

# Wandering through the dark forest: dreams and fairy tales in a group workshop

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## Abstract

The paper touches upon the role that fairy tales play in a group therapy, as it works through processes relating to dream contents. It exemplifies the way in which the interdisciplinary dialogue existing between group analysis and folklore research provides some interpretative options that would be unavailable unless one is familiar with the collective material existing in fairy tales. The example presented in the paper deals with the tale 'Hansel and Gretel', and demonstrates the way in which fairy tales are, in some cases, so integral to the shared cultural repertoire that it is almost impossible to deal with the dream narrative without relating its contents. The paper demonstrates the ways in which fairy tales and dreams might present a complementary or even compensatory dialogue, similarly to the way in which different voices in the group portray the outlines of conflicts and dynamics that the group will be occupied with in the phases to come. It is possible that this example may shed light on the way in which the affinity between dreams and fairy tales can influence the interpretative process.

**Key words:** Psychotherapy, dreams, stories, group work.

During the course of a group workshop that deals with dreams, one of the participants related the following dream: *"I'm walking with somebody, I don't know who it is, on some kind of road, maybe in a forest, when suddenly we come to a house, made of sweets and goodies. We eat the sweets with great pleasure"*.

After listening to the above dream, a complete silence prevailed in the group. The group workshop setting includes the responses of the other participants to the dream-telling event. Customarily, after one member shares his or her dream with the group, the other members are then invited to share their own associations, feelings, or any experience they find relevant. In this way, the group echoes various aspects associated either directly or indirectly with the dream narrative. These aspects may either be accessible to the dream-teller's consciousness, or, as often happens, they may reflect and enlighten different aspects that the dreamer, for diverse reasons, isn't aware of. In this case, the dream-teller unconsciously entrusts the group with the conflictual material (1). This is accomplished by using different mechanisms, such as projective identification (Klein 1946), in order to achieve integration. The group members react emotionally to the dreamer's mental experience; because the dreamer is not yet capable of coping with the conflicts that arise in the dream, s/he projects it through the group, which in turn, identifies with the projected material. Although on the overt level, no problematic or difficult material was evident in the related dream; nevertheless, a sense of tension was strongly felt throughout the group.

Only after a while, one of the participants finally asked: "...and?" and in response, another participant added: "...and then what? Where was the witch?"

Apparently, the association of the tale 'Hansel and Gretel' about the brother and sister who get lost in the forest before encountering the evil witch's house made of sweets, is almost automatic(2). The possibility of actively discussing the existence of the witch transformed the subtle tension into a more palpable feeling of anxiety, even though the presence of the witch existed only within the group's associative network, but was completely absent from the dream narrative itself. It seems that the 'witch content' was that part of the dream which split off from the dream-ego.

### **Dreams and Fairy Tales in Group Psychotherapy**

A large body of material has already been written about dreams in group psychotherapy, adopting various different perspectives - technical, as well as theoretical (see Neri, Pines and Friedman, 2002). However, I wish to use the above example in order to touch upon the role that fairy tales play in a group, as it works through processes relating to dream contents.

This dream was presented to the group at a relatively early stage of the group work. The experience evoked in the process of absorbing, 'digesting', containing, and reacting to its material by the other group members, was that of the need to warn against some kind of potential danger, or something bad that might happen, which has yet to be realized. This eventuation can be dealt with from different points of view, including the understanding of the processes occurring within the framework of the group's work, as well as understanding the complicated, multi-dimensional dynamics and relations between dreams and fairy tales. Dreams and fairy tales share several common characteristics(3). Both may be characterized by the combination of primary and secondary thought processes, whereas rules of time, space and logic are not committed to the realistic world, but rather to a fantastical one.

As can be seen, some fairy tales are so ingrained in culture, they seem to have developed almost automatically and naturally, as the shared experience of a group of people belonging to the same social or cultural community. The example presented above demonstrates the way in which the fairy tale is so integral to the shared cultural repertoire that it is almost impossible to deal with the dream narrative without relating its contents. As to the functions fairy tales might serve in group therapy, Lafforgue mentioned that "the fairy tale within a workshop becomes a sort of 'mother in a state of maternal reverie' in the Bionian sense (since) it receives and contains acting-out...archaic things such as violence and destruction related to the maturation of erogenous zones in their conscious and unconscious representations"(Lafforgue 2005). In examining the complex relations that the Hansel and Gretel tale shares with the dream narrative, a few interesting points can be noticed: A true sense of danger is absent in the dream text itself, but rather appears only in the link to the Hansel and Gretel tale, created by the group. It is possible that this example may shed light on the way in which the affinity between dreams and fairy tales can influence the

