

Storytelling and Harmonious Dwelling: The Role of Fairy Tales in Environmental Education

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This talk was originally given at the 4th Global Interdisciplinary Conference on Storytelling in Prague, May 2013.

Abstract

Ecocritical theory today converges in hope that imagination and storytelling can reconfigure our dysfunctional relationship to the natural world. A theoretical introduction to these issues is followed by a concrete example from my own teaching approach: the Czech fairy tale *Zlatovlaska: Princess of the Golden Hair*, a tale in which animal-speaking triggers adventure, and animal empathy secures success. Based on a short summary of that tale, the paper offers a pedagogical exploration of the ecological potential of the story in a creative writing classroom. Comparing and ‘unwrapping’ tales to explore the values held within can open a lively environmental dialogue. Writing itself can transform object to subject, and can give voice to that which is mistakenly seen as mute. Fairy-tale writing and performance can allow students to negotiate their own, original journey between the human and the wild world.

Keywords: Environmental education, eco-criticism, animal transformation, fairy tales, creative writing.

Introduction

Western thinking often maintains the idea of a felicitous rift between human and animal, evincing our linguistic capacity as the proof of our unique humanity. From fireside to nursery to novel, folk and fairy tale has unceasingly presented an alternative perspective; success is impossible unless we put aside our human voices and speak in the tongues of the wild world, or take off our skins and enter the fur of the forest-dwellers. As the impending environmental crisis urges us towards a change of thought and heart, we are confronted with a paradox: how is it that we empathize, to a large extent, only with our own species, when our tales remain those in which courtesy to other species is often the touchstone of the successful quest?

In countless animal bride and bridegroom tales, typified in our own culture by ‘Beauty and the Beast,’ it is a sympathetic encounter with the animal which is the key to a happy ending. In animal communication tales such as the Grimms’ ‘Queen

Bee,' it is the younger brother's protection of the forest creatures which ensures his successful rescue of the enchanted princess, and in tales of Baba Yaga, a girl must share her meat with the animals in order to escape the witch's hut. As Marie Louise Von Franz in her study of the morality of central European folktales has put it: 'If you do not listen to the helpful animal or bird, or whatever it is, if any animal gives you advice and you don't follow it, then you are finished.'¹ Contemporary Jungian Susan Rowland, speaking about children's fantasy, similarly emphasizes the importance in the fantasy novel of sympathetic response to the wild. Comparing *The Secret Garden* with *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, [Susan LM1][JC2]Rowland points out that both quests begin with the children following the movements of a robin. These classic texts of children's fantasy create not only stories with ancient resonance, but a 'healing borderland'² in which we are no longer 'severed' from this non-human wisdom.

As Linda Williams argues, it is neither possible nor desirable to return to a state which no longer describes us, a tribal state in which our paradigm is wholly mythic, and in which science is subsumed by a trust in the unchanging stories.³ It is, however, conceivable that traditional tales, including our own Western fairy tales, may provide us with a way to negotiate away from an outdated mechanistic viewpoint to a more inclusive future. It is this possibility which the following paper shall consider, first theoretically, and then practically, exploring the uses of traditional folk and fairy tale in an eco-writing classroom.

Enchantment and Re-enchantment

Enchantment. From the Latin *incantare*, to cast a spell upon, from the root *cantare*, to sing, and nowadays meaning a making of magic.⁴ Essential to the storyteller, in the past few decades enchantment, or rather, re-enchantment, has also become a key-word for philosophers and ecologists who are calling for us to return to an older or non-Western conception of the material world as living and aware. In his 2011 book *Ecological Imaginations in World Religions*, Tony Watling quotes Morris Berman: 'Some type of holistic, or participating, consciousness and a corresponding socio-political formation have to emerge if we are to survive as a species. What is needed is a new social imaginary, or imaginaries, re-enchanting nature [...][LM3][JC4].'⁵

Yet what does it mean to re-enchant? Are these ecologists calling us to re-believe in fairies, and if so, what relevance can fairies and fairy tales have to the gravity of today's ecological crisis? And what kind of role, if any, can this re-enchantment have in an environmental classroom, where it is the urgent facts of the matter, not the comforting fantasies, that we have a responsibility to communicate?

