Into the Land of Dreamlike Paradox:
Some Cultural and Psychological Perspectives of the Fairy Tale

By

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Abstract

In the essay the author will explore the 'fairy tale' from both a psychological and anthropological perspective. He will outline some of the structuralist interpretations of story and look at what defines the fairy tale from other types of story. Drawing on Jungian psychology he will examine the psychological implications of the fairy tale concluding that fairy tales and stories serve a fundamental role in the human experience and the development of the young mind.

Key Terms

Fairy-tales, *Child development*, *Jung, Structuralism*

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"Cut off a wolf's head and it still has the power to bite."
Princess Mononoke

In the preface of his 1979 book *Breaking the Magic Spell*, fairy tale scholar Jack Zipes includes a story about a little girl who sets out to find *the fairy tale*, which has become lost. She eventually finds it, as her search *for* it*, is* the fairy tale itself. This simple, short tale encapsulates the task ahead of me and gifts me a valuable metaphor. When coming to write this essay I have struggled to find a doorway into the tower where it is hidden. There is a huge theoretical body of material concerning myths, folk and fairy tales in the vast human library so I must choose my weapons wisely. Stories play a central role in human culture; they are one of the few universals. One cannot separate story from the fabric of culture; story is the essence of being human, forming the very foundation of what we call reality. "Humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives." (Connelly & Clandinin 1990:2).

Humans desire meaning and that meaning is constructed from the stories we tell ourselves. Moreover, Joseph Campbell believes that it is not just meaning we seek but "an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our innermost being and reality…" (1988:3). Whole nations define themselves on dramatized historical events where the 'truth' becomes buried underneath mythic tales of heroism fighting evil. Myths and fables give form, structure and meaning to the diverse array of belief systems humans subscribe too, from the mainstream religions to the cosmologies of traditional indigenous peoples. "Historical, sociological and anthropological studies have shown that the folk tale originated as far back as the Megalithic period and common people have been the carriers and transformers of the tales." (Zipes 1979:5). Modernity itself is saturated with story and cannot escape its lure. This was first elucidated by Barthes in his 1957 book Mythologies, but it is self evident in our obsession with television, film, print and social networking, all of which are forms of storytelling and are enabled by the

most persistent stories of all, those contained within advertising. The art of oral storytelling has also enjoyed a revival in recent years as a kind of resistance to popular culture's treatment and delivery of the story.

If children are exposed to a culture rich in story then it makes sense that the stories they are told will contribute significantly to how the child develops, both socially and psychologically. It follows then, that the content contained in the stories that children receive should be examined, as it is there that we may find clues to the cultural and psychological make-up of future generations. In popular culture the perception is that "fairy tales are for children" (Campbell & Moyes 1988:138), and so it is with them that I want to dedicate the majority of my focus. However, I will first look at the structuralist interpretation of story to provide some scholarly background followed by an exploration of what defines the fairy tale from other types of story. I want to examine the psychological implications of the fairy-tale and include a couple of short tales that have resonated with me. Finally, I will aim to conclude that fairy tales and stories serve a fundamental role in the human experience and the development of the young mind.

A Structural Analysis of story

When studying and searching for meanings in story scholars have attempted to identify patterns. These patterns can be found in a variety of motifs, symbols or tropes. One of the most widely recognised examples is the myth of the flood which is a universal trope found in most cultures around the world. There are four different flood stories that originate in Mesopotamia and the Fertile Crescent alone[1]. Perhaps these originate from the last glacial maximum, around 20000 – 10000 years ago when the ice began to melt and the sea levels rose; from these actual events, over long periods of time, myths developed using metaphor as a way of distilling events and creating a story that can be easily passed on from generation to generation. Meanings were then imposed upon the story depending upon the culture telling them e.g. Noah's flood was sent by God to punish humanity for its sins, therefore it is a moral tale.

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[1] Flood stories can be traced back as far as 1650 BC in Sumerian literature, also in the Gilgamesh and Atrahasis epics and the best known one of Noah's ark in The Torah.