interpretative process. The dreamer didn't mention the absence of the witch. Instead, she focused on the experience of pleasure, and no witch disturbed her. One possible way to understand this gap is that the dreamer, in the regressive state experienced while dreaming, expressed a childish position, or a childish state of mind, in which some infantile oral desires and needs are relatively salient. The evil witch penetrated into the dream narrative as an external influence, maybe as an additional voice - that of the mature part of the personality. Actually, it might be said that her penetration into the dream narrative is parallel to her penetration into the life of Hansel and Gretel after experiencing so much joy upon encountering the house made of sweets. This voice, in the group eventuation, is outside of the dream narrative, and it appears in order to warn children not to eat too many sweets, or, to put it in a more general way: It appears in order to warn against the unpleasant consequences that might result if one is not capable of behaving as an adult and preventing oneself from rushing into pleasure and immediate drive reduction. This voice carries a distinct, didactic messages; preaching in the name of good manners, politeness and the acceptance of social norms. Otherwise, says this voice, bad things might happen. It is advisable to mention here that some groups, in their early stages, are characterized by a great deal of paranoia (Rioch 1970). The search after the witch might reflect the sense of paranoia participants may feel at this early stage. The reactions of the group members to the dream narrative, using the fairy tale as a mediating object, in order to express a certain type of mental experience, portrays the '*shared group tension*' (Heath and Bacal 1968); they can't allow themselves to lose control, so instead they look for the dangerous forces existing in the new, unfamiliar realm.

### **The Dialogue between the Different Voices**

The affinity existing between dreams and fairy tales (Raufman 2007) helps to recognize the possibility that the fairy tale is composed of different voices - infantile as well as mature - which present an interesting dialogue. This dialogue is reconstructed in the group realm, where the dreamer herself brought only the childish part, and the other parts were entrusted to the group members. As in many other cases, the dream narrative becomes a social event, in which all group members take part (Shchlachet 2002). This understanding helps to shed light upon the processes taking place within the group: It seems that some of the issues the group was occupied with, were associated with accepting the group's norms and being exposed to socialization processes which might, or might not, take part over the course of the group workshop. The group, which was still in its early stages, was occupied with issues relating to degrees of freedom. Question such as 'what is right?' and 'what is wrong?' to bring to the group, 'what is tempting and exciting?' versus 'what is dangerous and destructive?', and most importantly - 'What kind of 'food' will be provided in the group workshop?' - occupied the group. It may also be mentioned, that the early developmental stage - i.e. a relatively 'childish' stage of the group, may also be analogous to the early developmental stage of the individual in real life, or- in other words - an immature phase, compared to the later phases that followed, in

which the relations between the participants were more differentiated and more mature. It seems that the group constructed the accumulative meanings of the dream narrative and its role in the group process. By exploring the emotional reactions, the needs, fears, desires and norms of the group as a collective entity, it was possible to facilitate processes relevant to both the dream interpretation and to the conflict that the group as a whole, and not just the dream-teller, was occupied with.

Although the group workshop didn't operate as a Social Dreaming Matrix, some aspects of the SDM may be relevant to understanding several pivotal issues. As in the SDM, which focuses on the dream itself, rather than on the dreamer (Bion 1961), the dream narrative that was presented to the group activated mechanisms belonging to group dynamics, which went far beyond the issues that are relevant to the dreamer's private world. This is quite significant when talking about fairy tales, which are considered to be created by the community and can't be attributed to any one single author. Berandt argued that dreams can express issues which are social in nature (Berandt 1968). Let's discuss how this idea can serve to facilitate some awareness regarding the processes taking place in the group workshop. Lawrence and Biran, among others, state that the free associations participants are required to share in the Social Dreaming Matrix enable them to enter into an unconscious realm. In addition, they claim that in the Social Dreaming Matrix a certain ability to get lost, leave the protection of the home, and lose control, is also required. They describe this experience as being wonderful and frightening, creative and curious. I believe the same is true for the fairy tale world, especially as regards the Hansel and Gretel tale. The arena of the tale is the dark unfamiliar wood, which can easily be analogous to the unconscious world. Hansel and Gretel get lost in the forest more than once, an experience that, similar to dreams and dreaming in general, can be wonderful and scary, creative and curious, dreadful and exciting. Most important, as in the SDM, in order to survive, the two children must be able to first lose their way and then find a new, unfamiliar path. In order to do so, a substantial amount of inner freedom, which enables them to contain their fears and manipulate them in a never-ending world of both fairy tales and dreams, is necessary. It is important to remember that the ability to dream is also associated with the ability to lose control.

