

The Enchanted Forest as a Place of Knowing

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... the feathers from the wings of angels are taken and strewn along the forest paths. Only the women who need enter the forest see them rocking softly on a leafy bed.

Introduction

In his essay 'Fairy Tales as Ways of Knowing', Bruno Bettelheim states of women who have confronted their deepest fears:

Having found their own strength and gained the ability to exercise it, they no longer need to live in fear, or to depend on others for their well-being. Life will be good for them forever after.

It [is] their experience in the dark and pathless forest; it [is] their successful encounter with terror which did all this for them. Finding oneself in a dark, impenetrable forest is an ancient literary image for [a woman] in need of gaining self knowledge (Bettelheim 1981:14).

When a woman has a powerful internal struggle and descends into the unconscious mind or the deep feminine (a well-hidden locale under many layers of thought and feeling), the struggle on a metaphorical level manifests itself in a difficult journey through the world between worlds, one of the 'ancient literary images' to which Bettelheim refers. After her induction, the woman dies to her former way of knowing and acquires a different way of knowing, relinquishing her naïve and childish

understanding of the world for a more mature awareness and comprehension. It is often necessary for women go through a form of initiation in order to become thus independent, strong and perceptive. Clarissa Pincola Estés in *Women Who Run With the Wolves* writes about 'contacting of the power of the Wild Woman'. Her parallel between strong, passionate women and wolves is animating and evocative (1992:3-6, 25-38). In this paper I draw on her constructs in certain instances, as they are vivid, vibrant and instructive.

Estés' Jungian construct of the deep female psyche (Estés 1992:3-4, 33, 88-90, 123) holds the intuition, which is a profound current of knowing that integrates into the divine. It is formed from the great female collective unconscious, consisting of a combination of many varied influences from all women, familial or communal. Because female readers have a knowledge of the archetypes of the deep feminine and their being part of the female collective unconscious, they are able to relate (albeit in an undefined way) to what the fictive heroine of the fairy tale experiences. By way of analogy with their own encounters of entering the 'dark impenetrable forest', they are able to recognize the process, understand its significance, and know how to deal with it when its cycle rises in their own psyche.

I have chosen to discuss the enchanted forest as it occurs in three fairytales, together with the forest's magical beings in each case. The enchanted forest resembles the real forest in that both harbour strong forces that affect people's lives in dramatic ways. The forests in the tales provide a milieu for the protagonists to become empowered, though not all of the characters come successfully through the spiritual trial that these forests offer them. The stories are about humans and their supernatural counterparts in an oral tradition.

Unlike in real, or realistic, forests, in the fairytale forest nature is animated or personified. In 'The Snow Queen' flowers possess the power of speech and in 'The Little Mermaid' some creatures are half animal and half plant (both these stories are from *Andersen's Fairy Tales*). The construct of the indivisible whole in the fairy tale implies that the fantastical entities cannot be separated from their environment because they are at one with the milieu. There is a form of omniscience and cohesion whereby the fairytale creatures are all-knowing and all-seeing. Their thoughts and feelings are accessible to all and are read and felt by all other fantastical entities. They are a mutable ensemble of beings that blend into their surroundings, and change form at will. In the real world,

most humans separate themselves from nature and perceive a distinction between themselves and nature. They see themselves as half dependent on the environment in an exploitative relationship in which they draw on plants and animals for their sustenance. People are generally more centred on taking care of their own personal interests than of the environment. Humans do not usually see themselves as a part of a great recycling process in which they are made of the same elements as the earth, taking in its nutrients and on cessation offering the elements and nutrients back in a huge cyclic process. They have a dualistic view of themselves in relation to their surroundings. Misinterpreting the power relations between themselves and nature, they act in bad faith and destroy the natural habitat to which they belong and on which they depend.

Regrettably, humans are also in division among themselves. Men and woman are at variance with one another because men try to dominate women. They both misuse nature and mismanage the wild life and wild lands that ensure their existence on this planet. They encroach on nature's own territory and even drive back the ocean in order to occupy its place. In the same way that the sea lands have been dwelt in by people, so men and ruthless women have by their selfish will forcibly uncovered and illegally occupied parts of women's secret souls. By their insensitivity and self-centredness they introduce negative convictions that crush and throttle. However, like the deltas and flood plains, the deep waters of the psyche will surge up to reclaim the lost territory. The deep feminine will reassert itself.

