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English 2010 – 11

12 Apr. 2015

Fairy tales: Fictional Children's Stories or Depictions of Real Life Evil?

Is there a link between fairy tales and serial killers? In recent history, names like Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer have come to be associated with serial murder, thanks to media and mass communications. However, such evil has been a dark part of humanity all along. Throughout history there are records of other kinds of evil; tyrants, genocide, and mass conquest are all accepted pieces of humanities past. On the other hand, where are the records of the evils that walk among the innocent? The ones who strike in the dark and leave only a trail of death. Where were they and how did the world interpret them before modern psychology and neurology? Now, so much is known about the brain and its functions, yet even experts cannot say exactly why serial killers exist. How much more difficult must it have been to understand these beings and their unfathomable acts before contemporary science. Before modern communication and psychology, fairy tales were society's way of portraying and processing what is now considered to be the work of serial killers. Many fairy tales depict several of the same characteristics we associate with murderous sociopaths and psychopaths, including cannibalism, an unthreatening appearance, and necrophilia.

After years of psychological study, some common characteristics can be found among serial murders. A few of the many recurring traits are a high IQ, a charming, average, or unthreatening appearance, a deep desire for power or control, psychopathy or sociopathy, an inability to sympathize or empathize with anyone but themselves, an obsession with death, and

having some traumatic experience during childhood, such as abuse or a head injury (Federal Bureau of Investigation). While each of these features are noteworthy, three stand out among the rest: anthropophagy, a charming or average countenance, and necrophilia. Anthropophagy, or cannibalism, is the consumption of human flesh, often in a ritualistic manner. A charming or average countenance refers to a serial killers ability to blend in with the rest of society; their exterior looks and behavior do not reflect the aggressive, dangerous being within. Lastly, necrophilia is an unhealthy or extreme infatuation with death, often manifesting in a sexual attraction to the dead. Each of these elements can be found in popular fairy tales as well as in the most notorious murderers.

The FBI defines a serial killer as someone who has killed 3 or more people, with some amount of “cooling off” time in between each attack (Federal Bureau of Investigation). However, a serial killer is also defined as someone who enjoys luring in, torturing, and killing a victim in a form of ritual (Schechter and Everitt 53). Not surprisingly, many fairytale villains also share these qualities. It is common knowledge that fairytales often have a darker or more gruesome origin. Many stories that present generations have come to know and love have been changed from their original story lines to make them more family friendly. For example, in the Disney version of the popular fairy tale “Cinderella,” Cinderella’s evil step sisters try to squeeze their feet into her tiny glass slipper, succeeding for only a second before the slipper rejects them. In the original Grimm’s Fairy Tales version, which was put into writing by Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm, one of Cinderella’s step sisters cuts off her big toe and the other her heel, in order to make the slipper fit (205). This bloodier version would not have become every little girl’s fantasy as the Disney version has. Fairy tales tell the stories of societies hundreds of years ago, where gore and blood were a more common phenomenon; a time when poverty and war seemed

to have no end. Many know the more gruesome details of our popular tales, but do they know the inspirations for those darker elements?

There are those who believe, because fairy tales include obviously fictional elements like talking animals, magic, and prince charmings, they are completely imaginary. While it is true that fairy tales and folklore are fantasy based, they are ultimately a reflection of the society that they were written in. According to Maria Nikolajeva, the author of several books that analyze children's literature and a professor at Stockholm University, "Fairy tales have their roots in archaic society and archaic thought," (138). It is also said in the world of psychology that stories can be used therapeutically. Psychologist, Richard Brockman finds that stories can be used as a form of therapy that helps ". . . answer the unknown, minimize fear, and alleviate doubt." In other words, stories help people process the things they cannot understand, like vicious killers. Fairy tales were a way of making the world black and white. There is good and evil, and good almost always prevails. This idea certainly must have been comforting to the peasants trying to understand the viscous and unfair world they lived in.

Murderous psychopaths, homicidal sociopaths, and fairy tale villains all share a taste for the meat of human beings. Many a convicted serial killer has been known to partake in cannibalism. According to popular true crime authors Harold Schechter and David Everitt, in the 1920's, Albert Fish, a particularly vile killer of children, was convicted of the murder of a twelve year old girl, who, after killing, he made into a stew (42). Around the same time, the German, Fritz Haarmann killed and ate approximately 50 boys, selling any leftover meat on the black market (42). Similarly, the notorious Russian Andrei Chikatilo, known as the "Mad Beast," slaughtered a confirmed 52 victims and consumed several of their genitals (43). These are just a few examples of the many anthropophagus killers that have surfaced in modern society.

