

Analysis of Hänsel & Gretel

Attention:

How many of you, when you were younger (or perhaps even still today) have made those little gingerbread houses out of pieces of graham crackers or even real gingerbread, gumdrops, candycanes, M&Ms and other stuff?

You know what I'm talking about. You use frosting as the cement mortar to keep the walls together, they always come out looking creepy and completely unappetizing.

The question also occurs to you as to why you're even doing this? Spending so much time designing and building something that's meant to be destroyed, broken, devoured and digested...

Well, it might not surprise you to know that the history of the Gingerbread House (or, *das Hexenhäuschen* as it's called to in German) comes from the very famous fairytale: Hänsel & Gretel.

But, it might surprise you to learn that the paradox of specifically building a house that's meant to be destroyed and consumed is also a central part of the psychology of the Hänsel & Gretel story. A story, that (according to psychoanalyst and author Bruno Bettelheim) deals primarily with the journey from the destructive immaturity of oral fixation to competent and mature adulthood.

Purpose:

In this short presentation, I will discuss **Hänsel & Gretel** within the larger sphere of the Grimm's collection and contemporary popular culture.

Following that I will offer an **analysis of the story's value system** along with important **symbolic representations** present in this classic fairytale.

Preview:

To do that, I will provide you with a brief **summary of the story**, followed by its **historical, regional, and cultural contexts**.

Next, I'll discuss a **previous interpretation** of Hänsel & Gretel and, finally, I'll offer **my own analysis of the story and its symbols**.

Summary:

Hänsel and Gretel is the story of a woodcutter who lives in poverty with his wife and two children: aptly named, Hänsel & Gretel.

When famine strikes, the children are abandoned in the woods at their stepmother's request, but they find their way home by following a trail of pebbles that Hansel leaves behind.

Soon after they return, though, hunger sets in once again and the children are brought out a second time. But this time, Hansel is unable to gather stones, so he leaves a trail of breadcrumbs.

Unfortunately the birds of the forest eat the breadcrumbs, so they can't find their way home.

Hansel & Gretel get lost, but finally arrive at a house made of bread, cake, and sugar and they begin to eat away at it.

The old woman who owns the house takes them in, but the next morning she reveals herself to be a witch who has plans of eating Hansel, and Gretel must help her prepare the meal.

In the climactic scene, Gretel shoves the witch into the oven.

Having escaped from the clutches of the evil witch, Hansel and Gretel gather treasures from the house and return home to their father. In the meantime, stepmother has died and they live happily ever after.

History:

The first recorded version of *Hansel & Gretel* is Wilhelm Grimm's handwritten manuscript from 1810.

According to his annotations published in 1856, the story comes from multiple tales originating in the German province of Hessen, but most agree that the definitive version was told to him by (his future wife) Henriette Dorothea Wild.

The first printed version of *Hansel & Gretel* appeared in the original *Kinder- und Hausmarchen* published in 1812. Since then, multiple changes to the story were made. These occurred in the following order:

In the second edition published in 1819, the Grimms expanded the story (after the death of the witch) to include a duck that carries Hansel & Gretel over a stream one at a time.

After the second edition (in 1819) father tricks the children into thinking they are hearing the sound of his axe by tying a branch to a tree.

In the fourth edition (1840), the Grimms made the critical decision to change the "mother" character to a "stepmother."

It's only after the fifth edition (1843), that a white bird leads the children to the witch's house.

Also after the fifth edition (1843), comparisons between the stepmother and the witch became evident through language (they both refer to the children as "lazy" at various points).

In Ludwig Bechstein's "Deutsches Marchenbuch" (1845), the story "Vom Hanschen und Gretchen die in die roten Beeren gingen" appears and expands the story further to include a white bird who leads the children back to their home.

After the Grimms' fifth edition (1850) the witch was described in similar fashion to the witch in *Jorinde & Joringel* (KHM 69).

Literature:

Now, let's consider the consequences of this for how characters and narrative represent the value-system of the story...

