A Jungian Interpretation of the Spiritual Message of Sleeping Beauty Enacted Through a Child's Grief and Healing

Jennifer Warters and Sandra Kilburn
2025



ABSTRACT
The Jungian symbolism and spiritual message of the fairytale Sleeping Beauty provides insights in relation to documented therapeutic play sessions with a five-year old child who was struggling to come to terms with the loss of her mother both at home and within the school system. The paper explores the Jungian interpretation of the symbolism of Sleeping Beauty which allows us to appreciate the child's ability to use the narrative to experience her own healing.

Key Words
Archetypes, creative play, fairytales, grief, healing, Jungian symbolism, Sleeping Beauty, spirituality,

INTRODUCTION

Sharing stories and sharing experiences has a long oral history passed down through thousands of years, which dates back to families and social communities telling of their adventures around a communal fire. We are able to listen to a fairytale with the curiosity of a child and through this process gain wisdom and insights. There are aspects of us in all parts of the story which address our deepest fears and questions.

Children have a sense of curiosity and wonder, and with their innate intelligence understand fairytales and are able to recognise the characters depicted. For example, the father in a bad mood loudly declaiming and stomping around the house, could easily represent an ogre and a mother's

tirade could, to the child, be reminiscent of a wicked witch. Children are all too aware that life can be a struggle and fairytales show that the most daunting difficulty can be overcome. The stories help children develop the courage and tenacity needed to survive in a world full of adults.

The stories help a child to understand who they are and who others in their life are. Situations that we all experience in life's journey are fully explored. The narrative doesn't change, although the setting may be different. Fairytales enhance imaginative play and give the child models for emotional situations as the initial problem is worked through and eventually solved.

Healing occurs through a dramatic story where a sad situation may be transformed by enchantment to a 'happy ever after' ending.

Sleeping Beauty

Although the first printed version of Sleeping Beauty appeared in Paris in 1528, Maria Tatar, a keen fairytale scholar, believed that the Sleeping Beauty story was based on an earlier thirteenth century Icelandic prose saga that tells of the origin and decline of the Volsung clan. In this violent tale which includes a magic sleep, a 'disgruntled deity' places a curse on a young princess Zellandine that causes her to fall into a deep slumber.

Many years later, Prince Troylus finds the princess and rapes her in her sleep. As a result of this violent encounter she has a child and faces many misfortunes.

This crude adult version of the tale was further developed and transformed over six centuries through French, German and English versions. In the late seventeenth century at the beginning of the Age of Enlightenment, people developed a different world view and began to question traditional knowledge and explore new ideas about progress, and tolerance. The later evolved versions of Sleeping Beauty do not feature rape, and it was around this time that less violent versions of fairytales appeared in the nursery and were read to children.

According to Jungian analyst Marie von Franz, princes and princesses became ideal representations of men and women in terms of spiritual and physical beauty, love and heroism. She believed that the eternal feminine was the 'core component of 'Sleeping Beauty' and the heart of later interpretations.

The classic story we have today is based on Charles Perrault's 1697 fairy tale, in French, known as La Belle au bois dormant, or The Beauty Sleeping in the Wood; in German: Dornröschen or Little Briar Rose, and in English as The Sleeping Beauty in the Woods. In the later Disney tale, we follow the young life of Princess Aurora who was cursed by the evil fairy, Maleficent, to die from pricking her finger on the spindle of a spinning wheel on her 16th birthday. However, the spell is mitigated by three good fairies and, instead of dying, the princess sleeps with her household for one hundred years. She can only be awakened by the true love kiss of a handsome prince.

Sleeping Beauty - The Dormant Self

Jungian authors and analysts in their exploration of the symbolism, have interpreted the story as a mirror of archetypal processes and psychological development.

Sleeping Beauty, we are told, reflects the "Maiden" archetype, a period of innocence and receptivity. The story is understood as a journey of self-knowledge, whereby one comes to consciously acknowledge and recognise one's unique individuality and wholeness, and in turn is then able to recognise and acknowledge that of another. An archetypal approach identifies universal themes and symbols found in literature and in the dynamics of relationship. For Jung, there is a collective human experience that informs our individual unconscious. This collective human experience is based on similar needs and desires of all human beings.