This paper will study three folktales rooted in the oral tradition, all of which locate their female characters for at least part of the narrative in an enchanted forest populated by fantastical entities associated with female trial, suffering and power. The stories are 'Vasilisa the Wise' as retold in *Women Who Run With the Wolves* (1992) and 'The Little Mermaid' and 'The Snow Queen' from the Collins edition of *Andersen's Fairy Tales* (nd). All these tales involve a protagonist who enters a forest, has an experience there and exits either in triumph or defeat. Vladímir Propp sees the plot structure of the 'wondertale' or fairy tale as possessing certain 'constant ... factors' (Propp 1984: 82). According to Claude Lévi-Strauss, Propp's version of the fairy tale plot follows these lines:

[t]he hero (victim or seeker) meets a ‘benefactor,’ willing or unwilling, obliging or reserved, helpful or hostile at first. The benefactor tests the hero (in many varied ways, which can go as far as engaging the hero in combat). The hero reacts negatively or positively, on his [or her] own or by means of supernatural intervention (there are many intermediate forms). The acquisition of supernatural help (object, animal, and person) is an essential feature of the function of the hero (Lévi-Strauss 1984:171).

In ‘Vasilisa the Wise’, the witch Baba Yaga is a hostile yet fair benefactress who tests the heroine (seeker), Vasilisa, by obliging her to perform very difficult tasks. There is a condition that if Vasilisa fails she will be devoured by the witch. If she succeeds, Baba Yaga will provide her with the fire she needs. Vasilisa cooperates with the witch and reacts positively. With the assistance of her supernatural helper, a doll, she accomplishes the tasks Baba Yaga sets. The benefactor in the ‘The Little Mermaid’ is the willing but self-seeking sea witch. The heroine (victim) is the mermaid and her help takes the form of a phial of magic potion (object) that the witch prepares. After swallowing it the mermaid undergoes the necessary change from fish to human. In ‘The Snow Queen’, the crippled hag of death and oblivion is Gerda’s benefactress. Gerda (a seeker) escapes the hag’s spell of ennui with the help of the flowers. The hyacinth’s story and the appearance of the rose bushes rouse Gerda from her amnesia so that she may flee the witch and resume her search for Kay. The witch inadvertently assists Gerda to surmount a shortcoming of procrastination and self-indulgence in her character.

The fictional women in the three fairy tales are young girls who as characters undergo life-changing experiences in the enchanted forests. I will argue that the girls, by going into the forest, have an encounter whereby they may be initiated into the deeper and wilder knowledge of who they are apart from who they are taught to be. In human society complex overlays, injunctions or prohibitions imposed by culture, tradition or custom can cause a woman to become alienated and estranged. When a woman is alienated, she is out of touch with her deep intuition or her inner knowing. For her this means muddling through life without a focus or passion. She ‘lack[s] inner seeing, inner hearing, inner sensing, inner knowing’ (Estés 1992:80). She could be the woman who lives by the values of goodness and sweetness, protective qualities she saw

in her mother's love for her. She continues to put a premium on them by being obliging and agreeable even when she faces abuse. Her purity and freshness exert a pull on any predator within her range.

Perhaps a woman's experiences have caused her to be afraid, ambivalent, faltering and without inspiration. Trauma, confusion and perhaps fear of non-compliance are just a few of the many negative states that a woman who is alienated from the deep feminine can experience. This woman can however be transformed through entering the mythological forest of the mysterious psyche and availing herself of the figure of the witch, (a fantastical construct) for initiation into the deep feminine. According to Estés, who paraphrases Jung's 'The Transcendent Function':

some persons, in their pursuit of the Self will overaestheticise the God of Self experience, some will undervalue it, some will overvalue it, and some who are not ready for it will be injured by it. But still others will find their way to what Jung called 'the moral obligation' to live out and to express what they have learned in the descent or ascent to the wild self (Estés 1992:32-33; see Jung 1960:84, 91).

When a woman has an enormous internal struggle, it is in parallel with an outward journey into the fantastic and follows the pattern of the death/rebirth cycle during which a new woman is born (Estés 1992:81). This cycle entails the death of an epoch in a woman's life and the birth of another epoch, a cycle which recurs many times in the life of a woman. The innocence of youth is maintained and reinforced by a kindly and protective mother whose loving voice is internalized by the child. During a rite of passage the 'too good' nature has to die and be replaced by a wilder and wilier nature. The woman must understand the many layers of reality and dispel her illusions of 'I am good so society must love me'. Bettelheim explains this phenomenon as the woman emerging from the forest experience and being happy afterwards (Bettelheim 1981:14). This contentment is temporary, however, because inevitably the cycle will repeat itself again. With each descent the woman may become either stronger or weaker.

Some fairy tales depict the start of such a journey as follows: 'once there was and once there was not...' By reading these first few words, we as readers are alerted to the fact that a mystical account of the

‘other world’ is about to occur. The ‘other world’ events play out in a ‘world between worlds’ where nothing is as it seems and there is an understanding that the protagonist will soon become cognizant of something that she was not aware of before. The nature of folklore is such that it borrows from reality but does not correspond to reality. According to Propp,

In folk prose the unusual acquires dimensions impossible in life. In folklore the narrative is not based on normal characters or normal actions in a normal situation; just the opposite: folktales choose things strikingly unusual (1984:19).