An enchanted landscape is a landscape steeped in story. As ecological storyteller Anthony Nanson describes, 'traditional societies perceive the landscape as permeated and animated by a coextensive mythscape of songs, stories, spirits.'⁶

Nanson claims that with the loss of story within landscape, we have lost our ability to mediate our relationship with the wild world.⁷ This idea is also to be found in the work of ecological philosopher David Abram. In describing the Aboriginal practise of Songlines, where each section of the landscape is narrated in sacred song, Abram explains that from the distant tales ‘we begin to discern that storytelling is a primary form of human speaking, a mode of discourse that continually weds the human community to the land.’⁸

But how, precisely, does this ‘wedding’ take place? As Nanson words it, in a storied landscape, the wild is ‘animated.’ In an enchanted field or forest, nature is conscious, aware and articulate. How else would we be able to speak with its spirits – the fairies, elves and goblins – or journey on quests guided by the wolf, fox or horse? The story might thus be said to function as an imaginative medium via which we acknowledge awarenesses other than ours. As Jacques Derrida emphasized in ‘The Animal That Therefore I Am,’ this awareness can manifest in a recognition that the animal is aware of us. Modern Western philosophy, argues Derrida, is fundamentally at fault because it *does not* acknowledge this: ‘something that philosophy perhaps forgets, perhaps being this calculated forgetting itself – it can look at me. It has its point of view regarding me.’⁹

Certainly in modern science – at least those aspects of modern science which have their roots in Cartesian mechanism and Newtonian atomism – ‘matter,’ which covers anything of ‘Earthly’ material, is by its very nature not ‘mind.’ As Kate Rigby summarizes:

In banishing of mind or soul from the realm of matter, the mechanistic-atomistic paradigm tended to deprive the non-human of moral considerability and thereby paved the way for a purely instrumental attitude towards the natural world.¹⁰

It is precisely this instrumental attitude towards the natural world that is now being re-evaluated, and stories which provide an alternative viewpoint are fundamental to this re-evaluation.

The Wild Voices

To our indigenous ancestors, and to the many aboriginal peoples that still hold fast to their oral traditions, language is less a human possession [LMS][JC6]than it is a property of the animate earth itself.

David Abram¹¹

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A fundamental aspect of attributing mind or soul to ‘the realm of matter’ is in the re-evaluation of the limits of language. Language is largely considered the unique possession of humanity, the polished distinction of human evolution. This view is typified by evolutionary biologist Mark Pagel, for example in his 2011 TED video ‘How Language Transformed Humanity,’ in which he argues that the evolution of language is ‘why our species has prospered around the world while the rest of the animals sit behind bars in zoos, languishing.’¹² Yet an alternative reading is that animals sit behind bars in zoos because we put them there, and the reason we put them there is precisely because we have lost our capacity to acknowledge their sentience.

In contrast, in traditional stories, everything speaks. Chatting with a mouse, debating with a fox, negotiating with a bear – this is the given state of the enchanted tale. For Westerners this is couched as anthropomorphic fantasizing, or escapist forays to a pre-lapserian state. In Indigenous cultures, according to Abram, it is an imaginative description of the reality that nature is as voiced as we are. In his book *Spell of the Sensuous* Abram cites a multitude of examples of Indigenous cultures from Siberia to South America where communication with the non-human is a fact of life.¹³ He points out that, in tribal communities, hunting was a process of learning the habits of the animal, including the ability to imitate its call. Abram describes this as becoming ‘apprenticed’ to the animal’s language, and suggests that speaking *with* the animal was key to existing within the local ecosystem.¹⁴

He also points out that in the beliefs of many tribes, the original language, now forgotten by man, was a language in which all nature was conversant. Abram quotes Mircea Eliade:

The existence of a specific, secret language has been verified among the Lapps, the Ostyak, the Chukchee, the Yakut, and the Tugus. [...] Very often this secret language is actually the “animal language” or originates in animal cries.¹⁵ [LM7][JC8]

Abram describes the Koyukon tribe of Alaska as an example of a tribe who subscribe to this belief. Caribou will sing through the dreaming of the tribespeople, granting them songs that some remember when waking. Elders of the tribe will create music and chants from the song of the loon.¹⁶ Thus, for Abram: ‘Among oral people’s language functions not simply to dialogue with other humans, but also to converse with the more than human cosmos.’¹⁷ ‘Words do not speak about the world, they speak to the world,’¹⁸ and it is our loss that we have become ‘severed from the vaster life,’¹⁹ and have forgotten the ‘expressive depths’ of language provided by the whole of the sensuous world.²⁰

‘Zlatovlaska: The Princess with the Golden Hair’²¹

Children's literature, potentially, and the arts, potentially, retain the possibility of being different, other or wild.

P.G. Payne²²

My own research investigates how we might explore, with young people, the disjunction between our attitude to animals in our traditional tales and in reality, and through this exploration open an environmental dialogue. It is particularly relevant to work with children on this issue, given that both fairy tales and tales where animals speak have traditionally been seen as the province of the child. Yet what can the fairy tale bring to today's internet generation, who will, in their futures, be faced with honestly and realistically renegotiating our [LM9][LM10][JC11]relationship with the wild?