Sleeping Beauty's sleep represents the dormant self in an inactive state during which growth and development cease. This period of waiting offers a potential for creativity or consciousness to wake up. A prolonged deep sleep reflects periods in the life where growth appears stagnant, but internal development is taking place beneath the surface. According to Jung, this phase reflects a necessary phase in the process of individuation, which is the process of developing a distinct identity and sense of self to enable inner growth by withdrawing from the outer world.

In the natural cycles of the psyche, periods of rest or withdrawal precede personal or spiritual breakthroughs. Donald Kalsched discusses fairytales as metaphors for psychological defences and the healing process, where the sleep represents a protective dissociation as the psyche retreats to avoid further harm in response to trauma.

The Curse – Influence of the Shadow

The curse placed on Sleeping Beauty at birth is representative of the shadow self, a familiar concept in Jungian psychology. The repressed or neglected parts of the psyche are a counterbalance to the self that people present to others. These repressed fears, or unconscious forces, must be confronted and integrated. The curse in this instance represents fear, doubt and unhealed wounds. It also highlights the inevitability of challenges and the role of fate in the soul's journey. Maleficent, a supernatural entity as the evil fairy or antagonist, embodies this shadow energy. It is both destructive and transformative, setting the scene for the eventual awakening of the sleeping princess. Therefore, the curse is both a threat and a teacher.

The Spinning Wheel Spindle

The spindle which pricks Sleeping Beauty's finger represents fate and the passage of time. Its sharp point can be interpreted as a painful but necessary awakening.

The pricking of her finger is the princess's encounter with destiny, or her unconscious drives and patterns of behaviour. The spindle represents an encounter with the darker, unconscious parts of the soul that lead to spiritual trials. It is a metaphor for life's unavoidable challenges which are necessary for psychological development.

If we ignore or repress parts of ourselves (fears, desires or emotions) this leads to stagnation and crises that force confrontation and growth. The spinning wheel is associated with weaving and is a symbol for the interconnectedness of life's events and the cyclical nature of existence. Growth and transformation are woven into the fabric of our experiences, the tapestry of life. We therefore need to trust in life and all that it brings, although this takes us to experiences which are not necessarily comfortable or pleasant. However, our increased awareness helps us to see the bigger picture and the possible light at the end of the tunnel.

The Sleep - Dormancy and Transition

The 100-Year Sleep is symbolic of the unconscious state of the psyche, a phase of psychological incubation where deep, internal transformation can occur. Sleeping demonstrates a need for stillness and withdrawal.

Detachment from external distractions allows the psyche to organise itself and gain maturity. Deep sleep reflects periods in life such as grief or spiritual crisis, the 'dark night of the soul' where outward progress halts to allow for inner growth. We are required to have patience and to surrender.

As preparation for awakening, these dormant periods prepare the individual for profound realisations heralding new phases of life. This reflects the natural rhythm of life with cycles of activity, rest and recuperation. Transformation occurs in cycles, often requiring periods of inactivity.

Thorns and Brambles Surrounding the Castle

The castle, as a symbol of the self, is protected by barriers, both protective and obstructive, which symbolise psychological barriers. This illustrates the need to safeguard this vulnerable incubation process from outside interference. These barriers are challenges that must be overcome to reach self-awareness or enlightenment. They serve as a test for growth or awakening, breaking through resistance, overcoming obstacles, etc. The Prince determinedly breaking through the thorns is symbolic of our determination to overcome inner obstacles. Challenges are part of the journey, testing resolve and readiness for growth.

The Prince - Catalyst for Awakening

The Prince represents the animus. Carl Jung's archetypes of anima and animus represent the feminine aspect within a man's unconscious and the masculine aspect within a woman's unconscious. They respectively play crucial roles in emotional and spiritual development. A balance of these two male and female aspects is required. The animus archetype of the Prince symbolises the energy required to awaken dormant aspects of the feminine psyche to empower the princess.

This rebalancing of male and female aspects is a unifying force, a catalyst for growth and integration. The kiss awakens the consciousness, bringing love and self-awareness, thus releasing Sleeping Beauty from her dormant state.

The union between the Prince and Sleeping Beauty is the merging or integration of opposites (masculine and feminine, conscious and unconscious) within the self. This reintegration marks a new stage of psychological development, a symbol of sexual maturation and the awakening of consciousness. The union of Sleeping Beauty and the Prince reflects the harmonious integration of all aspects of the psyche.

The King and Queen - Parental and Societal Expectations

The royal parents symbolise societal, cultural or parental influences on an individual's development. In their attempt to shield the child from the curse (the inevitable challenges of life), they burn all the spindles in the land. An overprotective action doomed to fail because personal growth requires us to take responsibility and to confront our challenges.

