

Nasty Characters in Fairy Tales

by Susan Olson

About a year ago, I attended a meeting of the faculty of the Memphis Jungian Seminar (a training group affiliated with the Inter-Regional Society of Jungian Analysts). We were discussing what each member wanted to teach in the coming year, but as my turn to speak approached, I found myself at a loss. The previous year I had chosen “The Archetypal View of the Psyche” as a topic, but this year no ideas—archetypal or otherwise—were popping into my head. Nevertheless, when my turn came, I found myself blurting out, “Nasty Characters in Fairy Tales.” I have no idea where this title came from! Like a nasty character who jumps out from behind a tree in an old story, it jumped out at me and stopped me in my tracks. “OK,” I thought, “If something like this is lurking in my shadow, I’d better pay attention to it.” So I signed up, and to my surprise the seminar members and I had a lot of fun with the evil Queen in “Snow White,” the angry “Spirit in the Glass Bottle,” and other nasties who made unannounced appearances in the course of our discussion. So much fun, in fact, that I decided to pay them some more attention in the Atlanta Jung Society’s October 15 program, “Monsters, Villains, and Evil Stepmothers: Nasty Characters in Fairy Tales, Fiction, and Film.”

Is it possible to “have fun” with nasty characters? We read and hear about real ones every day in the media, and in actual life the terrorists, corrupt politicians, and deranged killers who fill the headlines and wreak havoc in people’s lives are no fun at all. In our personal lives, nasty characters come in all shapes and sizes: rude drivers, obnoxious relatives and co-workers, abusive parents and spouses. And lest we forget, within the heart of each us lurks the dark figure that Jung called the Shadow, who represents split-off, disowned, unconscious aspects of the personality. The Shadow includes positive as well as negative elements, and is certainly not all bad. And yet it can be painful and humiliating to admit that we have a not-so-nice side, which pops up in our dreams, fantasies, and behavior. It is much easier to project our nastiness out onto an enemy, a political movement, or an unfamiliar religion than to recognize it as part of ourselves. Facing our own dark side is essential, even satisfying, work, but I would hardly describe it as “fun.”

Many years ago I took a college English class devoted to the works of John Milton, the blind poet who wrote “Paradise Lost.” I clearly remember the professor observing, almost casually, that Milton’s Satan was a more interesting literary figure than Milton’s Christ. Decades later, in a study group on Dante’s “The Divine Comedy,” I found Dante’s description of the Inferno far more engaging than his depiction of Paradise. In these great works of literature, the evil characters and dark places are complex and memorable, while the overly virtuous characters and blissful places often come across as boring and stale. Think of familiar nasty characters in literature and film: Shakespeare’s Macbeth, Claudius, and Iago; Darth Vader in the “Star Wars” movies; “He-Who-Must-Not-Be Named” in the Harry Potter series; Gollum and Saruman in *The Lord of the Rings*, to name just a few. All begin as flawed beings who fall prey to their



darker impulses, and it is chilling and (we must admit) fascinating to watch their gradual slide into evil. The most compelling “good” characters—like Luke Skywalker, Frodo Baggins, and Harry Potter—also contain within themselves the potential for great evil. Luke could become another Darth Vader, Frodo another Gollum, Harry another Voldemort. These heroes are complicated and multifaceted, and their flaws make them more interesting, credible, and human.

I think we relate to the nasty characters—and to the shadow side of our favorite heroes—because we know that our hearts are also full of ambition, envy, greed, and rage. Like them, we have it in us to make bad choices and rationalize them, and to surrender to pride, weakness, cowardice, and lack of compassion for our fellow creatures. But because fictional bad guys are “only make-believe,” we can keep them—and our own dark side—at a safe distance. We can come close enough to feel the chill of their presence, but not close enough to be harmed. We can “play” with them in our imagination—envision them, observe them, think about how we would deal with them if we were a character in the story. Would we pull out our light sabers and fight Darth Vader? Try to outsmart Saruman? Run like the devil from Voldemort? Would we feel compassion for Gollum, as Frodo does, or want to kill him, as Sam often wishes to? This kind of imaginal encounter *is* fun, because it mobilizes our creative resources and brings play into the picture. Afterwards, we return to “real life” better equipped to deal with the real nasty characters we meet every day.

Of course, we identify with the hero or heroine too, as we are meant to. But most hero-figures are woefully naive at the begin-

ning of their story. Think of Snow White, who never did “get it” that the old woman who offered her those pretty gifts was trying to kill her. Think of Othello’s misplaced trust in Iago, the officer who was scheming to do him in. By trial and error, by the skin of their teeth, heroes and heroines have to learn how to deal with the monsters, villains, and evil stepmothers who cross their paths—and so do we. As we watch the heroic figures fight, or flee, or learn to outwit their enemies, we gain more of an idea about how to deal with our own. The old stories prepare us to live our own stories, to know what we are up against, and to become heroes in our own right.

In fact, there would be no stories at all without nasty characters. It seems to be their job to get the action rolling, to create obstacles to be overcome, to compel the hero-figure to discover previously unknown inner resources and use them, or to die trying. I remember a cartoon that a fellow student taped up on her wall while I was in analytic training in Zurich. In the picture, which was only slightly funny, a satisfied-looking dragon with a big belly sat licking its chops, while disjointed bits of armor lay scattered about on the ground. “Sometimes the dragon wins,” the caption read—and so it does. The story of Bluebeard, which will be performed before my October talk by members of the Kenesaw University Department of Theater, Performance Studies and Dance, contains a gruesome account of the deaths of the young women who fall victim to the title character. It is important not to minimize the full horror of these scenes. Nasty characters in fairy tales personify powerful, destructive affects and complexes. That is why it is crucial to become conscious of them and to respect their power. They challenge us to grow in strength and wisdom, but it is up to us to do the work of confronting and containing them.

Nasty characters of all sorts bring us smack up against the problem of evil. Jung wrestled with this problem all his life, and concluded that evil is not merely the absence of good (the *privatio boni* theory), but an active, destructive energy in its own right. In many stories, it is felt as a dark force that exerts a pull on all the characters and actively attempts to corrupt them. Sometimes it is represented by a specific figure or a magical object, like Sauron or the One Ring. The true heroes of the story learn to recognize evil in all its disguises and to be vigilant against it. Characters who “go bad” are unable or unwilling to resist its pull, and gradually fall under its influence. For example, the Queen in “Snow White” begins as an envious stepmother and gradually morphs into a murderous witch. Gollum starts his life as a greedy hobbit, but falls under the spell of the Ring and is willing to kill to possess it. Other villains (Bluebeard, for example) are rotten to the core, with no possibility of redemption. Learning to tell the difference between a nasty character who can still be saved, a clever villain who can be outwitted, a monster from which one must flee, and a thoroughly evil figure who must be destroyed is a crucial heroic task, and often a matter of life and death.

After the performance of “Bluebeard” on October 15, we’ll talk about him and other nasty characters in fairy tales, film, and fiction. In preparation, think about your favorite nasty character (s) and what they reveal about your shadow. Why did they turn nasty in the first place? What would the story be like if told from their point of view? Why are some of them redeemable, while others must be banished or destroyed? As Halloween approaches, let’s invite the nasty characters in for an evening of lively play. But let’s never forget to be vigilant ■