Psychoanalyst and author, Bruno Bettelheim in his 1976 book, *The Uses of Enchantment* interprets Hänsel & Gretel as a story about parental separation anxiety and the journey from childhood to adulthood.

According to Bettelheim, *breadcrumbs* and *the witch's house* represent the "primary oral urge" of the child to have all of his needs met by the mother.

But as the story progresses, and the witch threatens the children with cannibalism, they are forced to adapt and rely upon their own resourcefulness to survive.

With this, a vital transformation has been made and the children have taken a step toward adulthood.

Analysis:

The value system of any folktale is revealed by examining character traits in reference to narrative outcomes. Because folktales depict a world that is idealized by culture, it is correct to conclude that valued traits will be rewarded and undesirable traits will be punished.

Consider the following characters and the traits they possess:

Father vs. Stepmother: It's Stepmother's idea to abandon the children. Father thinks it's better to "share his last bite with his children." Stepmother is, therefore, **selfish**, while father is **generous** and cares for his children.

Hänsel vs. Father: Father is **weak** and allows himself to be bullied into submission by his wife. Hänsel, to the contrary, is **resourceful** and **optimistic**.

Stepmother vs. Witch: As in the Wizard of Oz, stepmother and witch are one in the same, especially after the changes made beyond the 5th edition when each one uses the same language toward the children. Both of these characters are **greedy** as demonstrated by their respective desires to eat (in the first place) the children's food and (in the second) the children themselves.

Hänsel vs. Gretel: Like the Stepmother and the Witch, we must (to some extent) see Hansel & Gretel as the same character. As brother and sister in a dire situation, they are as close as can be and they always look out for one another. At the beginning of the story, it's Hansel who's resourceful and comforting to his sister, but by the end, she has saved him from the clutches of the Witch and led them home again. They are (unlike the evil Stepmother)...**loyal** to one another.

Based on the outcomes of the story, then, we must conclude that the *loyalty* (of Hansel & Gretel to each other), their mutual *resourcefulness*, and the *generosity* among Father and his children are rewarded. These are the values of the story: **Loyalty, Resourcefulness, and Generosity.**

On the contrary, the *greed* and *selfishness* of the Stepmother and Witch are reviled and symbolically discarded with the horrible death of the witch and the subsequently learned death of the Stepmother.

In examining the symbols of Hansel & Gretel, Bruno Bettelheim notes specifically in his influential 1976 book: *The Uses of Enchantment*, that the *breadcrumbs* and the *gingerbread house* represent the destructive, immature oral drives of the children. Simply put, rather than tapping into their own internal resources, the breadcrumbs and house represent the primitive and childish urge to be fed and nurtured by mother. At the same time, the Stepmother herself and her rejection of the children gives voice to the repressed separation anxiety present in all children when they realize they cannot eternally depend upon their parents for support.

Beyond Bettelheim's interpretation, though, it's possible to pry into the symbols that were added to the story over the years: specifically **the duck** and the **white birds**.

The Duck: The individual trips on the back of the duck represent the ultimate distinction and maturation of the children. They are now two separate and unique individuals that stand apart from each other. Their gender identity is determined and they're ready for the adult world and relationships and economic conditions.

The White Birds: Doves. The Holy Spirit. A religious message from the Calvinist Wilhelm Grimm. The Holy Spirit never abandons you even if your parents do. Religion is also a means of coping with the parental separation anxiety that we all feel.

Conclusion:

So, to conclude, I would identify the central values of this tale to be **loyalty**, **resourcefulness** and **generosity**. Further, I would indicate in addition to Bettelheim's insightful psychoanalytic analysis that the **white birds** are indicators of a sublimated impulse to control parental separation anxiety in adults: something that we call *religion*. To the extent that religion gives us a surrogate mother or father figure who looks after us in this life and beyond, it is nothing more than a crutch we use to deal with the primal trauma faced when we realize that mother's love is as finite as it is conditional.