Although cannibalism is not a new phenomenon, it has always been a loathed deed, reserved for only the most primal and animalistic being. There have also been cases of cannibalism as a means of survival or a war ritual (41-42). However, serial killers do not eat their victims because they are starving. Their mentality is closer to that of the tribal people who reveled in their victory by eating their conquered enemies (42). To our modern murderers, their kill is their victory and their joy. They eat their victims as a way to derive every last pleasure and steal all dignity from those they have slain. For serial killers, cannibalism is just another taboo within which to thrive.

Several fairytale characters have also been known to enjoy making a meal of humans, for example, "Hansel and Grethel," from the *Grimm's Fairy Tales* collection. In this fairy tale, Hansel and Grethel are abandon in the woods by their parents who cannot afford to feed them anymore. The children, knowing that they will starve if lost in the woods, leave a trail of breadcrumbs in an attempt to find their way home. Unfortunately, the crumbs are eaten by birds. This leaves the children lost and very hungry in the woods, until they happen upon a house made of bread, cake, and sugar. Little do they know, that in the house lives an evil witch. The Witch, who is blind, but has an exceptional sense of smell, was said to have lured many children in with her candy house, only to ". . . kill them, cook them, and eat them. . ." (97). Hansel and Grethel are very hungry and easily enticed by the Witch's kindness. Captured by the Witch, Grethel becomes her slave and Hansel is locked in a stable to fatten up. In the end, the children manage to escape by pushing the witch into the hot oven, and soon make their way back home (89 – 100). Before the Witch's demise, she is a considerably dark character for a children's tale. She regularly feasts on hungry peasant children, fattening them up and cooking them like one would a pig. However, the witch does not need to eat children to survive. To the contrary, her house is made of cake and sugar. She is not starving, instead she spends considerable time luring in and

fattening up her meal. Eating children is a treat for her; a pleasurable dining experience worth much time and effort. This behavior is strikingly similar to that of our modern killers who chose without reason or necessity, to butcher and prepare their victims as they would any other kind of meat.

Another man-eater found within fairytales is the Giant in the story “Jack and the Beanstalk” from *English Fairy Tales, Collected by J. Jacobs*. In this story, a peasant boy named Jack, sells his widow mother’s cow for five magic beans. Upon returning home, his mother is very upset and throws the beans out the window. The next morning the beans have sprouted and grown into a very tall beanstalk. Jack decides to climb the beanstalk and follows it all the way into the sky. Once in the sky, Jack starts along a road until he sees a large woman and asks her for some food. The woman tells Jack to run, for her husband likes nothing better than “. . . boys broiled on toast. . . “ (62). However, Jack doesn’t listen and the woman finally agrees to give him some food. As he is enjoying his bread and cheese, the Giant comes home and his wife hides Jack in the oven. Upon entering his house, the giant says “Fee–Fi–Fo–Fum, I smell the blood of an Englishman, be he alive or be he dead, I’ll have his bones to grind my bread,” (63). His wife assures him that it is only his imagination and he soon falls asleep. While the Giant snores, Jack grabs a bag of the Giant’s gold and escapes. Later, Jack returns to the Giant’s house three times, eventually chopping down the beanstalk and killing the Giant, (59-68). Although Jack steals from the Giant, the Giant and his literal thirst for blood are clearly seen as the greater of the two evils. Once again, the Giant does not need to eat men to survive. The Giant is well off, thanks to the golden eggs, and it would seem there is plenty of food to go around, as the Giant’s wife feeds Jack bread and cheese. For the Giant, eating men is completely unnecessary, but perhaps that is why he chooses to do it. Perhaps it is a way for him to demonstrate his power, just as current

killers long to feel the power of degrading another human being. The Giant not only eats Englishmen, but can smell them like the Witch from “Hansel and Grethel.” In this way, both villains sniff out their prey and consume them in the most nonchalant way. The Giant eats boys on toast and the Witch roasts children in the oven, just as Albert Fish cooked his victims into a stew and Fritz Haarmann sold his at the market like poultry.