Attempts to prevent or deny difficulties can inhibit growth as struggles are essential for maturity and self-awareness. The parents' inability to stop the curse demonstrates the importance of allowing individuals to empower themselves to face their own journeys and destinies.

The Three Good Fairies - Supportive Archetypes

The three good fairies are protective or guiding archetypes – inner strength, mentors or helpers who assist in times of difficulty. The gifts (beauty, grace, music) bestowed on the little princess by the three good fairies, reflect the potential creative qualities of the self that remain dormant but are essential for eventual growth and transformation. These fairies show us that even in the face of adversity, benevolent forces are at work. We have inner strengths and positive influences that help us to navigate life's challenges and appreciate the beauty around us.

The Awakening, Consciousness and Integration

Sleeping Beauty's awakening symbolises psychological integration and enlightenment. The dormant aspects of her psyche are reconnected with consciousness, creating a sense of balance and wholeness.

The Kingdom's Awakening

The stillness of the castle during Sleeping Beauty's sleep is symbolic of the pause required for deep, inner work allowing transformation to unfold in appropriate timing. The awakening of the kingdom mirrors Sleeping Beauty's awakening. It reflects the ripple effect of personal awakening, as inner transformation brings new awareness, revitalising the external environment.

The awakening indicates a new phase of life, where the individual emerges wiser and stronger with expanded self-awareness.

The Wedding

The wedding, the sacred union of opposites (masculine and feminine, conscious and unconscious), reflects the integration of all aspects of the self and the attainment of wholeness.

OVERALL PSYCHOLOGICAL MESSAGE

Sleeping Beauty emphasises the importance of integrating all aspects of the psyche (shadow, conscious, unconscious, masculine and feminine) to achieve wholeness, with awakening occurring at the correct time. Often, external forces and internal readiness are the catalyst. Periods of dormancy, stillness or retreat are essential for inner transformation even if they appear unproductive on the surface.

Spiritual Symbolism and Meaning of Sleeping Beauty

Sleeping Beauty represents the soul in a dormant state, waiting for awakening. Her long sleep, a metaphor for cycles of human consciousness, represents periods of waiting, stillness, spiritual latency or times of ignorance, a disconnection from the higher self which resides in a higher frequency of consciousness. Transformation is required before there is an awakening to spiritual truth.

As spiritual enlightenment is achieved through harmony and balance, the wedding signifies the culmination of the soul's journey and its return to unity with the divine (primary) creative source.

CREATIVE PLAY SESSION

Having explored the symbolism and message of Sleeping Beauty, it is time to explore the fairytale through the eyes of a child. Creative play sessions allow a child to use their favourite stories for their own healing. The child, in their own interpretation of the story, may wish to repeat the action of events again and again. Repetition of the story is very important because the child needs to know that there is a pathway through trials and tribulations. This allows integration and assimilation of events and understanding.

Alice was referred by a team of health service professionals who were offering counselling support to Alice's father and his new girlfriend. Alice,

aged five, was grieving for her mother who had passed away with cancer two years earlier. I was told that the little girl had watched helplessly as her mother slowly deteriorated at home before her eyes. Her father's inability to fully come to terms with the loss of his wife had led to his new girlfriend (who had recently moved in) to exit the family home on repeated occasions. Understandably, these dramas had an impact on Alice. A follow up referral was received from Alice's school and a meeting was arranged.

A pale, solemn little girl with long brown hair and large grey eyes tentatively entered the room designated for our play sessions. Alice's class teacher told me that Alice spoke very little in class. Indicating a need to withdraw, she was reluctant to join her classmates at the group activity table; she refused to read or write during group activity. I suggested to her teacher that rather than insisting on group cooperation, an empty chair could be placed for her at the group table. Alice would then be free to sit on the chair and take her place with the other children if or when she felt ready to do so. Meanwhile, I asked that she be allowed to sit separately but be encouraged to draw and paint, activities which she enjoyed. This would allow her an opportunity to silently express through drawing any internalised feelings.

It was my hope that a period of weekly sessions of creative play would provide Alice with another channel of expression. One of the smaller classrooms was offered on a weekly basis and arrangements were made for a total of six play sessions.