In most fairy tales where forests feature, something both strange and familiar awaits an individual in the forest and it is the individual’s fate to meet it. According to Estés, ‘*La Que Sabé* [the One who knows] breathe[d] upon us, changing us’ (1992:33). In the strange events and transformations of the tale, the female reader or listener recognizes the cycle of death and rebirth that is familiar to her own psychic life.

‘Vasilisa The Wise’

‘Vasilisa the Wise’ is a folktale of Eastern European origin. In Russian folklore there is a blurring between the animate and the inanimate, the real and the unreal, nature and man, the dead and the living. I have chosen the tale because it is rich in symbolism and diverse in its different themes and constructs. It incorporates motifs that are found in other fairy tales, for example ‘Hansel and Gretel’, ‘Cinderella’ and ‘Rumplestilskin’. It is therefore ideal to use as a template when analyzing the other tales to be discussed in this essay. In the ‘Hansel and Gretel’ tale there are exiled children, a cannibalistic witch, a formidable forest and an unusual abode. The ‘Cinderella’ tale features the hateful stepmother and daughters, the importance of clothes, an abused child and a caring benefactor. In ‘Rumplestilskin’ a maiden has helpers who assist her when she is required to spin hay into gold. The three tales are all similar, in the way in which they conform to the characteristics that Propp has identified.

In ‘Vasilisa the Wise’, the formidable and frightening forest or the ‘psyche wilderland’ (Estés 1992:83) is the locus of initiation into the deep feminine for Vasilisa. The ‘psyche wilderland’, or deep unconscious,

provides a locale where she will learn life's most important lessons and become greatly strengthened. I will provide a brief outline of the tale 'Vasilisa the Wise' as told in Estès, who provides a Jungian interpretation of the story. I will later use her template of interpretation to explain 'The Little Mermaid' and the 'Snow Queen', too.

'Vasilisa the Wise' is a story about a young girl who loses her mother. The mother bequeaths the girl a doll to comfort and guide her, and charges her not to neglect the doll and always feed her. The girl's father remarries after a short while. The stepmother and stepsisters tyrannise Vasilisa and try to get rid of her. Emotionally ill-equipped to defend herself against the step women, Vasilisa becomes their servant and falls victim to their persecution and abuse. The naïve and over-protected young girl, in the absence of her father, loses her territory, her certainty and her dignity. The step women are jealous hags 'who throw [her] about like a rag' (Estès 1992:92). Because she is docile and submissive, their ill-treatment intensifies. Eventually they order her into the forest to fetch fire from Baba Yaga the evil witch. Like 'things that live in the dark, the step women [clap] and [squeal]' (Estès 1992:76) as they conspire to make sure that Vasilisa dies. She is obliged to go into the forest in search of the frightening old woman who eats children. By the construct of the rule of naivety and gullibility she qualifies for initiation by Baba Yaga.

Vasilisa leaves her 'real' world and enters the other world of the enchanted wood. On entering the forest, she plunges into a darkness that is both literal and metaphorical. The forest becomes darker and darker. Bettelheim writes:

[t]his evil, this darkness that surrounds [her] in the forest, is but a projection of the darkness that resides in [her]self, and so is the dragon against which [she] does battle. The dragon is a figment of [her] imagination into which [she] projected all that [she] can not accept in [her]self (Bettelheim 1981:15).

Night falls. Vasilisa comes closer and closer to a frightening ordeal in which the forest is the underworld of the psyche where the red, the white and the black horsemen ride. They lead her into the old witch's hut. Their uncanny presence is a precursor of the kind of experience that Vasilisa will have in the Yaga's abode. Baba Yaga, the keeper of the sky and earth beings refers to the horsemen as 'my sun, my day, and my

night' (Estés 1992:92). As Vasilisa approaches the initiation hut she is closer to herself, to essential ideas, feelings and the realm of the unconscious. According to Helen Pilinovsky:

[Baba Yaga's] home is a mobile hut perched upon chicken legs, which folklorist Vladímir Propp hypothesized might be related to the zoomorphic *izbushkii*, or initiation huts, where neophytes were symbolically 'consumed' by the monster, only to emerge later as adults (1980).

In the following analysis, I will interpret the images and metaphor in the tale. The fire that Vasilisa seeks is retained in the skulls of children that the old witch has devoured. The crucibles of fire are balanced on pedestals made from dead people's bones, many of which surround the house. The bones testify to people who have displeased the hag and have been devoured by her as a result. They are the casualties who fail the initiation process. The mythological forest as the locale of the deep psyche houses Baba Yaga and her 'cohorts', who are the 'dragons' against whom Vasilisa 'does battle'. The witch sets her tasks to complete. One of thee is to separate the poppy seeds from the dirt. By doing this, Vasilisa learns to discern between positive and negative elements. She focuses on the positive. Through her diligence and commitment, she is a constructive link in the separation process. The process of separation is a metaphor for choosing to pursue desires from the soul instead of the seductive elements that arouse but do not satisfy. An example of such elements would be wrong friends and destructive lovers instead of steady, dependable people.