The two scholars best known for the structural analysis of story are Claude Levi-Strauss and Vladimir Propp. Levi-Strauss examined a wide variety of myths collected from peoples living in different regions and found that they followed an arbitrary and seemingly random series of events whilst also conforming to a deep structure of underlying patterns (1955:429). Unfortunately Levi-Strauss completely disregards Jung's theory of mythological patterns in the form of archetypes (*ibid.*), a perspective I believe to be highly valuable and one that I will draw upon later on. Nevertheless, Levi-Strauss did believe that myth cannot simply be explained by language as, "myth *is* language: to be known, myth has to be told; it is part of human speech." (*ibid.:*430). Moreover, he states that to understand myth one must look at the overall story and how each element fits together, "[i]f there is a meaning to be found in mythology, this cannot reside in isolated elements which enter into the composition of myth, but only in the way those elements are combined." (*ibid.:*431). He called these structural elements of myths *mythemes* and he arranged them in horizontal and vertical columns to offer an explanation to his theory. The main point that resonates for me, and the underlying argument, is that myth may contain symbols relevant to a specific culture but these are interchangeable. They all ultimately function to "provide a logical model capable of overcoming contradiction." (*ibid.:*442), a way of making sense of the many binary oppositions present in the human experience, such as life and death.

The Russian born folklorist Vladimir Propp was a clear influence on Levi-Strauss. In his seminal work, *Morphology of the Folktale*, Propp examined the underlying structures present in the Russian folktale and identified 31 different forms, these being the actions and functions performed by the various characters as opposed to the actual characters themselves. He states," [t]he action of all tales …[ ] … develops within the limits of these functions. The same may also be said for the action of a great many other tales of the most dissimilar peoples." (1979:64) These are universal, recognised actions. For example, No.2, "[a]n interdiction is addressed to the hero", we are all familiar with the scene of the hero being delayed or prevented from acting on his best intentions at any given moment; No. 5, "[t]he villain receives information about his victim", another familiar scenario; a third example, No. 11, "[t]he hero leaves home", perhaps on a quest. Each form has a detailed explanation adding a little more complexity. Despite his influence, Levi-Strauss was also critical of Propp and attempted to differentiate his structural analysis from Propp's formalistic theory

(1978:115). It should also be noted that Levi-Strauss himself attracted criticism for his theory, Mary Douglas disagreed with his linguistic arguments around language (1967) and Kenelm Burridge claimed that his theories are at times ambiguous and reductionist and that, "myths serve … almost any purpose... The problem is not to discover a particular purpose but, since myths are part of total culture, to systemize their value as modes of cognition…" (*ibid.:*113). This takes story away from an anthropological discourse into a psychological realm.

Myth, Folk or Fairy Tale?

Levi-Strauss was more concerned with myth whereas Propp was focused on the folktale, but is there any difference and are they interchangeable? Stories are a part of a much broader body of cultural material termed folklore. As Alan Dundes (1965:3) highlights, "folklore included myths, legends, folktales, jokes, proverbs, riddles … [ ] …folk medicine, folk drama, folksongs …" There are many more elements that constitute folklore and the boundaries between them are often blurred. However, in his comprehensive list of what constitutes folklore Dundes makes no mention of the fairy tale. Is the fairy tale just another term for the folk tale or is it something different? Following that line of enquiry one can also ask whether there is a difference between fairy tale and myth? Jungian scholar, Marie-Louise von Franz believes that "[f]airy tales are the purest and simplest expression of collective unconscious psychic processes."[2] She goes onto say that, "[t]he fairy tale itself is its own best explanation; that is, it's meaning is contained in the totality of its motifs connected by the thread of the story". (1996:1). This analysis has much in common with the structuralists' interpretation. If we think in binary terms we could see the myth as a cultural story describing cosmological events, an explanation of the *outer* world. As an opposite the fairy tale represents the psychological *inner* world of the psyche. If we think of the numerous creation myths from around the world, they all have a grandiose quality about them. Worlds are created and destroyed by Gods and superhumans, there is little concern for the smaller details, as it is the grand plan that takes centre stage. Von Franz states, "[i]n myths or legends, or any other more elaborate mythological

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[2] The collective unconscious is the theory that underpins the work of Carl Jung. It is a psychic system that all humans are collectively connected by (1959).