### **Personal versus Collective Experiences**

These processes also highlight the way in which fairy tales and dreams stand in relation to one another. Dreams are more private than fairy tales. Actually, dreaming is one of the most private situations one can experience in life. Even though some collective motifs and themes might appear in our dreams, they still exist in a private realm and the individual can choose whether to share them with others, or not. In contrast, the fairy tale is public domain. As it belongs to the society as a whole, it carries functions of socialization and serves to strengthen social norms(4). Therefore, it is not surprising that the need to warn against unrestrained behavior shows itself in

the collective narrative. It is possible that the gap between the original dream that was presented to the group, and the associations to the fairy tale that were raised by the other group members, portrays the existing tensions between desires and dangers. It is clear that witches and evil characters may also appear in dreams and don't belong solely to fairy tale realm. However, the above example demonstrates the ways in which fairy tales and dreams might present a complementary or even compensatory dialogue, similarly to the way in which different voices in the group portray the outlines of conflicts and dynamics that the group will be occupied with in the phases to come. In this manner, this eventuation exemplifies the way in which the interdisciplinary dialogue existing between group analysis and folklore research provides some interpretative options that would be unavailable unless one is familiar with the collective material existing in fairy tales.

### **Developmental Issues**

The role of the dream-teller in this eventuation is interesting. It is possible that the voice she echoes is the voice of those parts of the group which are exposed to dangers. Therefore, they have to go through certain maturation processes: from being dominated by the pleasure principle, towards the reality principle, by developing and strengthening the function of the Ego. Psychoanalytical interpretation regarding the tale about Hansel and Gretel emphasizes the aspect of achieving a more mature developmental stage as a central issue of the tale, by developing the ability to suspend immediate gratification, overcome the dependency children feel towards their parents, and learning to cooperate with peers (Bettelheim 1976). Parallel processes might occur between the group work and the story's inter-textual components. If this voice indeed identifies with the position of the children Hansel and Gretel, as it appears at the beginning of the story, then a question considering the role of the adults in the group arises. More specifically, the role of the group director may be questioned. The adult world in the tale of Hansel and Gretel is one of disappointment, abandonment and evil. Besides the witch, the other adult characters in the tale are the parents, who abandon their children in the forest. This abandonment results from their inability to raise them and to fulfill their role as parents. This inability stems from poverty and hunger, which reflect the helplessness of the adults in the story. The narrative's happy ending is not due to a good, helpful adult, such as the fairy godmother who saved Cinderella from her miserable fate, but rather to the children's own initiative, cunning, and courage, which enable them to save themselves. It is possible that the penetration of this content into the group, by means of the dream narrative, reflects issues that occupied the group, including the issue of dependence versus independence. It's also possible that the group was occupied with the question of whether the group experience would be beneficial or disappointing, as well as questions regarding the ability of the groups' members to help one another and to help themselves in situations of distress. Within the context of these questions, it is very interesting to note that the group members immediately noticed the absence of the witch, but said nothing at all about Hansel, neither mentioning his name nor

asking anything about him. Everybody who is familiar with the tale knows that Gretel didn't venture alone into the forest. Still, while expressing the fear associated with the evil witch, none of the group members related to the presence of the dream-teller's 'partner'. Actually, none of the familiar characters from the well known fairy tale actually took part in the dream narrative plot. It seems that the dream-teller expressed the attitude and position with which she approached the group, while the surrounding figures, good or evil, were neither internalized nor distinct enough to become significant others in the dreamer's inner world. It is possible that this dream is also a reflection of the other group members' psychological situation, and the fact that they didn't notice the absence of the role of Hansel. This position might be a reflection of the character of the early phase of the group workshop. The house of sweets that the dreamer encountered in her dream caused her great pleasure and satisfied her needs in such a way that she didn't need significant others; in the dream, she functioned as an auto-erotic subject without suffering from any deficiency. The voice of the group that was echoed by relating to the dream narrative is a voice that was not yet familiar with the possibilities of drawing comfort, companionship, and encouragement from one another, or the voice of a group that did not yet feel secure enough to express itself in an overt manner. It seems that it was easier for the group to relate to the absence of the witch, than to the presence of Hansel, i.e.: to the possibility of escorting the heroine on her path in the forest. Actually, it was Hansel that tried to rescue his sister in the forest, and it was Gretel who saved her brother from the boiling pot. It was Hansel who scattered pebbles along the path so that the children could find their way back home, and he was also the one who tried to make Gretel feel secure and safe. However, creating distinct object-relations in the group was still only at its very beginning stages, while the witch, together with the witch's house, may represent the oral-sadistic quality of object-relations. Both the witch and the children wish to destroy one another by the act of swallowing, devouring, or eating voraciously. Both are punished for this behavior and are encouraged to overcome this oral developmental stage.

