

# ADOLESCENT PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT IN ROMANIAN FAIRY TALES

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**Abstract:** *The psychological interpretation of the Romanian fairy tales is a research area less explored. Using qualitative research we have analysed the adolescent psychological development of a boy in “Prâslea the brave and the golden apples” and a girl in “The enchanted pig”. The parents are playing an important but discreet role, being symbolically present throughout the development process. There are no significant differences related to the hero’s gender, only regarding social roles and physical abilities. The Romanian fairy tales can be used in psychological interventions if we select the content and choose the proper methods according to the issue.*

**Key words:** *Romanian fairy tales psychological development, parents, adolescent.*

## 1. Introduction

The transition from childhood to adulthood, as described in most of the Romanian fairy tales, takes place far away from the child’s house, the leaving of the family house seems to be a *sine qua non* pattern. The transition process is a period in which many changes are taking place (Papalia, Olds & Feldman, 2009). In Romanian fairy tales the transition correspond with the adolescence period, especially if we take in consideration the fact that the hero is, almost every time, the youngest brother. A behavioural pattern in this period, common to all the fairy tales main characters, is *resiliency*, defined as „class of phenomena characterized by good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development” (Masten, 2001, p. 228).

Because in fairy tales the hero’s age in the moment when she or he leaves their house is not specified, we can only assume that it happened when the sexual maturity is reached, as in the ancient, primitive communities. The physical development into sexual maturity is still celebrated by a rite of passage in many archaic (nonindustrial) societies (Craig & Dunn, 2010), usually the person is castaway or forced to leave home for a period. Modern rites of passage are the first communion and the confirmation in the catholic religion, the *bar-mitsva* in the judaic religion or the enrolling in the army (Clerget, 2012).

The main criterion for evaluating maturity, beyond age or intellectual acquisitions, in

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the common sense wisdom, is the expression „she/he is standing on her/his own feet. Thus, we can say that leaving home is a key condition for an optimal psychological development.

The objective of this research is to analyse the transition from childhood to adulthood in two Romanian fairy tales, to underline some of the narration moments that can be used in child and parent counselling. The fairy tales can help the client to resolve his conflicts through psychological counselling, because they are similar with life situations, to explain his emotions and behaviour (Cashdan, 1999; Peseschkian, 2003). In contrast with therapeutic tales, the fairy tales are transmitted by different cultures and can communicate familiar experiences that are easily processed by clients due to the behavioural and attitudinal similarities with the hero, who have evolved in the same social and historical context (Zipes, 2002; Peseschkian, 2003).

A comparison between the fairy tale and reality brings us into questioning if it is possible for a teenager to leave home and after a while to come back as an adult and if the optimal psychological development can occur without the family contribution. Using fairy tales content in counselling can help us find answers regarding psychological development.

## 2. Methodology

Fairy tales and storytelling is used in psychological interventions, in the family or in school for different purposes: to ease the process of information gathering, to induce well-being, to educate or entertain. Fairy tales content is present in books, movies, in games or dramatizations in the original form or adapted, created for a specific purpose (Burns, 2011).

The method used in this research is documents analysis, and the documents – two Romanian fairy tales: *Prâslea the brave and the golden apples* and *The enchanted pig*, both collected by Petre Ispirescu (2014). These fairy tales were selected by us because they are specific representations for the both genders psychological development process. The psychological analysis of the two fairy tales will focus on the inner feelings, the actions, relations and interactions of the heroes through the development process. The questions of the research are the following:

1. What are the features of the main character?
2. What are the similarities and differences in psychological development between the genders in the Romanian fairy tales?
3. In what way the actions and relations from the fairy tales are useable in child/parent counselling.

As technique we used content analysis and open coding to generate the relevant categories: stages of the psychological development of the heroes, relationships with the special persons that support them to achieve the proposed objective, relationships with the family members (mother, father, brothers/ sisters, husband), the event which triggers the leaving of home and the resources used.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. The Psychological Development of the Heroes

Regarding the *Prâslea the brave and the golden apples* and *The enchanted pig* fairy tales, we are presenting the elements, actions and relations which entails the psychological development of the heroes, both the common elements and the gender differences.