material, we get at the basic patterns of the human psyche through a lot of cultural material. But in fairy tales there is much less specific cultural-conscious material, and therefore they mirror the basic patterns of the psyche more clearly." (*ibid.:*15). Bruno Bettleheim, also has an interesting point to make regarding the differences, "[t]he answers given by myths are definite, while the fairy tale is suggestive; its messages may imply solutions, but it never spells them out". (1991:45)

Zipes approaches this issue from a linguistic and a socio-political angle and offers his view on both the difference between myth and fairy tale and fairy tale and folk tale. The central thesis of his book Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale (1994) is that the fairy tale has been warped by modernity and mythologized to reinforce the dominant patriarchal social structures. Zipes work is sometimes critical of the fairy tale; when making a clear distinction between the folktale and fairy tale he views the latter as a form of literary commodification, which concretizes a once, flexible, orally transmitted tradition. "Once there was a time when folk tales were part of communal property and told with original and fantastic insights by gifted storytellers who gave vent to the frustration of the common people and embodied their needs and wishes in the folk narratives…" (1979:4). He states how the folktale was an important unifying agent bridging gaps in understanding social issues and strengthening communal bonds among the 'common' people, everyday folk. In the hands of oral storytellers these tales would have come alive and been tailored in real time, improvisation would have been an important tool and the tale's moral qualities would have been dependent upon the current social and political narratives. The emotional state of the storyteller and his or her own agendas should also be taken into consideration here as human emotion tends to be in constant flux and never fixed. Due to these variables there would have been a strong element of the unexpected in each retelling of the story, an unpredictability reflecting the reality of real life. Once in the hands of educated literary experts the folk tale became concretized and could be used for widespread political and personal agendas.

By the 17th century various folk tales were being written down and translated, such as the now famous *Book of a Thousand and One Nights* of Persian and Indian origin (Popularised as Arabian Nights) translated into French by Antione Galland (Luke 1987:19). But it is Charles Perrault who is best known for popularising the folktale

and 'creating' the fairy tale genre with the publication of Puss in Boots in 1697. As Zipes states, "Perrault carefully contemplated known literary and oral versions of fairy tales, changed them in his mind and on paper, [and] represented his own society and literary debates to himself and readers…" (1997:33). But it wasn't until the early nineteenth century when the Grimm brothers published their volume of fairy tales that we really see a formulisation of the folk tale happen. I imagine that Grimm's tales would have been terrifying to children in the era of their publication, nevertheless, Zipes still maintains that a rationalising process took place and that the fairy tale tradition, "was part of a civilising process involving discourses about norms, values, mores and etiquette as well as depictions of actual social conditions". (*ibid.:*42). As Luke notes, " Perrault… omits in the interests of *bienséance* … that the sleeping beauty is raped by the rescuing prince and even gives birth to his children while still asleep." (1987:18). Perhaps this omission was due to a sea change in culture that began to see this act as particularly distasteful. Zipes uses the example of the wicked stepmother abandoning her stepchild; originally this type of tale would have had the mother doing the abandoning, perhaps having its origins in harsh social conditions such as times of severe food shortages and famine where drastic measures were often taken. However, to make it more acceptable and marketable for a 'mainstream' audience the mother eventually became the 'wicked' stepmother. Zipes sees this process of creating formulaic fairy tales as the beginning of what he terms 'the culture industry' and a precursor to Disney. There will always be negative consequences when concretising any art form, fluidity can be lost and commodification ensues. Alternatively, the fairy tale could be seen as an abstraction from a local folk tale, "condensed and made into a crystallized form, and thus they can be handed on and are better remembered because they appeal to the people."(Franz 1996:20). Whichever term is favoured in the present day, folk or fairy tale, seems to lose significance when telling a story to children, as long as the storyteller is capturing their attention and imagination. Having said that, in a world where disenchantment is around every corner the term 'fairy tale' seems to convey a real sense of enchantment. As Angela Carter (2010: xi) so eloquently states,

> It is a figure of speech and we use it loosely, to describe the
> great mass of infinitely various narrative that was, once upon a
> time and still is, sometimes, passed on and disseminated through

the world by word of mouth – stories without known originators that can be remade again and again by every person who tells them, the perennially refreshed entertainment of the poor.

The fairy tale and child development

"The journey into the wood is part of the journey of the psyche from birth through death to rebirth" (Mantel 2009:online).