My research focuses on a creative and critical approach to the traditional story, which allows both student and teacher to *use* the tale as a vehicle to explore our relationship to the wild. One fairy tale which provides an excellent focus for teaching and discussion is the Czech tale of 'Zlatovlaska.' The tale tells the story of Yirik, a king's cook. Yirik's king is given a snake by a wizened old woman which, when eaten, will allow him to speak with all the animals of the world. On preparing the snake for the king's dinner, Yirik takes a bite. Enraged, the king sends Yirik away on a quest to bring him back a bride – specifically Zlatovlaska, the maiden with the golden hair. With no idea where to seek, Yirik sets off through the forest, where he comes across a colony of ants trapped underneath a burning bush. Yirik stamps out the fire, and the ants promise him help in return. He continues through the forest to find two baby ravens, fallen from their nests. He feeds them meat and water and, similarly, they promise him help. When he finally reaches the ocean, he discovers two fishermen fighting over ownership of a freshly caught golden fish. Yirik buys the fish with all his money and tosses it back into the ocean; as it disappears under the wave it promises to return the favour. The satisfied fishermen split the gold, and take Yirik to the island of the king whose daughter is Zlatovlaska of the golden hair.

On reaching the island, Yirik is given three tasks. The first is to find the pearls of Zlatovlaska's necklace in a field of high grass, the second is to find Zlatovlaska's lost ring in the ocean, and the third to fetch flasks of the waters of life and of death. Unable to complete any alone, he is assisted by the ants, who find the pearls, the fish, who finds the ring, and the ravens, who find the waters. Her father satisfied, Zlatovlaska returns with Yirik to his kingdom. On their return, despite the fact that Yirik has found him his bride, the king decides to have him killed. Zlatovlaska, assisted by the waters of life and death, is able to resurrect Yirik, who awakens younger and handsomer than ever before. More envious of his cook than

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ever, the king demands the same treatment, and thus orders his own execution. His rejuvenation unfortunately unsuccessful, Zlatovlaska and Yirik are married, and live in wisdom and peace ever after.

A Pedagogical Approach

Before I explore how we might use this tale in the classroom,[LM12][JC13] I would like to make two qualifications. Given that many of today's thinkers are challenging our widely held Western attitude to the material world I believe that it is important to discuss with young people how our own fairy tales represent a world in which communication with the wild is not only possible but necessary. Yet as Stephen Bigger and Jean Webb following Paul Ricoeur point out, stories are not here to moralize but to provide a polyvocal space through which dialogue can be achieved and readers can 'reconsider attitudes and concepts enriched by new perspectives'.²³ In exploring these tales I am not attempting to impose any viewpoint, but to provide a play space in which we explore possibilities of interacting with an active world.

The second qualification is about the story itself. Here the wild speaks. Yet apart from tasting his king's dinner, Yirik has to undergo no trials or apprenticeship before he becomes fluent. The simplicity with which his comprehension occurs might be said to be an anthropomorphic simplification of the language of nature, making any child, perhaps, even more sceptical to the idea that nature might hold its own, entirely different, method of communication. Similarly problematic from an environmental point of view is the relationship between Yirik and his animals – for *his* seems to be the operative word. Their function in the story is to help him fulfil his task. On one level this is a mutual relationship of assistance, yet the fact that the animals are not rooted in their own territories, but appear – magically – in the time and place that Yirik needs them could be argued to reduce our relationship to the animal world into one of functionality rather than mutual interaction.

With this in mind, my environmental class on 'Zlatovlaska' begins with a discussion on this very point of hesitation: the language of the animals. Can animals speak? Does language have to be spoken, or written? Could it also be moved, sung, or danced? We think about whether the concept of a universal animal language is just a human fantasy, a desire to know every secret of the planet, or whether it is more respectful to animals to imagine they can speak just as we can. Following this is a narration of the story itself.

The follow-up activities are a creative re-writing and performing of the story, thinking in detail about animal speech. Divided into three groups, the children's task is to research their animal – ant, raven or fish – as thoroughly as possible, and think about how each of their animals perceive the world, and how this affects their language. We consider scientific research into communication within these animal groups, and discuss how this communication could be represented poetically. We read some examples of poems written in English which try to represent animal

speech, such as poems by Don McKay, Les Murray or Charles Simic.²⁴ And we then attempt to write – or create visually or via movement – a description of these animals in their own voices.

Although the animals in the tale do not appear rooted in their territories, it is the very engagement of each creature with their landscape that allows Yirik to succeed in his quest. For an educational purpose the story also provides two contrasting moments in which to explore the animals' voices—Yirik's first meeting with the animals in crisis, and the second meeting, when the knowledge of their element saves the hero. Armed with our research, we create two scripts – or choreographies, or images – of lamenting danger, and of singing success. The scripts are then put together and developed into a more complex performance.