The magic 'hands in the air' are the first of Baba Yaga's 'cohorts'. They are a synechdochic metaphor for the help they give the witch in accomplishing her tasks. The magic hands squeeze oil from Baba Yaga's poppy seeds, a precious end product, symbolic of healing and anointing. It is hard work to squeeze the last drop of oil from the minute seeds; the hands' productivity is an example of how affirming and therapeutic useful pursuits can be.

Vasilisa's 'doll', Vidacita, also assists her in accomplishing her tasks. The doll, a talisman and 'helper', resembles the elves and fairies that sometimes come to the rescue of mortals when huge tasks have to be accomplished. Vidacita is on the one hand the diminutive of Vasilisa, a small and bright copy of herself, who, like her, is dressed in red, white

and black. On the other hand, this doll is also a talisman from Vasilisa's mother, a matrilineal bequest of power or deep intuition handed down the familial female line (Estés 1992:80). She is the instinctual life force that is fierce, enduring, astute and driven towards continued existence. Together with the Yaga the doll is the mother of all women. Their guidance and intuitive gifts come from the personal level as well as from the divine.

Another of Baba Yaga's 'cohorts' is the chicken feet that spin the house. The chicken feet are tough, strong, flexible and agile; they are tenacious and cling to a perch where they roost even while the bird sleeps. This image is suggestive of the support or mainstay in the psyche where Vasilisa learns to be vigilant, stalwart and perceptive. The claws on the chicken feet are sharp and durable, capable of scratching open hard ground and uncovering what lies beneath the surface. They evoke the insight and detection mechanisms that Vasilisa needs to employ to gain clarity in any given situation. As a whole, the house is symbolic of a part of the young Vasilisa's psyche that needs to be developed. When she arrives in the forest or at the threshold of the deep psyche, she is vapid, too ordinary and nondescript. She needs to drop her inhibitions, gain charisma, and (like the house on the chicken feet) reel and swivel with her hands to the heavens in celebration of a vibrant life.

The 'cohorts' collectively represent human action, passion, carrying out intentions, developing strategies, clearing and preserving the inner sanctum. Their lesson to Vasilisa is to keep order and not allow the forest of the psyche to become cluttered and chaotic. She is charged with the task of taking care of Baba Yaga's house. By good housekeeping she learns responsibility, constancy and trustworthiness. By working in Baba Yaga's yard she learns to grow, prune and nurture plants. She provides enough water for the plants, not too much and not too little. She deals with beetles, weeds, and pests. This form of husbandry is an analogy for nurturing a good partner, raising children and being on the lookout for harmful influences. She learns to allow what needs to expire to die, and by dying to live again.

During her stay with the Yaga or Hag Goddess, she is initiated into character-building activities and she learns about her inner cycles and biorhythms. She needs to remain within her natural rhythm and learns that she should not fan the sensual fire too high or allow it to die down to low. She develops her intuitive powers and relinquishes ideas and practices that cause her to have problems with the archetype of the

stepmother and sisters. The step women represent the detractors or the wicked refrain within the deep psyche that chants discouraging messages and negative assertions. They are the vicious reiterations that whisper dark messages of hate, deception and misconstruction. They are the natural predators that shout 'fail'. Fortunately they are also part of the dark self that will drive an individual towards becoming stronger and more prudent. They will drive the woman to overcome weak elements that urge her to be too compliant and agreeable, and to accept defeat without a fight.

The construct of the Baba Yaga or the old Wild Mother brings about a new directive to the ego, so that the miraculous can occur, integrity can be built, impulses moderated, and energy focused in the right way. She is a teacher, a model that is true to herself, the power of the life-force. She represents the irrational and the inexplicable element that we fear in ourselves. She is the devourer, the one who is able to eradicate us. If we outwit her or overcome her we will be immensely enriched.

Baba Yaga requires Vasilisa to perform various tasks such as cooking, cleaning and washing clothes. By cleaning the dirty laundry, Vasilisa deals with confidential matters and secrets in her own life, which brings her a form of catharsis. The clothes are the external coverings that the witch selects in order to reveal a certain identity to the outside world. As Vasilisa washes the witch's clothes, part of the old hag's power is transmitted to her. She lays down her own clothes and adopts the witch's persona. The witch's personal effects are significant as they stand for power, affluence and authority. Each occasion calls for a different garment, depending on what impression she needs to convey. Vasilisa needs to be empowered, and the 'washed clothes' construct is associated with power, mastery, and social mobility. Part of Vasilisa's initiation is so that she can adopt the personae that the outfits characterise. Through her purification process she develops spiritual dynamism and strength.

Under the correction of Baba Yaga, Vasilisa is fully initiated, acquiring the witch's sensibilities, gaining her stamp of approval and earning the right to own the fire. She advances as master of her experience. Her detractors are silenced by being burned to cinders, destroyed by the skull that holds the fire, which is the passion and power that the girl has derived from her descent. Above all the fire it is a token of a secure livelihood. If the witch is separated from her assets, the

heroine profits and her future is secured forever. 'Life will be good for [her] forever after', according to Bettelheim (1981:14).