In each one of the two fairy tales, the heroes succeed in achieving the goals using a sum of internal and external resources, seldom metaphorical represented. In *The enchanted pig*, the hero is forced to leave the parents' house together with his pig-husband. For the accomplishment of the psychological development process, the resources used are the love for her new-born child and for her husband, but there are also some magic characters or objects: "God", "the mother of the holy Moon", "the mother of the Sun", "the mother of the Wind" and the "little bones".

In the other fairy tale, *Prâslea the brave and the golden apples*, the action of leaving his parents' house is self-assumed, even in contradiction with his father opinion: "*But the emperor pleased that he touched de golden apples, he didn't want to know about the thieves anymore*". The resources that help the hero are exclusively internal, the emperor's daughter and the raven are helping him because they have received help in the first place. As Jung says, the individuals are getting help only if they are worthy (2003).

An identical feature of the two fairy tales, a mandatory element for the psychological development, is self-sacrifice. The hero is cutting her little finger in order to complete the ladder that will take her to the husband and in the other tale the hero is cutting a piece of his thigh to feed the eagle who takes him back in his world.

The families of the two heroes are "without a mother", the mother figure is not mentioned, a fact frequently encountered in fairy tales. This fact could have multiple meanings: reaching independence from the mother is strong condition for maturation, the domination of the male characters, emphasizing that the heroes are no longer children, the association between the gender and the emperor role, factors linked to the attractiveness and the credibility of the author (the storyteller). Sometimes the mother symbolizes a good fay or a witch.

In *The Enchanted Pig*, the father is a positive character because he gives advices to his little daughter. In the other tale, the father appears only at the beginning and in the end. Both psychological journeys are consolidating the idea that the psychological development in adolescence is a self-mastered process, the main contribution of the parents is the education given to the child until the puberty sets in.

In both stories, the heroes have siblings, but the rivalry is different. In *The Enchanted Pig*, the sisters are present only in the story beginning, their roles being mainly passive. In *Prâslea the brave and the golden apples*, the siblings rivalry is violent, the elder brothers are trying to kill the little one.

When he reaches adulthood, the hero becomes a role model for kindness, wisdom and generosity. That is why the punishment of the negative characters is done by somebody else than the hero, who is now on a superior social level and can be merciful "*And the emperor asks Prâslea how to punish them. Our brave hero responds: - Father, I forgive them and God will punish them. We are going out on the palace stairs, and each one of us*

*will throw an arrow up in the air and God, if someone has done anything wrong, will punish us” (Prâslea the brave and the golden apples).*

### **3.2. The Stages of the Psychological Development of the Main Female Character from *The Enchanted Pig Fairy Tale***

#### **3.2.1. The hero relationship with the father**

The relationship between father and daughter is a positive one: he trusts his daughters “*he gave them the all the keys from the rooms*” and he gives them advices them for their well-being. The daughters emotional dependence is being revealed by feelings “*of sorrow and boredom*” when the father is away. The scene of defying the father’s strong command – to not enter in a specific room - could represent the inner dialogue of the same person. The inner conflicts regarding obeying (symbolizing the stagnation in the role of the emotional dependent child) and disobeying her father (the parents are the source for breaking the rules and the curiosity manifestation as a start in the self-identity development). The motif of the locked room and the warnings given by the parent (father) to his daughters not to unlock that room symbolizes, in some interpretations, the possible beginning of the sexual life before achieving adulthood or before marriage (Bettelheim, 1976). According with the traditional values, if this happens, there are negative consequences in the fairy tale, the hero (of any gender) must accomplish some tasks who are symbolizing the redemption for the misbehaviour, but overcoming the obstacles will lead to an optimum psychological development.