As Franz notes, until the industrial revolution "fairy tales were … told to adults as well as to children". They would have been the main source of entertainment in the community and "in agricultural populations, telling fairy tales became a kind of essential, spiritual occupation." (1996: 4). So children have always been exposed to story irrelevant of their social position and social status in any given culture. I say this to acknowledge and take a cursory look at the debate around the social construction of childhood by scholars such as Hendrick. When talking about Britain he notes that "[i]n 1800 the meaning of childhood was ambiguous and not universally in demand" (1997:34) The enlightenment and the Industrial revolution had a profound effect on Western culture, the concept of childhood and the treatment of children was no exception. However, it is reasonable to conclude that what an individual is exposed to in childhood will have a lasting psychological effect upon them and, to my mind, that applies universally to all *young minds* irrespective of historical or cultural conditions. Bettleheim's book, *The Uses of Enchantment*, addresses this issue and delves into the psyche of the child in some depth. He is known for his Freudian analysis of the psychological effects of fairy tales, "fairy tales carry important messages to the conscious, the preconscious, and the unconscious mind, on whatever level each is functioning at the time" (1991:6). Bettleheim believes that fairy tales carry important messages and meanings that help a child to make sense of both the light and the dark present in the world whilst that dominant culture often seeks to repress and deny the existence of the darkness. Bettleheim states that the message conveyed in fairy tales is manifold, "that a struggle against severe difficulties in life is unavoidable … an intrinsic part of human existence…"(*ibid:*.8). He goes onto to say that this struggle results in a victorious end; however, this is a little reductionist as life does not always

favour the brave or the noble and not all fairy tales follow quite such a formula. Bettelheim seems to do this a lot and in his own quest for meaning is guilty of simplifying the fairy tale 'genre' to basic binaries such as good and bad, ugly and beautiful. However, Bettelheim does also recognise the complexity of the fairy tale and the psyche, "the paramount importance of fairy tales for the growing individual resides in something other than teachings about correct ways of behaving in this world … Fairy tales do not pretend to describe the world as it is, nor do they advise what one ought to do." (*ibid:*.25).

There is much to admire in Bettelheim's analysis of fairy tales and I agree with the essence of it, that being the influence on the young mind that fairy tales can exert. It does feel a little out-dated at times, but that in itself reflects his Freudian outlook; it is true that if one goes looking, then one may indeed find sexual metaphors. Taking a story like Little Red Riding Hood with her suggestive relationship with the wolf then it is easy to draw that conclusion. However, I do not believe that all fairy tale narratives can be reduced to sexual metaphors or parental dysfunction; the psyche is a vast universe and a Freudian interpretation is just one way of comprehension. It may say as much about the psyche of the person receiving the story as the meanings contained within. Anthropologist, Moshe Shokeid (1982) believes that "fairy tales may … serve to introduce the child to the world of strangers and the noncommitted modes of behaviour which often typify social encounters in Western society." (223). He goes onto say, "[i]n studying Western fairy tales, I prefer to disregard Western complexities of sex and generational conflicts. Preoccupation with Freudian theories and their counterparts has led to a 'symbolic deprivation' of other acute sources of conflict and animosity in human life" (1982:228). This may go a little way to explaining the sometimes ambiguous meaning of a fairy tale. Shokeid also notes that, " [w]estern fairy tales instil the child with doubts about the surrounding world and its moral code" (*ibid:*.229). In some ways aligning himself with Levi-Strauss he posits that the fairy tale expresses and seeks to highlight the many contradictions evident in human social relations; "the child learns that despite all the moral teachings and the wide range of appropriate behaviour hammered into him, he cannot take his world for granted – especially not people." (*ibid*). When working its magic the fairy tale begins to equip the child's unconscious with an awareness of the many cultural and psychological complexities that they may encounter throughout their life. Fairy tales

are also full of horrific and violent circumstances, and as Luke rightly observes "for the child, in whom violent impulses and guilt about them exist anyway, repeated encounters with such fictional events, so far from being frightening or disturbing, may be satisfying, guilt relieving, reassuring and therapeutic" (1987:37).