The tale of 'Vasilisa the Wise' is a comprehensive template that well illustrates the descent of a heroine into the deep psyche where she will confront her dragons and do battle with them. The dragons are a rich field of personification of abstractions and of metaphor that represents the psychological and social exemplars that will teach, strengthen, empower and edify the heroine. Referring to the symbolism of folktales such as this one, Bettelheim says:

the symbolic codes woven into fairy tales are relatively easy to decipher, for they are based either on generally familiar allusions or on verbal substitutions. As Freud noted, folklore in general takes advantage of symbols that possess universal validity (Bettelheim 1981:31).

'The Little Mermaid'

The second tale that I wish to investigate is 'The Little Mermaid', from *Andersen's Fairy Tales*. The motifs in this story are very similar to those of 'Vasilisa the Wise', forest and witch themes occurring in both tales. The mermaid is a princess of the sea who falls in love with a human prince, but in order to win his love she needs to become a human being. The world of the merpeople is subordinated to the human world. The fictive world of the human, consisting of the prince and his kingdom, simulates the real dimension, into which the supernatural is adroitly integrated. The mermaid believes that humans have superior benefits and privileges. So strong is her desire for the prince and the promise of immortality enjoyed by human beings that she visits the enchantress of the sea, who has the power to transform her into a human being. In order to meet this sea witch she is required to traverse a hostile and frightening terrain—a sea forest with snakelike polypi that catch and strangle their victims:

She had to traverse an expanse of bare grey sand till she reached the whirlpool, whose waters were eddying and whizzing like millwheels, tearing everything they could seize along with them into the abyss below.... Then she had to pass through a boiling,

slimy bog which the enchantress called her turf-moor: her house stood in a wood beyond this, and a strange abode it was.... All the trees and bushes around were polypi, looking like hundred-headed serpents shooting up out of the ground; their branches were long slimy arms with fingers of worms, every member, from root to the uttermost tip, ceaselessly moving and extending on all sides.... Among other things might be seen even a little mermaid whom they had seized and strangled (Andersen nd:124-125).

In all these tales, the forest represents the dark side of the human psyche. No forest, however, upon land or sea could be as menacing as the deep and violent wilderland of the psyche of one who wishes to change her cultural affiliation and traverse the boundaries of her own society to move into another. The mermaid represents someone who has this aspiration on a human level. Her psyche is therefore particularly voracious; it would rather fasten her down and annihilate her than let her pursue such an unfavourable line of action. As a metaphor, her journey to the house of the hag reflects the violence of the machinations of the deep unconscious upon one who would forsake her clan, her ethnic group or her religion to form a union with another of a different culture, class, religious belief or an unconventional sexuality. Jung would describe such a woman as someone who is not ready for the descent and will be injured by it.

There are several parallels between the mermaid's undersea forest and the forest of Baba Yaga. The sea witch and Baba Yaga are one and the same Old Wild Mother, with her cohorts. In this milieu a great acclimatisation takes place. On a certain level, both Vasilisa and the mermaid have the same initiatory experience, but only to a point, because they emerge from the forest of the deep psyche very differently. The polypi forest is far more threatening than the forest that Vasilisa transverses. The description is frightening, and the transactions between the mermaid and the witch in the sea forest are violent and painful. Vasilisa's experience is rigorous but fulfilling and successful. She proceeds valiantly, tentatively, intelligently and smoothly through her initiatory experience. The mermaid, who has a strange duality about her (she is both fish and human), undergoes a very violent and brutal initiatory experience. She underestimates the hazard involved in her cross-over. Unlike Vasilisa she is inflexible and ignores her inner hearing, inner seeing and inner knowing.

Throughout the exercise of acclimatization, the little mermaid knows that the cross-over from ‘fish’ to human is perilous and may not be worth all the energy and sacrifice needed. She is also inexperienced at projecting what might happen in the future, unable to calculate human ways and guilty of ignoring clues in her environment (the dead mermaid caught in the tentacles of the polypi). During their interview, the wily and experienced witch, who has expected her, says ‘I know well what you would ask of me’, and then ‘laugh[s] so violently that her pet toads and snails f[a]ll from her lap’ (nd:126). The hag warns the little mermaid that she will endure terrible pain day and night and that she will never be able to be among her family again. Moreover, unless the prince marries her, she will not gain the immortality she so desperately wants and she will also die if he marries another—she will instantly dissolve into foam.