Following the defying of the father’s command and the fulfillment of the prophecy regarding the marriages of the elder sisters, the little sister is showing depression symptoms: “*she was not eating anymore, she wasn’t dressing up anymore, she wasn’t going out anymore, and she wanted to die than to end up being the mockery of the world*”. The social status and public image disparity between the little princes and her’s future pig groom is accentuating the negative emotional condition. This phase is overcome with his father help who gives her hope that the situation is temporary “*the speech and wise behaviour of this pig is not characteristic for an animal (...) it must be some kind of spell or another kind of devilish thing*”. The requirement to make this unpleasant situation disappear is to obey the pig-husband and do exactly what he wants him to do “*because God will not let you agonize for long*”, is telling the father to his daughter. According to the feminine social role, the little daughter has to become an adult just by changing the authority figure of the father with the one of the husband, without having a chance to explore the environment, to develop, a situation that will have unpleasant consequences for the young couple. Clerget (2012) claims that the adolescents could avoid depression if they will perceive the development process similar with the perception formed throughout the idyllically childhood.

#### **3.2.2. The conflict with husband**

The moment when the psychological development of the hero starts is when the young couple begins their sexual life. The young girl is surprised by the fact that her husband was becoming a human during the night “*(...) the girl could not understand how his husband is a pig during the day and a human during the night. Seems like he was enchanted, under a spell to be like that.*” Bettelheim (1976) asserts that this situation is making the young girl anxious because is a situation opposed to her expectations “*then*

one would expect the animal husband to be an animal at night in bed, and not during the day” (p. 297). In the night (in intimacy) the woman or the man are free to explore each other, discovering the sexual pleasure, but during the day, the anxieties linked to the partner or to the negative social perception of the pleasure are rising (Bettelheim, 1976).

In addition to that, another anxious situation is appearing, the girl becomes pregnant „Eventually she becomes in love with him, when she started to feel the marital benefits; only that was sad because she didn't know what will give to the world in a few months”. The conflict starts when the husband leaves home, due to the absence of communication between them, the wife talked about these issues with someone outside the family, with a witch, proving immaturity. The old witch could symbolize the mother or the mother-in-law who is trying to protect his daughter or son from a possible distress, interfering in their marriage. The prolongation of the curse gives to the hero the time needed to complete the psychological development, the requirements for a successful endeavour being set by the husband „And only then will you shake my hand, when you will tear three pairs of iron shoes and when you will blunt a steel cane, looking for me (...)”.

In the end of the fairy tale, the “animalistic” nature of her husband is not entirely vanished, but is less repulsive because now is capable of turning into a pigeon, a possible love symbol. The psychological development of the emperor's daughter is complete only when she is reunited with her father, this scene is underlying the role of the parents in the transition to adulthood “Did I tell you that I wouldn't believe to be born as a pig that animal, who asked you to be his wife? And well done, my girl that you have listened to me”.

### 3.2.3. The relationship with the mother

In *The enchanted pig*, the magic help comes from three characters, all mothers, like the hero, the mother of the moon, the mother of the sun and the mother of the wind, without being conditioned by any action. The psychological development process can be seen as a self-actualization process because the *Moon*, the *Sun* and the *Wind*, primordial symbolic elements, are actively participating in offering shelter, food and advices, all the help offered to the hero being symbolized by the “little bones” that she receives after each visit. The self-actualization, the emotional self-regulation or the completion of some personal objectives are processes whose achievement is depending on specific behavioural patterns. These are combined with the wearing of specific clothing and/or body ornamentation (e.g. the steel cane, the iron shoes). All these items are representing the embodiment of the accomplishment “to be aware not to waste even one little bone, because it will help her a lot”.

The cognitive, emotional and social development processes are happening progressively, the hero is arriving at first at the *Moon* – a feminine symbol – then at the *Sun* – a masculine symbol – and eventually at the *Wind*. The cosmogonic symbols are helping her indirectly, through their “mothers”. The common language, the hero being also a mother, is facilitating the transition.

The replacement of the good mother, who dies, with a bad mother, usually a stepmother, appears frequently in fairy tales (e.g. *The old's man daughter*) due to the insufficient emotional development of the child, this motif helping him to manage the conflicts with his own mother.