Our interaction with the tale is receptive, critical and creative, allowing the students to, as Jack Zipes puts it: 'test the limits, test the words of language and test the rules.'²⁵ The class has to date been successfully taught at a number of primary schools throughout Sussex, to positive responses from both students and teachers. For eleven year old Lisa, for example, 'this course made me think about how the world is really around me,'²⁶ and for Abbie 'it gave me chance to think differently about ants and fish, because I've never really thought of them before, thinking that they're creatures and how they feel.'²⁷

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to provide some strategies, thoughts and reflections as to how fairy tales might be used as a compass for our re-enchantment of the wild world. In *StarMatter*, a book on Earth-focused education recently published in cooperation with Environmental Arts Group Creeping Toad, Leslie Brown and Tom Mason point out that 'to date, world education has been predominantly, and perhaps inevitably, anthropocentric, having very little concern for the role that the "other than human" influences play.'²⁸ With this in mind, they stress the importance of finding ways, in creative education, 'of celebrating the relationships between people, wildlife and places.'²⁹ Myths and fairy tales provide a space and place for this. As Terry Gifford has pointed out, 'objects of descriptive writing' can be 'given voice through [...] mythical character,'³⁰ or, he quotes Patrick D. Murphy: 'nonhuman others can be constituted as speaking subjects, rather than constituted merely as objects of our speaking.'³¹ I believe that, as we struggle to renegotiate our relationship with the wild, folk and fairy tales provide both imaginative

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stimulus and space for debate as to how we might alter our attitude and behaviour to that which is other than us.

Notes

¹ Marie-Louise Von Franz, *Shadow and Evil in Fairy Tales* (Boston and London: Shambala, 1995), 145.

² Rowland, *Ecocritical Psyche*, 83.

³ Linda Williams, ‘The Social Theory of Norbert Elias and the Question of the Nonhuman World,’ *Ecocritical Theory: New European Perspectives*, ed. Axel Goodbody and Kate Rigby (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), Kindle edition.

⁴ *Online Etymology Dictionary*, s.v. “Enchantment,” accessed May 4, 2013, <http://www.etymonline.com>.

⁵ Morris Berman, *The Reenchantment of the World* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1981), 23, quoted in Tony Watling, *Ecological Imaginations in the World Religions: An Ethnographic Analysis* (London: Continuum, 2009), 19.

⁶ Anthony Nanson, *Words of Re-enchantment* (Stroud: Awen Publications, 2011), 140.

⁷ Nanson, *Words of Re-enchantment*, 140-141.

⁸ David Abram, *Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Random House, 1996), 163.

⁹ Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills (Ohio: Fordham University Press, 2008), 5.

¹⁰ Kate Rigby, *Topographies of the Sacred* (Charlottesville, Va.: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 21.

¹¹ David Abram, *Becoming Animal* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 170-171.

¹² Mark Pagel, ‘How Language Transformed Humanity,’ TED Video, 11.16, filmed in July 2011, posted in August 2011, http://www.ted.com/talks/mark_pagel_how_language_transformed_humanity.html.

¹³ Abram, *Spell of the Sensuous*.

¹⁴ Ibid., 138.

¹⁵ Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1964), 96, quoted in Abram, *Spell of the Sensuous*, 86.

¹⁶ Abram, *Spell of the Sensuous*, 142-145.

¹⁷ Ibid., 70-71.

¹⁸ Ibid., 71.

¹⁹ Ibid., 89.

²⁰ Ibid., 83.

²¹ This fairy tale was first collected by Karel Erben and published in *Sto prostonárodních pohádek a pověstí slovanských v nářečích původních*, (Prague: I. L. Kober, 1865).

²² Phillip G. Payne, 'Remarkable-tracking, experiential education of the ecological imagination,' *Environmental Education Research* 16.3-4 (2010): 301.

²³ Stephen Bigger and Jean Webb, 'Developing environmental agency and engagement through young people's fiction', *Environmental Education Research*, 16 (2010): 403.

²⁴ See for example Les Murray, *Translations from the Natural World* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1993) (suitable only for students over the age of fourteen), Don McKay, *Strike/Slip* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2006), or Charles Simic, *What the Grass Says* (San Diego: Harcourt Inc., 1967).

²⁵ Jack Zipes, 'Once Upon a Time: Changing the World through Storytelling' (lecture, University of Chichester, Chichester, West Sussex, March 26, 2013).

²⁶ Lisa (pseudonym used), Focus Group Discussion, Bognor Regis, December 18th, 2013.

²⁷ Abbie (pseudonym used), Focus Group Discussion, Mile Oak, March 9th, 2014.

²⁸ Leslie Brown, et al., *StarMatter* (London: StillWell, 2004), 59.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Terry Gifford, *Reconnecting with John Muir: Essays in Post-Pastoral Practise* (Georgia, University of Georgia Press, 2006), 67.

³¹ Quoted in Terry Gifford, *Reconnecting with John Muir*, 67.

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