The mermaid is stubborn and compulsive. The terrible phial of potion she is willing to consume is a potent and volatile mix. Even the polypi cringe as she takes it past them. In spite of all the warnings she still pursues her unwise course of action. Her sisters serve as ‘helpers’ and also experience the same upper world that the mermaid sees and desires. They turn away from the novelty after a while but the mermaid does not. Towards the end of the tale they visit the witch and exchange their hair for a penknife that they hope the mermaid will use to kill the prince. They are so concerned about the sadness which the youngest mermaid has caused in their family that they risk going through the frightening whirlpool and polypi forest to see the witch. The mermaid stands on the deck of the prince’s ship unmoved as they hand her the knife. She is indifferent to their sacrifice and devotion and does not kill the prince, choosing to die herself instead.

The mermaid is not like Vasilisa who listens to ‘Vidacita’ and feeds her. The mermaid does not heed her intuition and the less she listens the fainter the inner voice becomes. The dark psyche works to provide what she wants, as her will is so strong.

Because the mermaid unwisely bargains her tongue away to the witch as a means of exchange, her beautiful singing voice (her brilliant creativity) is lost to her. She foolishly forfeits it as compensation to the witch for her help. She is the kind of woman who will gambol away her reserves without being able to predict that this exploit will handicap her in her future endeavours. She is reckless and takes unprecedented risks. Instead of drawing power from the witch, she gives her own power over to her.

After drinking the potion and committing herself to the 'upper world', she develops an apparently faultless persona. She is deformed but looks good, always graceful, smiling and beautiful. Her legs are however so painful that every step she takes is agony for her. She fools the entire court that she is doing very well in the 'culture-made skin' that does not fit (Estés 1992:276). The culture-made skin (legs) is an attribute she acquires that enables her to fit in with her new society. Sacrificing so greatly for a diminished life, she still consoles herself that the new culture's ideology of a perfect and long life will sustain her; but her expectations remain unfulfilled. Her transfer from mermaid to human is nothing but exile to an earthly wilderness.

The mermaid stays; she cannot go home to recuperate and wishes for no other way of existence. She has forfeited all her power and becomes a 'fog', then a 'vapour' and then a 'wisp of her former wildish self' (Estés 1992:102). Furthermore, she has no self-expression left; she can no longer sing or communicate or go to her inner world that has an order familiar to her. There is no way to revive herself as she is always caught up in her pretence. Sadly, she is resourceful enough to be led into the life she seeks, but her situation is too untenable to sustain.

The mermaid's former way of life is in fact a representation of a state of being that is cohesive and soulful. It is nourishing and set in her natural habitat but she does not appreciate her nurturing and serene environment. She relinquishes all she is and has in the merkingdom because she is idealistic, self-centered, naïve, dissatisfied, restless and ambitious. Her discontent is with her people, her environment and her state of having a tail and living in the water. She surrenders her natural bodily form for a futile devotion to a man who does not return her love.

The mermaid chooses to leave her home on her own accord, while Vasilisa is an exiled heroine. If we were to apply the mermaid's experience to women in real life, a woman (by a cross-over) would forfeit an essential personal quality necessary for her continued existence in the place of her choosing. Perhaps she would need to suppress it forever and be mute about it. Ironically and metaphorically, her tongue would be cut out in the same way that the mermaid allowed the witch to cut her tongue out.

This real-life woman might be a person from an ethnically or culturally different or a deprived or lower-class background who is attracted by the trappings of an affluent and powerful culture and falls in love with a man from this group. She pursues him relentlessly. She leaves

her home, her loving and devoted family, culture, religion and friends to embark upon a course of action that will prepare her for a future with the man. She relinquishes her way of life, of dress, and of speech. She renounces her affiliations because she believes that his religion, worldview or societal structure is more sustaining than her own. She learns a new language, adopts new mannerisms, customs, values, dress codes and gestures. She tries to hide the truth about her background, living a life of pretence and angst, striving to be someone she is not. An irreconcilable lack of correspondence between her reality and that of the new culture alienates her from the new group. The man eventually rejects her in favour of a woman of his own standing. She cannot return home because the change in her is significant enough to estrange her from her own people.

Another possible example is a woman who embarks upon a relationship with a man many years her junior. She deserts her family and own age group to mix with younger people. She tries to familiarise herself with their discourse, and engages in activities that younger people enjoy. As time goes by, she is obliged to conceal the effects of aging. Her life becomes one of apprehension and dislocation. Although she has superior attributes, everyone recognises her as inadequate and she is gradually phased out, being made to look ridiculous and anachronistic. This woman might open herself up to such impossible circumstances and inhabit so bizarre a mental world that the only people who can share her particular psychic space are those in mental institutions or prisons.

Unlike Vasalisa, who separates the poppy seeds from the dirt, these women fail to select the elements that nourish rather than seduce. They choose harsh, abusive partners instead of the men who will nurture them. They do not reach the 'moral obligation'—the goal of Jung's 'transcendent function'—under which they live out what they have learnt in their descent to the wild self and thereby 'discover the courage to be [themselves]' (Jung 1960:91; Estés 32-33). They are the women who crawl away in tatters.