Because the mother cannot be always good (she is not allowing the child to exclusively follow the pleasure principle) she is duplicated: a good mother (who sometimes disappears) and a not good enough mother (because she is trying to impose the reality

principle), according to Bettelheim (1976). *“The old woman (the not good enough mother), was imposing upon the uncle’s daughter all the house chores and her daughter was like a statue because she was doing nothing. The poor uncle’s daughter was spinning, weaving, making bread, sweeping and switching without saying a word! But the old woman was taking her daughter’s side, complaining about her to the uncle and keep saying hard words to her” (The old woman’s daughter and the old man’s daughter).*

This concept of the mother dissolution allows the child that listens or reads the fairy tale, displeased by the requirements of his mother, to manage his opposing feelings. A fairy can embody all aspects of the mother figure. According to Bettelheim (1976), the child learns that becoming an adult implies gaining autonomy towards the family, engaging in a long and hard journey where the reality principle is gradually integrated in the personal values structure being harmonized with the pleasure principle. *“Then, of fear to hearing hard words from his step mother, is climbing on the cottage, she looks all over the place, maybe will see a fire trace, to go and ask for a charcoal, but she have not seen any. When she was about to get down, she sees in the east a little flickering flame; she descends the roof and headed that way” (The old man’s unspoiled daughter).*

The emperor’s daughter from *The enchanted pig* is interested to develop herself, to find out more about the human nature *“(…) how come the Sun is so upset, he, who is so beautiful and does great things for the mortals?”* The *Wind*, from whom she found out the whereabouts of her husband, is the symbol who signifies the contraries integration, of the *Moon* and *Sun*, because the *Wind* blows night and day. A possible psychological interpretation could be that the *Wind* represents the *Ego* in which is integrated the *Id* and the *Superego*. Even if the hero got through the psychological development stages, she cannot get the accomplishment confirmation only when her family is reunited and in order to do that she is ready to sacrifice her body integrity, by cutting her little finger (Bettelheim, 1976).

### **3.3. The Stages of the Psychological Development of the Main Masculine Character from *Prâslea the Brave and the Golden Apples***

In this fairy tale, at the beginning, the father-son relationship is marked with disbelief, caused by the elder brothers failures and the little son immaturity who is called *“snotty”*. The fairy tale hero is trying, in the first place, to learn something from his attempt in catching the thieves of the golden apples, modestly avoiding to disappoint his father and himself *“I’m not saying, says Prâslea, that I will catch the thieves, I’m saying if I’ll give it a try, too, it won’t cause you any harm”*.

#### **3.3.1. Leaving the house**

The psychological development of the hero starts with his departure in searching the thief of the golden apples, when he enters *“the other realm”*. Here, *“he feels a little scared”*, but he proves himself capable of emotional auto-regulation *“encouraging himself, he chooses a path”*. Meanwhile, his brothers who could not pass in *“the other realm”*, accessible only for those with a superior level of development, are planning to kill him, decision that confirms the low level of psychological development. In this fairy tale the hero is not helped by any magic character or object directly.

He proves courage and spectacular physic abilities, which allows him to defeat the dragons; he possesses better communicational abilities than the dragon when he

convinces the raven and the girl to help him. His intuition regarding the evil intentions of his brothers and the ability to create survival strategies proves the high psychological development status “*he previously felt that his brothers are bearing a grudge on him*”. The transformation of the brothers in characters with an inadequate behaviour is emphasizing by contrast the moral qualities of the hero.

To complete the psychological development process, the hero must return to his world, where his evolution will be validated by the marriage with the emperor’s little daughter. To achieve this purpose, he is ready to do anything, even to sacrifice his body integrity “*and he cuts a piece of soft meat from his thigh and gives it to the eagle*”. The fact that a apparently negative character, the big female eagle, who initially wanted to eat him, not only that she reattaches his thigh piece back, but she hugs him at the departure, demonstrates the hero’s power in turning the odds in his favour.

