

## **Notes on Fairy Tales**

by Eric Miller, PhD

To begin to define "fairy tale":

Folktales are created by communities (not by individual authors), and are passed down orally from one generation to the next.

One type of folktale is the "fairy tale" -- which is also sometimes known as the "wonder tale".

Fairy tale characters are often like paper dolls, in that they tend to be very clearly defined, with no complicated emotions or mindsets.

Fairy tales tend to have a somewhat abstract style. They tend to take place in landscapes that could be anywhere. Such landscapes exist beyond historical time and place.

The material, glass, seems to have a special affinity with fairy tales (Cinderella's glass slipper, the story of the Glass Coffin, the story of the Glass Mountain, etc).

Many European fairy tales do not include actual fairies. However, these fairy tales take place in a magical realm in which all matter can be transformed instantly. Fairy tales feature magic of a peculiar mood and power. This realm is the opposite of the laborious, scientific realm. In fairy tales, just wishing can make it so (sometimes).

Characters in fairy tales do not question how magical transformations are possible: rather, the existence of supernatural characters who can exercise powerful magic are unquestioningly accepted.

A fairy tale protagonist typically interacts with other worlds (which may seem magic and strange to us). These other worlds may be related to characters' inner forces, and/or supernatural powers.

Fairy tales often portray the developmental stages in a young person's life. The magical transformations that occur in fairy tales often have to do with the protagonist moving from one life-stage to the next. Thus, fairy tales are often coming-of-age stories. They present the adventures of a young person as he/she struggles to find his/her way in the world. The friends and teachers he/she finds along the way are often essential to his/her success.

In spite of obstacles and pitfalls, protagonists in fairy tales may accomplish a task, gain wealth, find a mate, and gain wisdom. Sometimes, the hero/heroine undergoes trials which may lead to his/her inner and outer transformation. The lead character of a fairy tale often moves to the next stage of life with help from magical friends. Typically, fairy tales end with the protagonist's marriage.

Early in a fairy tale, the protagonist may seem to be a failure. He/she can't do things like everyone else can. This sometimes leads to the protagonist leaving his/her family to make his/her way in the world.

It should be noted that the isolation of the protagonist is often not complete -- for example, often his/her mission involves helping his/her family members.

The fairy tale protagonist often has a deep connection with the natural and supernatural worlds. This character can often understand animal languages: he/she helps the animals, and the animals help him/her.

It is the hero's/heroine's innocence, kindness, politeness, considerateness, and humility which helps him/her succeed. On the other hand, wicked, rude, self-centered characters are punished. The rewards and punishments that appear magically in fairy tales often seem to represent those characters' inner natures.

In summary: Fairy tales often centre on a hero/heroine, usually poor at the start, who, after a series of adventures in which supernatural elements play a conspicuous part, attains his/her goal and "lives happily ever after" (Krappe 1930).

### Further Reading

*The European Folktale: Form and Function* (1947), by Max Luthi.

*The Folktale* (1946), by Stith Thompson.

*Science of Folklore* (1930), by Alexander Haggerty Krappe.

"On Fairy Stories" (1965), by J. R. R. Tolkien. In his book, *Tree and Leaf*. This essay also appears in *The Tolkien Reader* (1972).

"Definitions of Fairy Tales",  
<http://www.surlalunefairytales.com/introduction/ftdefinition.html> .

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fairy\\_tale](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fairy_tale) .

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Glass\\_Coffin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Glass_Coffin) .

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Glass\\_Mountain\\_\(fairy\\_tale\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Glass_Mountain_(fairy_tale)) .

*Indian Fairy Tales* (1912), by Joseph Jacobs, at  
<http://www.surlalunefairytales.com/authors/jacobs.html#INDIAN>  
and  
<http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/ift/index.htm> .

Preface to *Indian Fairy Tales* (1912), by Joseph Jacobs  
<http://www.surlalunefairytales.com/authors/jacobs/indian/preface.html> .

99 Tamil folktales, collected by Stuart Blackburn,  
<http://www.storytellinginstitute.org/99.doc> .

Links to many collections of folktales (including fairy tales),  
<http://www.storytellinginstitute.org/87.html> .