Many modern day serial killers harbor an animalistic ferocity, though it is well concealed under their countenance. One of the reasons that serial killers are so hard to catch and convict is that they are often very intelligent and surprisingly average. They are able to blend in with the rest of society as unthreatening and even charming. For instance, Ted Bundy, one of the most notorious killers in America, was also a charismatic law student and future politician. He easily coaxed young women into his car with his good looks and outgoing personality. He even sported a cast or sling to appear as pathetic and innocent as possible to his soon to be victims (Schechter and Everitt 36-38). Bundy was comparable to Robert Louis Stevenson’s character’s Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in the drastic contrast between his outward persona and the monster hiding within. Many people knew Bundy and were shocked to find out that he was not the captivating young Republican they thought he was. Instead he was a blood thirsty murderer who slowly grew more and more mad, eventually giving in completely to his animalistic desires.

Homicidal maniacs’ ability to conceal the darkness within was once actually considered to make them monsters. Before psychology and knowledge of mental illness, the most vicious and lustful of murders were thought to have been lycanthropes, or wolf men (Schechter and Everitt 172-73). Just like werewolves, these men supposedly transformed into giant canines and terrorized peasant villages. Known murders of the 1600’s killed with such ferocity, ripping people apart with their bare hands, that it was no wonder people thought it was the work of a

monster. These men were “wolves in sheep’s clothing” so to speak. Seemingly average, often wealthy, men using a wolf as an alter ego to explain their blood lust. Four hundred years ago, Ted Bundy would certainly be considered one of these wolf men. He would change his personality, sometimes being shy or crippled, and sometimes being outgoing and alluring. Both personas made him seem harmless, but each appealed to a different victim.

Although it is not the only fairy tale to feature a menacing wolf, “Little Red Cap,” better known as “Little Red Riding Hood,” certainly portrays the deception and savagery associated with the carnivorous creature (Grimm’s Fairy Tales 149-55). In the story, a sweet, young girl sets out to bring cake and wine to her sick grandmother. On her way, a wolf appears and asks her questions about her destination. Little Red Cap “. . . did not feel frightened,” and told the wolf about her grandmother and her grandmother’s house in the woods (150). The Wolf made his way to her house. Once there, the wolf pretends to be Little Red Cap and eats Grandma, eventually putting on her clothes. When Little Red Cap arrives she is wary of her grandmother’s strange appearance, but alas, it is too late and the wolf eats her (149-55). In the original version, the story ends here, however the revised version has a huntsman and a happy ending. This strange and twisted story not only demonstrates cannibalism, as the wolf is more akin to a man in his talking and premeditation, but also the deception and manipulation by a seemingly unthreatening murderer. Little Red Cap is not afraid of the wolf, as she does not know what a monstrous creature he is. Later in the story, the wolf pretends to be Little Red Cap in order to devour the Grandmother, and pretends to be the Grandmother in order to consume the girl. In the same way, serial killers can change their countenance in order to maximize their possible victims. “Little Red Cap” is one of the darker fairy tales, yet it sheds a considerable amount of light on the society within which it was written.

The last characteristic shared by slaughtering sociopaths and folklore characters is an affinity for death. Necrophilia, from the Greek word meaning “love of the dead” is deeper than just the raping of a corpse (Schechter and Everitt 194). True necrophiliacs have a deep obsession with death; going beyond the desire to degrade their victim, they are truly aroused by and in love with death. One of the most famous examples of a modern necrophiliac is Jeffrey Dahmer whose love affair started as a child. Growing up, Dahmer would frequently collect and dissect road kill. As the years went on, his obsession had grown more perverse, manifesting itself in his killing rituals. Dahmer claimed to have sliced open the stomachs of his victim’s bodies to ejaculate inside of them, as well as anally raping them (Schechter and Everitt 195). Another known necrophilic killer, Ed Gein, started out digging up women’s corpses to have sex with. He eventually progressed to actual murder when the number of dead bodies in the cemeteries ran low (Schechter and Everitt 195). Both killers were not only fascinated by death, they were in love with it. They were not at all attracted to living women, which drove them to find the kind of women they did like: dead ones.