The end of 'The Little Mermaid' is tragic and convoluted. Suffice it to say that something awaits her in the forest landscape of the psyche and it is her fate to meet it, without possessing the right form to withstand it. Women who are similar to the mermaid meet up with the forest witch, defy her caution and fall into her power; in her iron jaws she chews them up and spews them out. They are the bones in the fence around the house that spins on chicken feet or the skeleton of the little

mermaid caught in the clutches of the polypi. They do not relinquish their 'good girl' nature and do not learn to understand the many layers of reality. They continue to believe: 'I am good, so society must love me and accept me'. Like the mermaid they spend an eternity doing good deeds but never thrust their hands towards heaven to reel and swivel in celebration of a vibrant life.

'The Snow Queen'

Vasilisa and the mermaid undergo initiation in forests and so does the next heroine whose progress we follow. She is Gerda, the female protagonist of 'The Snow Queen'. Her initiation takes place in the form of a long and challenging journey. Within the journey she also has a forest experience. Gerda is fated to endure hardship during a wellnigh impossible undertaking. When a sliver of glass falls into the eye of little Kay, Gerda's playmate, he undergoes a personality change and is stolen by the snow queen. Gerda's arduous journey is a quest to find him.

She has many varied experiences. Numerous creatures of make-believe assist her in finding her way to the palace of the snow queen and, like Vasilisa and the mermaid, she meets up with a forest witch. This witch takes the form of an old woman with whom she stays during one stage of her journey. The old woman is a crippled hag, the ruler of the realm of oblivion and death, according to Wolfgang Lederer in *The Kiss of the Snow Queen* (1968:41). Her affliction entitles her to this designation. She is not the complex Baba Yaga, who is a combination of various archetypal witches of both the forest and the underworld. Nor is she like the snow queen who is a truly powerful enchantress. She is just an old witch with a whim. During Gerda's stay with her, the old woman seduces Gerda into the psychic space of distraction and idleness because she wants company. Gerda forgets her purpose and loses sight of her intention to find Kay, but fortunately she has an experience that causes her amnesia to break. This occurs through her communication with the plants in the old hag's garden, the most important of which are roses and hyacinths. These talking flowers volunteer information based on their own perspectives or worldview. They are quite solipsistic in their approach and their remarks are mostly not altogether applicable to her situation. The hyacinths say of their own opinion, 'We do sing our own song, the only one we know!' (nd:225). However, they tell Gerda a

significant forest story. I investigate this story because it is a tale with the same theme as the other tales discussed in this essay.

The hyacinths' embedded narrative strongly features the forest in the construct of the divided world of realism and myth. The flowers are enchanted, with other-worldly qualities: they are the all-seeing, all-knowing watchers who can also use their scent in mysterious ways. After Gerda has been subtly reminded of Kay's existence by a rose, the hyacinths tell a story about three maidens who enter a forest:

‘There were three fair sisters, transparent and delicate they were. The kirtle of the one was red, that of the second blue, of the third pure white. Hand in hand they danced in the moonlight beside the quiet lake; they were not fairies, but daughters of men. Sweet was the fragrance when the maidens vanished into the wood; the fragrance grew stronger. Three biers, on which lay the fair sisters, glided out from the depths of the wood, and floated upon the lake: the glow-worms flew shining around like little floating lamps. Sleep the dancing maidens, or are they dead? The odour from the flowers tells us they are corpses; the evening bells peal out their dirge!’

‘You make me quite sad,’ said little Gerda. ‘Your fragrance is so strong I cannot help thinking of the dead maidens. Alas! and is little Kay dead? The roses have been under the earth, and they say no!’

‘Ding dong, ding dong!’ rang the hyacinth bells. ‘We toll not for little Kay—we know him not! We sing our own song, the only one we know!’ (Andersen nd:225).

The sisters in this story are either poisoned or hypnotized by the fragrance that they encounter in the forest. They experience death, or on a different level, defeat in their initiation into the numinous experience of the deep psyche. They are like the children Baba Yaga devours because they do not satisfactorily accomplish the tasks that she sets. They meet the same fate as the dead mermaid.

As Gerda listens to the hyacinths' parable she sees herself suffering the same fate as the princesses. She realises that, like them, she too has gone into a forest and become overpowered by a fragrance. Her forest is the abode of the hag and her wonderful, sweet-smelling garden. She identifies with the princesses, seeing the oblivion that the hag's spell

causes her as a kind of 'death' that has brought her to a state of forgetfulness. Living in the house of the witch has caused her to relinquish her quest and become self-indulgent and self-involved. She realizes that the hag's promise of bounty and everlasting asylum has paralysed her will and diverted her from her goal. She immediately leaves the cottage with its scented flowers and delicious cherries and resumes her search for Kay. Thus she escapes oblivion and inertia and emerges strengthened in her resolve.

More lessons from other people along the way await her after she flees the hag. She learns wiliness and strength from the robber maiden; she is toughened by the cannibalistic robber woman; she is taught to be cautious and careful by the Lapland woman; she discovers from her encounter with the Finland woman her great inner strength, integrity and resolve. Although Gerda does not have a personal encounter with the snow queen, her initiation is elicited by her.