Franz offers an alternative psychological analysis that comes from Jung's school of thought. Franz is concerned with archetypes, which put simply are motifs that occur universally in the collective unconscious; for example, the fish or the lamb which are particularly well known archetypal images (1996:29). However, it is not so simple to conclude that specific archetypes have the same meaning for all people. Nevertheless, Franz is clear how the fairy tale as opposed to a myth, migrates between cultures as it is beyond "cultural and racial differences". She goes onto to say that, "[f]airy tale language seems to be the international language of all mankind – of all ages and of all races and cultures" (*ibid*). She also notes how young children relate more to animal archetypes as they require less information then humans; the animal based story is "the deepest and most ancient form of tale." (*ibid*:.36). Franz goes into depth about various fairy tale archetypes and what they may represent on an unconscious level, comparing various versions of the same tales. With Franz we once again return to the complexity present in the human psyche and how, many fairy tales, "ultimately circle around the symbol of the Self". (ibid:.114). Drawing on Jung's theory of the shadow, anima and animus she contributes significantly to the hidden depths and meanings contained within the 'simple' fairy tale, I can only scratch the surface in this essay and a clearer understanding of Jung's theories are required to go deeper.

There is also another function that the fairy tale can have for the young mind and that is the rejection of the adult world with its seemingly hypocritical norms and values and its obsession with rules and order. Children's intelligence and understanding of the world is often underestimated and undermined; *do as I say not as I do* springs to mind. Roald Dahl's tales are a good example of the child's perspective and the rejection of adult authority, instilling an anarchic sensibility into the child's world. He often paints adults as stupid and greedy and at times quite horrific and abusive; whilst the child, as the main protagonist, is there to foil the injustice dealt out by the authoritative adults. We see this pattern repeatedly in Dahl's stories where the child overcomes diversity in the face of the adult world and comes out triumphant. These

tales serve an important function, that of removing the veils of innocence, revealing that age does not always equate to wisdom. The authoritative power displayed by the adults is more often self serving and not in the interest of the wider community. To my mind this is one of the most important lessons a child can learn about how society is structured. There is usually an adult element there to aid the child and this is where this synergy between adult and child generates its own kind of wisdom.

Roald Dahl is one of the cleverest contemporary storytellers as he incorporates complexity extremely effectively and never patronises the child. As Van Renen (1985) states in his dissertation "perhaps the most outstanding feature of his work for children is the complete honesty with which he creates his characters and their environments, and the honesty with which he relates to his readers. He does not regard them as little angels, as precious beings requiring to be cushioned from some of the more unpleasant realities of the world." (*ibid:*88). This honesty is very important and relates back to undermining children's intelligence. Children deserve to know the true nature of humanity and its complexity and this is where story comes in as it communicates this on a level that seeks to bring together truth on the one hand and enchantment on the other, only within the framework of a story is this possible. Van Rennen also highlights another fundamental element that Dahl uses so effectively, and that is humor. Humor serves as a way to ameliorate feelings of injustice. It is an important tool that contributes to the building of inner resilience and allows a psychic break from potentially harmful psychological processes.

Time for a Tale or Two

I feel an essay about folk and fairy tales that solely focuses upon theory lacks a little of the magic that can be found in the tale; as I have highlighted from both Franz and Levi-Strauss, meaning is found in the content and the telling of the story. So I would like to share two short examples that I enjoy and that also support Shokeid's slight rejection of Bettelheim's Freudian reductionism.

Sermerssuaq

Sermerssuaq was so powerful that she could lift a kayak on the tips of three fingers. She could kill a seal merely by drumming on its head with her fists. She could rip asunder a fox or hare. Once she arm wrestled with Qasordlanguaq, another powerful woman, and beat her so easily that she said: 'Poor Qasordlanguaq could not even beat one of her own lice at arm wrestling.' Most men she could beat and then she would tell them: 'Where were you when the testicles were given out?' Sometimes this Sermerssuaq would show off her clitoris. It was so big that the skin of a fox would not fully cover it. *Aja*, and she was the mother of nine children, too!

(Carter 2010:2)

This tale originates form the Inuit and challenges our understanding of gender roles. Although sexual organs are mentioned I interpret them as symbols of strength rather than explicitly sexual. Sermerssuaq is herself an archetype of the strong female that serves as a powerful image contributing to the development of a child's psyche and an understanding of one element of what may be expected in the adult world. This also shows the cultural basis of the tale, as the life of an Inuit woman is quite different to that of a Westerner. However, it can still cross cultural boundaries, speaking as a parent of two girls I would like to think that in times of need they could dig deep into their psyche and draw upon the power of Sermerssuaq.