A love for the dead can also be seen in the *Grimm’s Fairy Tales’* “Snow-White.” In this tale, Snow-white’s father, the king, dies and she is left with only her step mother. Although the queen is very beautiful, she is also very vain and each day she asks her magic mirror who is the most beautiful in the land. The answer is always “the Queen,” until one day when the magic mirror tells the queen that Snow-white is the most beautiful. The Queen will not allow this and sends her huntsman to kill Snow-white. Nevertheless, the Huntsman takes pity on Snow-white and lets her go. Instead, he kills a pig and brings its heart back to the Queen. The Queen quickly figures out that Snow-white is not dead, meanwhile, Snow-white has discovered the Seven Dwarfs and gone to live with them. The Queen decides to do her own dirty work and dresses up

as an old lady with a poisoned apple. She finds Snow-white and tricks her into eating the apple. After one bite Snow-white falls dead and the Dwarfs find her body. They lay her in a glass coffin because she is too beautiful to burry. After quite some time a prince happens upon Snow-white's coffin and falls in love with her. He asks the Dwarfs if he can have her body and after some bargaining, they finally say yes. As the Prince's men carry the coffin back to the castle they stumble, knocking the piece of poisoned apple out of Snow-white's throat. Snow-white comes back to life and lives happily with the Prince (*Grimm's Fairy Tales* 219-31). Compared to the stories previously discussed "Snow-white" seems innocent enough. Yet a darker theme is still woven into the seemingly happy tale. The Prince, having never met Snow-white, falls in love with her dead body. He is so in love, in fact, that he says ". . . I cannot live without looking upon Snow-white," (230). Likewise, Jeffrey Dahmer, Ed Gein, and other modern necrophiliacs cannot control their desire for the dead. They too, are literally in love with their dead victims and feel that no living man or woman could compare to the beauty of a corpse. However, necrophilia without murder, although questionable, is not nearly as vile. The Prince in "Snow-White" is not a villain and the tale is not warning us to avoid prince charmings. Rather, this tale may be trying to justify the act of loving the dead by portraying it romantically.

Some may believe that serial killers are a relatively recent phenomenon, caused by modern ills. While it is true, many a murderous psychopath has come to light in the last one hundred years or so, similar killers can be found in the past, and even in human's animal ancestors. One of the darkest Grimm's Fairy Tales, can be traced back to the acts of an actual serial killer. "The Legend of Bluebeard" is widely considered to be about the "Bestial Baron" Gilles De Rais of the fifteenth century. Gilles De Rais was a rich French man who killed wife after wife. The story of Bluebeard follows a similar pattern, as Bluebeard's newest wife finds a

room in his castle filled with his former wives' dead bodies (Schechter and Everitt 30). The fact that this fairy tale was inspired by real events, not only validates the idea that fairy tales draw inspiration from the real world, but that serial killers did exist during their time. Additionally, a study by Michael Wilson and several of his colleagues, found that some chimpanzees display the same unnecessarily viscous tendencies to kill and torture. These Chimpanzees attacked other chimpanzees without any clear reason or benefit received (445). This study shows that homicidal psychopaths are not a recent evolution, but a part of the human species. Although certain events surely bring out the evil in people, such as poverty, war, and abuse, the desire to kill and maim is one that has always existed and needs little provoking.

In the twenty-first century, Americans like to think that they've got it all figured out. However, when it comes to murder and other inexplicable horrors, society is still in the dark trying to make sense of it all. Current generations no longer tell fairy tales as a way of understanding the truly gruesome as they have evolved to serve another purpose. Instead, the modern horror movie is used as a means of processing the unknown. According to Stephen King, the popular horror author and screen writer, horror movies function as morality tales, "...which take away the shades of grey," in life (505). King says "[Horror] urges us to put away our more civilized and adult penchant for analysis and to become children again, seeing things in pure blacks and whites," (505). Although society has cleaned up fairy tales and no longer uses them to portray the evils they once did, a modern version of folklore has been created in the horror genre. Humans continue to attempt to make the world black and white to help them face the real evils of the world, such as serial killers.

Today, serial killers are known to be a frightening fragment of humanity. Hundreds of years ago, how much more terrifying must they have been? With little known about them, and no

way to explain their needless brutality, cultures turned to the black and white world of fairy tales to understand serial killers. As serial killers partake in cannibalism and necrophilia, and hide in an unthreatening appearance, so do the characters of popular fairy tales. Perhaps the tales are there to warn of these psychopaths, or perhaps they are just a reflection of humanity's deepest fears. As modern society struggles to understand the inner workings of serial killers, in an attempt to find what makes them tick and how to stop it, the world is not much better off than it was in the time of fairy tales. The dark part of humanity still lingers and we process it through storytelling in the form of horror. These killers may never go extinct, as it would seem that they are a part of the human species, however, generations will continue to try to simplify them, whether it be through folklore or horror.

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