In her desired role as Sleeping Beauty, Alice, chose to process her grief by beginning her story with Sleeping Beauty asleep in the castle tower in the middle of the forest. It is important not to dominate a child's interpretation and direction of a story because the psyche generates its own journey for its own healing, and therapist involvement should be by invitation of the child only.

Play Props for the Stories Created

A pair of stretchy 'magic slippers' covered in sparkles.

Music previously used in an earlier research project within the National Health Trust, where a specific piece of music was introduced as a healing agent to accelerate and enhance language development.

Swathes of silky, diaphanous material in clear bright colours of the rainbow spectrum

Darker material to create a costume for a character in a story that would be key to Alice's healing process.

A small golden box of mixed polished crystals to enhance our play.

A blanket

A packet of biscuits

Play Sessions

At the beginning of each session, with the music softly playing in the background, Alice slipped into the sparkly slippers before entering the world of her imagination.

Play Session - Sleeping Beauty



Sleeping Beauty was Alice's favourite fairy story. In her play, she cast herself as the sleeping princess. I (therapist) was given the role of the Prince. Alice chose to ignore the first part of the story where the spell was cast, and instead instructed me as the Prince to ride my pretend horse around a small table covered in a green cloth (the forest) until I could see a castle surrounded by sharp thorns and brambles. Determinedly cutting my way through the thicket of thorns and brambles, I found the sleeping princess (Alice) wrapped in a blanket and asleep, high up in a tower of the castle. Sleeping Beauty was discovered and awoken from her slumbers by the Prince's kiss on her cheek. At the end of Alice's story, the prince and princess hugged and rode away on the pretend horse to live happily ever after.

In the third week of our play sessions, when the story was repeated in exactly the same way, there was a very special moment when Alice, after

being awoken by the prince's kiss, looked at me intently and said in a calm, grave voice, *'I have been asleep for two years.'* This was the length of time that had passed since she had lost her mother to cancer. This brief statement demonstrated the healing that was taking place because these stories and myths are held deep within our unconscious. They are keys to helping children make sense of their experiences in life, enabling them to find ways of dealing positively with their pain. Repetition allows necessary time for the child to begin to understand and resolve their own struggle.

Theme of Abandonment

Watching her mother's health deteriorate would have saddened and confused Alice and she would have felt abandoned at her death. However, in order to enable her to reclaim her power, it was necessary to create another tale and together we mapped the storyline. Alice made drawings of the new narrative. In this story, Alice was a beautiful girl who came upon an old witch in a forest. I was to play the part of the witch. Alice said that the witch was very poorly and she couldn't make her better, even though she had given her biscuits and a blanket to keep her warm. This was an indication that in her own short life, Alice had been unable to make her own mother well and had helplessly watched her mother become increasingly sick until she was eventually taken away from her forever. She would have felt a lack of emotional nourishment as the mother is too ill to give full support to meet the child's expectations.

To complete the healing, Alice needed to separate the happy, healthy mother she knew before her illness from the ugly cancer that had caused her death. The following week, I brought to our sessions a little golden box of polished crystals and the extra props that were required for our play session. Together, we found an ending for her story, similar to the mitigation of the spell in Sleeping Beauty, where the beautiful girl remembered that as a birthday present she had been given some special crystals which she was told she might need one day. Together, we completed the story.

The Bewitched Princess

A witch lived alone in a cold, rickety house in the forest. The witch was really a princess who had been put under a spell. One day a beautiful little girl was riding her horse through the woods and came upon the witch, who had been out gathering sticks for her fire but had collapsed in the cold and was very ill. The little girl gave the witch a warm blanket and



biscuits but the witch did not feel any better. On the next visit, the little girl placed a magic crystal under the witch's bed to make her well. She continued to visit the witch every day and each day, she gave her a different magic crystal to place under her bed. As the witch started to get better, the little girl noticed that she began to transform before her eyes. As the witch, I had initially wrapped myself in rainbow coloured silken material and had disguised these bright colours by overlaying the brightly coloured silk with dark colours.



To illustrate the release of the spell, the dark material began to fall away with each of the child's visits, revealing the princess in rainbow colours. She told the child that a spell had been put on her but that the spell would be broken when a beautiful child who was unafraid of her ugliness had been kind to her. Although the witch was hunched over and dressed in dark material, Alice, as the little girl in the story, had been unafraid and had given the witch a warm blanket, food and precious crystals to make her well. Eventually, through her determination and repeated visits, the witch's dark clothes fell away and she was transformed into a princess in beautiful rainbow colours thanks to the love and kindness of the child.