Arriving in the world of humans, the hero seems to have lost everything that he accomplished before because he cannot get in touch with his family or his future wife. The characters that intermediates the reunion is a silversmith who is overwhelmed by the emperor’s little daughter wishes. The hero takes the responsibility to fulfil the peculiar wishes of the girl and he does so even if he is perceived as a “shabby” by the silversmith. In the beginning of the fairy tale, his father called him a “snotty” and now, for the second time, the story is telling us that appearances can be deceiving and demonstrates that psychological development is a long process.

The total reunion with his family and the formation of a new family together with his future wife are possible only after he deals with the last issue, the one regarding the brothers that intended to kill him. The brothers are atypical negative characters, because they are the hero’s brothers, could symbolize the dark side, the negative side of the hero, the side that needs to be controlled.

### 3.3.2. Conditioning the aid received by the hero

Due to personal qualities, rather potential ones, and with the conditioned help received from the positive characters, the hero succeeds in finding what he was looking for. In the Romanian fairy tales, the hero is seldom helped by an old man or an old woman (*Saint Friday, Saint Sunday*), characters who are experts in human nature, in how to win a situation, with access to secret knowledge, which are offering their help only to the one who are deserving. A fairy, an old woman, an old man, an animal could be embodiments of the hero’s developing abilities, but could be also the embodiments of his parents’ positive aspects.

Animals (a horse, a bee, an ant, a fish, a tree or an oven, *etc.*) help the hero. In *The emperor Aleodor*, the magic help is coming from a pike, from a raven and a gadfly, which are gratifying him for saving their lives. More than often, the magic animal that helps is the horse. The horse is a materialization of the intuition and knowledge archetype or a mediator who ensures the passage between stages or worlds (Noica, 1996). At the beginning of the adventure, the horse is an incomplete being, limp or uncared for (the embodiment of a weak mind, as Jung claims) and needs to be fed by the adolescent or released from a witch (the image of the unconscious) (Jung, 2003). For example the *Ileana Simziana* fairy tale: “*Finally she came across his fathers’ horse from his youth, uncared for, full of blains and lying down on his ribs. When she has seen him, she looked at him with mercy and she felt she could not walk away from him*”.

The horse is the most encountered magical character in Romanian fairy tales, being the image for the genetic potential capabilities as well as for the parents' image who gives advices on the spot, in real time. In *Prince Charming with the golden hair*, the horse takes over the father's role after his death and goes with the child to the city: "You see, master, here all is happening in a specific way, that's why you should learn to make your own living".

In *Ileana Simziana*, the father's horse with whom she left home, the one who advices her, is exchanged with his younger brother, called *Sun Yellow*. The horse exchange and the fact that the new horse was asking the hero to analyse the situation before taking a decision could symbolize the reaching of an upper level in the process of psychological development, a level from the hero cannot rely exclusively on the horse. The horse can be also the symbol of some inner resources partially used. Changing the old horse with a younger one can symbolize the hero's development that exceeds the knowledge received from his parents. The journey's trials help the hero to accept the reality, overcoming parent addiction and the need for maternal protection.

### 3.4. Ways and Means of using Fairy Tales Content in Counselling

The fairy tale is considered as "a mediator of the psychic life" (Kaës, 1993, p. 3) for the listener or reader because it stimulates the symbolic imagery by introducing in the thinking game images with multiple meanings, as a result of the preconscious activity (Picard, 2002). The fairy tale as "a transitional space" offers leads to think, to find answers that are impossible or hard to find in a different way, it restores curiosity and the pleasure of imagining (Winnicott, 1971). In the following, we will describe the possible use of the fairy tale content in psychoeducational interventions. Similar activities have been developed and implemented during two sessions having as participants 20 children and 17 parents, in May-July 2016 at Transilvania University of Braşov.

1. After reading the fairy tales, the participants can analyse the significance of the hero leaving the family house. The situation is analysed separately with parents and children and the answers compared in a sequence that reunites the two subgroups. The issue in question could be the "leaving home" motif, metaphorically representing the adolescent's needs to assert him and claim his independence.