Indirectly the snow queen is responsible for Gerda's quest into the unknown or the wilderland of the deep psyche. In Gerda's experience (the most voracious part of which is the broken down castle in the wood inhabited by the cannibalistic robber woman and her villainous associates), her 'helpers' are the swallows, the pigeons, the talking flowers, the ravens, the prince and princess and the reindeer. They play a part similar to that of Vasilisa's helper, Vadacita. The construct of the shattered mirror and the distorted view of the world it brings to Kay also touch Gerda's life. Her charge is to reverse the negativity it causes; she succeeds in her mission.

In both 'Vasilisa the Wise' and 'The Snow Queen', clothes and coverings are thematic. Through the princess's provision of fine clothes and fur boots, Gerda develops the feel for sophistication and elegance. In a forced exchange, the robber maiden takes the clothes and muff and gives Gerda the robber woman's big, rough gloves. As Baba Yaga's possessions connote authority, durability and mastery, so do the gloves belonging to the robber woman. Above all, the gloves are the token of a secure passage. If the witch or her 'cohorts' part with any assets, the beneficiary profits, her future secured forever. Gerda has outwitted her 'devourer', the cannibalistic robber woman, and is thereafter imbued with this woman's vitality, wiliness and resilience.

Whereas Vasilisa's detractors are her stepsisters and stepmother, Gerda's are the snow queen's guards who shout 'expire'. They are the negative assertions that Gerda fights off by chanting a prayer of

affirmation. When, after the long expedition, she finds her way to the snow queen's palace, she weeps with joy at seeing Kay again. Her tears melt the icicle of his heart and the snow queen's spell over him is broken. She emerges from her initiatory experience a different person. She is strong, can navigate in the dark and go a long way to rescue someone she loves. The story ends when both Gerda and Kay are mature adults, celebrating their victory over the snow queen. In the company of Kay and in fulfilment of their moral obligation, she returns to their home town to pay homage to the role model of their formative years. There they find that the only change that has taken place is within themselves: 'The clock [says] "Tick, tick!" and the hands [move] as before' (Andersen nd:254).

Gerda, a fictive character undergoing a descent into the psyche's wilderland, has a counterpart in the real world. This young woman commits herself to a young man from an early age. He is her childhood sweetheart but rejects her when he goes through a very difficult adolescence. She remains faithful and patient. Part of her descent into the wild feminine revolves around her determination to rescue him. He suffers a deep form of identity crisis and perhaps becomes a gangster or a drug addict, involving himself in a destructive relationship. He attaches his sleigh to that of the snow queen, a *femme fatale*. However, he is rescued by his first love, returns home as a prodigal and continues his life, carrying out his moral obligations. Like Gerda, the woman, he goes through his own initiation into the deep psyche.

Both Gerda and Vasilisa reach the point of Jung's 'moral obligation' where they live out what they have learnt in their descent or ascent to the wild self. Of Gerda and Kay the narrator says:

There they sat, those two happy ones, grown-up and yet children—children in heart, while all around them glowed bright summer—warm, glorious summer (Andersen nd:255).

But the mermaid has an experience parallel to a form of imploding into herself or 'crawling away in tatters'. She does not live to fulfil her moral obligation because she never ascends. A woman whose experience is analogous to that of the mermaid will pay a penance for heeding her undisciplined heart. Depending on her own world view it might happen that she commits herself to the moral obligation of performing good deeds for the rest of her life.

Conclusion

What do readers gain from the tales we have studied? The stories all speak of and to women. A comparison should enable us to determine what Propp calls the ‘constant ... factors’ and those that are unique to a specific tale (Propp 1984:82). By understanding the characterization we may be able to find the fairy tale that best suits our own particular life crisis. Using a technique of critical analysis we can try to comprehend the imagery, metaphor and symbolism active in the descent of each protagonist. Heeding theoreticians such as Propp and Bettelheim, we can gain an understanding into the basic way the fantastical constructs operate. Perhaps some of us can identify with one of the heroines, saying: ‘I too have met with Baba Yaga under similar circumstances’. We learn from the tales that, in order to survive our encounter with the witch, we must not forget to feed Vidacita, listen to her instruction and combine forces with her when she assists us in separating the poppy seeds from the dirt. We should be in good faith, face our dragon and know that finding ourselves in a dark, impenetrable forest is an ancient literary image for humankind in need of self knowledge. By coming successfully out from among the trees—and from the witch’s clutches, bearing her possessions—we forsake our naïve and juvenile understanding of the world for a more mature, but perhaps less conventional, way of knowing. According to the folktales we may live happily ever after only when we have left the ordinary expectations of society and withstood the trial of the Wild Woman, at which point we can begin, in Jung’s phrase, to ‘find the courage to be [ourselves]’ (1960:91).

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