School Review

Fortnightly review meetings took place with Alice's teacher, who reported that Alice was beginning to integrate into her class group once more and was choosing to sit at the table with the other children. She had even asked to be allowed to read and write. To her teacher's delight, she had discovered that although Alice had not read aloud in class before, she was able to understand the words in her reading book and was only a little delayed in her comprehension.

Follow Up Appointment Three Months Later

At our clinic review appointment, Alice was asked to bring her favourite musical track. Playing this music during our play session would help her to relax. Alice was accompanied by her father's girlfriend. Initially, Alice focused on a toy oven and made a pretend meal for the three of us. When we had eaten our meal, Alice asked if she could play me her favourite song. She was eager to dress up to dance to the music. The music she had brought with her was the song 'Tragedy' by 'Steps', https://youtu.be/2XApA3hKO6w?si=en3pBhQ0Csr20tGV a poignant choice.

As the music swelled, Alice's confident self emerged. She asked me to tie flame coloured material around her waist and she assumed the appropriate, empowered posture and transformed herself into a Spanish flamenco dancer. She beckoned me to follow, as she strutted across the floor, expressing her own remembered tragedy through the movement, words and music.



Thankfully, Alice's father's relationship had stabilised and there was a growing bond with the young woman who had brought Alice to the clinic. No further help was requested but the door was left open for further contact if required. I did not hear from the family again.

Outcome and Resolution

A child's soul understands the symbolism. Alice found solace in the story of Sleeping Beauty and identified with the 100-years sleep, which symbolized her own withdrawal which encompassed two years from the time her mother died. Her soul required repetition in order to find a pathway through her perceived abandonment and distress. She directed the Prince to cut through the barrier of sharp thorns and brambles to then give her an awakening kiss

Alice's world and environment are revitalised as she emerges from her two-year sleep and is then able to integrate with others again. She played out the original story and then spent the rest of the sessions healing her wounds. At our review appointment there was some resolution as she chose to provide nourishment before expressing her newly empowered self in the guise of the flamenco dancer. Fairytales and belief in magic equip a child to meet the struggles of life. It is important not to deny the child this opportunity. The therapist should only involve herself in the play when invited to do so, but may suggest options of choice if things come to a standstill.

'All children need to play and use their play to make sense of their experiences and to make sense of what is happening around them. Through play, they are able to channel overwhelming feelings and 'play out' situations that they feel powerless to resolve.' Warters J 2011

REFERENCES

Bettelheim B The Uses of Enchantment - Meaning and Importance of Fairytales (1989) VintageBooks NY

Hugs for Kids -Fairy Tales and Early Child Development 2025 https://www.hugsforkids.com.au/blogs/hugsforkids/fairy-tales-and-early-childhood-development?srsltid=AfmBOoqMjt8T3TZUC5OJQux-0rATbd1oOFPlJYJbuXXoieL8JOBUQvJg

Hogstad G Archetypal Interpretation of "Sleeping Beauty": Awakening the Power of Love (2018) https://www.pacifica.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Vol.2-Archetypal-interpretation-of-sleeping-beauty.pdfz

Kalsched D 'The Inner World of Trauma Archetypal Defenses of the Personal Spirit: Archetypal Defences of the Personal Spirit ' 1996 Routledge

Mc Carley H 'From Once Upon a Time to Happily Ever After: Grimms' Fairy Tales and Early Childhood Development' 2017 Education PsychologyCorpus ID: 55182543
Search 224,110,959 papers from all fields of science

Warters J 'Creating Child's Play' 2011 http://www.blog.lightvoice.org.uk/?p=208

Warters J and Kilburn S 'Fairytales, Astrology and Enchantment in Relation to Child Directed Creative Play' 2019 https://www.academia.edu/41168128/Fairytales_Astrology_and_Enchantment_in_Relation_to_Child_Directed_Creative_Play

Warters J and Kilburn S 'Astrological Chart Indicators Illustrate the Significance of a Child's Interpretation of 'Little Red Riding Hood' 2024 https://www.academia.edu/124325382/Astrological_Chart_Indicators_Illustrate_the_Significance_of_a_Childs_Interpretation_of_Little_Red_Riding_Hood

Von Franz M L The Interpretation of Fairy Tales: Revised Edition (C. G. Jung Foundation Books Series) 1996 Shambhala Publications Inc