2. The little son and the little daughter of the emperor are becoming heroes, which prove that even the little and feeble ones can be victorious (Tatar, 2003). The relating issues can be low self-esteem or temporary degrading situations.

3. The excerpt "the speech and wise behaviour of this pig is not characteristic for an animal (...) it must be some kind of spell or another kind of devilish thing" can be used to approach the issue when the child or adolescent is in a puzzling situation and needs help from his parents. Similarly, the emperor's affirmation "Did I tell you that I wouldn't believe to be born as a pig that animal who asked you to be his wife? And well done, my girl, that you have listened to me", can be used in discussing the role of the parent after the completion of the psychological development process.

4. The excerpt "(...) hearing a scream and a moan that filled his heart with sorrow, he looked around and saw a dragon twisting around a tree and climbing to eat some eaglets. Drawing the sword, Prâslea was flinging at the dragon and chopped him to pieces" could be used in relation with the fact that personal actions of the hero are the one who are accomplishing the psychological development.

Jung (2003) claims that finding what you want implies effort, overcoming obstacles or



perils. Eliade (2000) asserts that help comes only after the hero passes some challenges similar to the initiation rites. Bettelheim (1976) believes that becoming an adult means to get outside of the family's protective space and to engage in a long and hard journey where the reality principle is integrated gradually in the personal system.

#### 4. Conclusions

For both main characters, from these two fairy tales, the process of psychological development takes place in a different new world where other characters are helping or fighting them. In *Prâslea the brave and the golden apples*, the psychological development is complete in the end of the tale, when the hero is getting married. In *The enchanted pig*, the psychological development starts when she is getting married, being closely linked to the character of the husband.

The therapeutic value of the fairy tales has been widely accepted and we have tried to exemplify it using these two Romanian fairy tales. In the same time, we have discovered some negative heroes and situations, but the approach regarding this issue is not the theme of this work, for the moment. The fairy tales characters are not as ambivalent as they look when we approach them from the literary realism and everyday morality perspective. The psychological interpretation is different from the moral judgment over the behaviours and the approach should avoid being a didactic one (active/lazy, good/bad, intelligent/less intelligent) even in this way (Laffont, 1976).

At the first level of psychological interpretation, the absence of the parent-child interaction during the psychological development process as it is described in the fairy tales does not coincide with what happens most frequently in the contemporary society. In the fairy tales, the parents (usually the father of the hero) appears only at the beginning and in the end of the process, during the evolution they are indirectly present through advices or other adult characters embodiments who help or obstruct the hero. Therefore, we can conclude that the successful endeavours assumed by the hero, depends in the first place by the way he manages his internal resources and less by the help from the others.

In most fairy tales, the parents' appearance in the end of the tale is associated with the happy-end, their presence could be a condition for a successful psychological development. The family represents for the adolescents the first communicational option in profound emotional situations, which demonstrates that the adolescent needs support from his parents (Rime, 2008). The identity development of the heroes follows the path of experimental learning, becoming stronger both physically and psychically, as they are progressing. In both fairy tales, the heroes are about to fail just right before the resolution but the self-sacrifice ensures the overcoming of this last obstacle.

Fairy tales can be used in parent-child group counselling, by analysing and debating some situations, behaviours and moral values similar with those experienced by the hero.

The simple reading of these fairy tales by a troubled adolescent of our days could have a low psychological influence, due to the limited attractiveness of the reading. This research is limited by the fact that we analysed only two fairy tales, even if they are typical, and by the fact that some adolescents may find the fairy tales heroes unimpressive. The issue of attractiveness, of how adequate are the Romanian fairy tales heroes for the children and teenagers and in what way we can present them to the clients in order to be accepted, must be studied through further empirical research and guided interventions.

The idea of using fairy tales in psychotherapy and psychological counselling is not new but we are not aware that anyone had used the Romanian fairy (folk) tales before. The adaptive use of the fairy tale structure, of the heroes' typology in individual or group counselling, emphasizing the psychological development of the hero, could be a way of dealing with the aversion towards the apparently anachronistic fairy tale.

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