Chelm Justice

A great calamity befell Chelm one day. The town cobbler murdered one of his customers. So he was brought before the judge, who sentenced him to die by hanging.

When the verdict was read a townsman arose and cried out: "If Your Honor pleases – you have sentenced to death the town cobbler! He's the only one we've got. If you hang him who will mend our shoes?"

"Who? Who?" cried all the people of Chelm with one voice. The judge nodded in agreement and reconsidered his verdict.

"Good people of Chelm," he said, "What you say is true. Since we have only one cobbler it would be a great wrong against the community to let him

die. As there are two roofers in the town, let one of them be hanged instead!"

(Yolen 1986:176)

This is a Yiddish tale and a little cultural background is required. Chelm is known in Yiddish folklore as a town of fools. So this is tale of justice, although it is debatable whether justice is really served. It has a streak of dark humour which conveys the shadow self and shows that justice is not always fair, a contradiction in itself. Someone has to pay for the murder, but the community values the murderer for his skills, however, the community only requires one roofer and so the 'joke' is on the innocent roofer. Perhaps, the townsman who originally brought the issue up is related to the roofer in question or it may even be him. This would be a lesson that teaches one to be careful when questioning lawful decisions. This could also be interpreted as a story of one's place in the community and the importance of learning an invaluable trade. I love these two stories, as they do not seem to conform to the traditional fairy tale although they both have an element of violence, which is so often present. The more folk and fairy tales one reads from around the world the more one becomes aware of the vast cultural and psychological elements that are interacting to produce these localised motifs, archetypes and metaphors. These are at times universal and easily transferable between cultures and other times highly personalised to a specific culture and can leave you feeling perplexed and unsure of their meaning. Perhaps tales from indigenous cultures untouched for a longer amount of time by Western doctrine are harder for the Western mind to grasp, as they seem to be more abstract and less narrative.

Into the future: A conclusion

So it is here that I must draw this story of stories to a close. I feel as though I have been unable to do this subject as much justice as I would have liked. It is a vast continent to be explored and I have only touched upon some of the prominent theories that seek to explain the meanings and functions of story; they appear to serve a multitude of functions that are both cultural and psychological in their nature.

Although there is some friction between scholars I am of the opinion that all the theories I have covered are complimentary to one another and all have equal relevance. Once again, in reference to Levi-Strauss, to understand story one must see how all the theories fit together; each one contributing to our overall understanding of the importance of story and its location in child development from both a social and psychological perspective. The only perspective that I feel is lacking is that of the child. However, the perspective of the child may not fit in with academic rational and reasoning, which is perhaps why it is so valuable, another contradiction?

Fairytales act as a form of containment for emotions, which can be heightened during childhood helping to navigate the stormy waters of a rapidly developing psyche. They can contribute to the understanding of one's position in the world both locally and globally and at times how to treat the world and how it will react to that treatment. As Shokeid highlights, a good tale can also embody the unpredictability of human existence; it prepares a child for the positive and negative attributes of the human condition and contributes to the socialisation of a child into the community. I hope that I have shown in some way that story is a powerful agent and so it is with story that the world can be transformed for the positive or the negative of any given agenda; it informs the child's understanding of the world and it is this understanding that will ultimately construct the reality of future generations. Humanity faces an uncertain future in the face of the ensuing ecological crisis as well as the persistence of economic inequality, which has the potential to create social instability for all of earth's inhabitants. It is perhaps with story that the next generation of children can continue to gain a deeper understanding of both the planet's requirements and of the multitude of social relations that are present in today's global community. Analysis is, at times, an inadequate way of conveying the essence of story, which is what both Franz and Levi-Strauss attempt to articulate; it is within the story that one 'feels' a meaning, on a level that transcends articulation. The meaning of the fairy tale is a dreamlike paradox, which may explain why metaphor and symbolic representation, dressed in a story, have been such a fundamental part of the human experience and continues to be so. Perhaps, it is beyond intellectualisation that one finds the pot of gold?

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