolve their inner conflicts in a safe, symbolic way. Bettelheim believed that, inspired by Sigmund Freud's theories, fairy tales allow children to process and address their fears, desires, and anxieties without facing them directly.

Bettelheim's psychoanalytic approach to fairy tales suggests that stories like *Hänsel und Gretel* represent universal human struggles that children must confront to develop resilience and maturity. Fairy tales, he argues, serve as therapeutic tools that help children symbolically work through their fears and build emotional strength. In *Hänsel und Gretel*, themes of abandonment, independence, and self-reliance are central. By examining how these themes unfold, we can better understand how the story provides a framework for children to grapple with some of their deepest fears in a symbolic way. Through this analysis, we explore how *Hänsel und Gretel* serves as a vehicle for psychological growth, enabling children to confront symbolic representations of their unconscious fears and ultimately emerge stronger. (Blažić, Milena Mileva. *Comparative Analysis of Maori and European Folk Tales : Illustrated Maori Myths and Legends*. Tórculo Artes Gráficas, 2008, pp. 7–17)

### Analysis

In this section, we delve into the key symbols, characters, and psychological conflicts present in *Hänsel und Gretel*, following Bettelheim's interpretation. This analysis focuses on how the tale addresses themes of abandonment, self-reliance, and resilience, which Bettelheim considers fundamental to a child's emotional development.

### Symbolic Elements and Psychological Conflict

#### 1. Setting and Parental Conflict

The story opens in a poor household where *Hänsel* and *Gretel* live with their father and stepmother. The family is on the brink of starvation, and the parents are faced with a desperate choice to abandon their children in the forest. This situation introduces the theme of scarcity and represents an emotional and psychological conflict for the children. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Bettelheim sees this scenario as reflecting children's deepest fears of abandonment by their caregivers. (Bettelheim: *The Uses of Enchantment*, p.107)

The father's inner conflict over abandoning his children symbolizes a child's fear that parents might not always be there to protect them. The stepmother's insistence on abandoning *Hänsel* and *Gretel* symbolizes the darker side of authority figures, introducing children to the unsettling notion that those who are supposed to care for them may sometimes fail them. By experiencing this abandonment vicariously through the story, children confront this primal fear symbolically, allowing them to process feelings of vulnerability and insecurity.

#### 2. Fear of Abandonment

Abandonment is one of the central fears explored in *Hänsel und Gretel*. When the children are left alone in the forest, it is a symbolic representation of children's anxieties about being left to face the world without the protection of their caregivers. According to Bettelheim, fairy tales like *Hänsel und Gretel* offer children a way to address these fears indirectly. The siblings' efforts to find their way back home reflect a universal struggle to restore security and connection with loved ones.

Through the children's journey, readers are given a symbolic exploration of resilience. By facing the unknown, *Hänsel* and *Gretel* learn to rely on themselves. This portrayal not only allows children to safely experience the fear of abandonment but also reassures them that they possess the strength to cope and even thrive in the face of adversity. (Grimm, Brüder, *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, Band 1. 7.Auflage, Göttingen: Dieterichschen Buchhandlung, 1857, p. 76)

#### 3. The Forest as the Unconscious

The forest is a recurring setting in many fairy tales, often symbolizing the mysterious, dark, and unknown parts of life—or, in psychoanalytic terms, the unconscious. Bettelheim interprets the dark forest in *Hänsel und Gretel* as a metaphor for

the children's unconscious minds. It is a place of danger and uncertainty, where they must confront their inner fears and desires.

Wandering through the forest, *Hänsel and Gretel* face trials that force them to mature and develop independence. For young readers, this journey represents a symbolic descent into their unconscious minds, where they confront hidden fears. Bettelheim argues that the forest's unknown nature helps children process the concept of the unconscious, providing a safe space to encounter their anxieties in the context of a story.

### **Role of Characters: The Witch and the Stepmother**

#### **1. The Stepmother and the Witch as Negative Figures**

Bettelheim sees the stepmother and the witch as personifications of hostility, selfishness, and danger—traits that can appear even in caregiving figures. In this tale, both figures represent threats to the children's well-being. The stepmother abandons the children, exposing them to the cruel side of adult authority, while the witch poses a direct threat to their lives, luring them with promises of food but intending to harm them.

Bettelheim suggests that these figures allow children to externalize their fears, making them easier to confront and symbolically "defeat." By presenting such negative figures, the tale permits children to explore and manage their feelings about authority, danger, and betrayal. The siblings' eventual triumph over these threats reassures children that they can overcome even their darkest fears. (Bettelheim, Bruno, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, New York: Vintage Books, 1976, p. 108)

#### **2. Gretel's Role in Overcoming Adversity**

Gretel plays a pivotal role in the story by outsmarting the witch and saving her brother. This act of bravery and cleverness represents self-reliance and resourcefulness. Bettelheim emphasizes that Gretel's leadership in this crucial moment allows children, especially girls, to see the importance of self-empowerment and mutual support in the face of adversity.

By showing that even children can take control of a threatening situation, the story reinforces the idea of resilience. Gretel's bravery symbolizes the ability to overcome negative influences, offering young readers a model of strength. Bettelheim argues that through such heroic actions, children learn that they have the capacity to confront and overcome difficulties in their own lives.

#### **3. Overcoming Oral Fixation and Dependence**

The witch's house, made of enticing sweets, represents a phase in early childhood that Freud called "oral fixation," where children are primarily focused on nourishment and dependency on caregivers. By resisting the temptation to succumb to the witch's house and ultimately defeating her, *Hänsel and Gretel* move past this stage of dependency. Bettelheim interprets this as the children's growth toward maturity and independence.

According to Bettelheim, the children's triumph over the witch signals that they are no longer merely dependent on others for survival. Instead, they have learned to rely on themselves and each other. This overcoming of oral fixation symbolizes the development of independence, a key milestone in child psychology. (Bettelheim, Bruno, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, New York: Vintage Books, 1976, p. 107)

### **Moral Lessons and Psychological Growth**

The moral lessons in *Hänsel und Gretel* emphasize self-reliance, resilience, and the value of family bonds. By cooperating and supporting each other, the siblings succeed in overcoming all obstacles. The treasure they bring back home symbolizes the inner strength and emotional maturity they have gained. Bettelheim sees this treasure as a metaphor for the emotional growth that children achieve by working through their fears and anxieties.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, *Hänsel und Gretel* offers much more than an entertaining story. Through a psychoanalytic lens, the tale serves as a powerful symbolic tool that helps children navigate complex emotions like abandonment, fear, and dependency. Bettelheim's interpretation highlights how fairy tales allow children to safely encounter and process challenging emotions in an indirect, symbolic way. By facing abandonment, confronting dangerous figures like the witch, and learning to rely on themselves and each other, *Hänsel and Gretel* gain emotional strength.

Bettelheim argues that the therapeutic value of fairy tales lies in their ability to mirror children's inner struggles, allowing them to process these struggles and grow. Ultimately, *Hänsel und Gretel* teaches readers that despite the fears and dangers of the unknown, courage, resilience, and mutual support can help overcome adversity. This timeless tale provides children with a symbolic journey of psychological growth, instilling in them a sense of hope and confidence in their ability to face life's challenges. (Bettelheim, Bruno, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, New York: Vintage Books, 1976, p. 110)

### **Biography**

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