In linking the oral contents in the dream, as well as in the fairy tales, to the developmental stage of the group, it is important to remember that the fairy tale itself, as a literally genre, is characterized by several oral qualities. Firstly, as opposed to legends and myths, fairy tales were once transmitted orally, from one generation to another, from mother to daughter, from grandmother to grandchild. The fairy tale genre is hypothesized to be mostly transmitted by women(5), and is therefore considered a feminine genre. As regards the developmental stage of the group, it should be noted that the fairy tale genre in itself belongs to an early stage of human civilization, and its creation is associated with the dawn of time. The analogy Freud made between the developmental stages of the individual and that of mankind may be relevant in the discussion of the parallel processes between the group and the use of fairy tales in order to express things which are not yet accessible to the conscious discussions of the group. The archaic elements presented in fairytales -

devouring/being devoured, being abandoned and getting lost in the forest - echo, as Lafforgue puts it, our most hidden anxieties (Lafforgue 2005).

In examining the messages presented through the association between the dream narrative and the fairy tale, it may be noticed that in addition to the issues of temptation versus danger, dependence versus independence, and loneliness versus intimacy, the voice expressed by the dream-teller might also present some additional options. For example, one option relates to the oral sadism represented by the witch, and by the witch's house. Recognizing the tale of Hansel and Gretel reveals the fact that the witch indeed exists, and that she is indeed dangerous, but the end of the story, as happens in the tradition of the fairy tale genre, is always good. Viewing the situation from this perspective may suggest that the voice arising from the dream narrative invites the group members to go on an exciting, as well as frightening, journey into a new, unfamiliar realm, full of temptations, dangers, losing one's way, and discovering one's power, courage, and ability to initiate, thus making the end of the journey worthwhile. In order to make their shared journey successful, the group members have to portray, firstly, the dangers, in order to ensure that they won't get hurt or damaged along the way. Then, after ensuring these critical conditions, which may be translated into critical rules necessary to enable the group's sense of security (such as secrecy, commitment, etc.), they can take the next step. The fairy tale hinted at in the dream narrative is aroused at the beginning of the group's journey, and may serve to outline the path upon which the group members will tread in the phases to come. It provides the possibilities of growing-up and developing a stronger self, which can better bear challenges. Mostly, it hints at the idea that getting lost from time to time might not be such a bad thing.

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## Notes

1) See Friedman's paper: Dreamtelling as a request for containment and elaboration in group therapy, *Funzione Gamma*, 1, 1999, pp.

2) This tale has different names in different versions that exist around the world. In the AT index, it appears under the classification AT 327. See Aarne, Antti and Stith, Thompson, The Types of The Folktale. A Classification and Bibliography. FF Communications 184. Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1961.

3) Freud, during the beginning stages of his psychoanalytic theory, argued that in order to interpret dreams, it is necessary to recognize symbols and motifs appearing in folklore. See Freud, Sigmund and D.E. Oppenheim, Dreams in Folklore, New-York, International University Press, 1958. Throughout the decades following Freud, many other scholars related to the affinity existing between fairy tales and dreams, and it is impossible to review them all here. For further reading, see Raufman 2003.

4) Even though some have argued that the fairy tale, as opposed to the legend, is not meant to educate, but rather to entertain ( see Luthi, Max., *The European Folktale: Form and Nature*. Philadelphia: Institute For The Study of Human Issues, 1982 ), since it reflects private desires, it is still a narrative that has undergone socialization processes, censure, and editing processes in order to adapt it to the community which preserves it.

5) Since fairy tale collections are now available in print, its oral quality has become less salient. However, it should be remembered that this genre, as opposed to legends and myths, used to exist mainly in an oral form. Whereas men were more associated with the public realm, and therefore used to tell narratives such as legends, which deal with public issues; women used to tell tales dealing mostly with familial issues, such as fairy tales. In addition, in times where women didn't know how to read and write, an oral genre was the only one they could tell. These are some of the reasons why fairy tales are considered to be a feminine genre, even though no one can really say who created them - men or women. For further reading, see

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