An Exploration of the Symbolism and Astrological Significance of the Fairy Tale 'Hansel and Gretel' with a 21st Century Case History Comparison of Two Siblings

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Key Words

Abandonment, Archetypes, Attachment Disorder, Cultural Trauma, Fairy Tales, Foetal Alcohol Syndrome, Generational Trauma, Great Famine, Hansel and Gretel, Jungian Symbolism, Moon- Saturn- Pluto Triad, Natal Chart, Saturnian Symbolism, Sesquiquadrate

In analytical psychology, fairy tales are understood to be symbolic expressions of the collective unconscious, according to Marie-Louise von Franz, a leading exponent of Jungian psychology and symbolism. Fairy tales frequently depict stages of individual development, with a focus on early ego development, as the characters attempt to separate from deeply held emotional patterns often relating to a parent. These unconscious patterns of thoughts, memories and feelings influence their behaviour.

THE BACKGROUND OF 'HANSEL AND GRETEL'

Records reveal that Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm collected and collated local versions of stories and put them together to make one complete narrative. Many believed that the brothers collected these stories to preserve German culture and folklore and they were not initially intended to be read by children. Alarming as it may seem, the gruesome narrative was based in fact

that helped to preserve cultural trauma. Fairy tales could be a cover for the darkest part in our history. The stories often include dark themes of murder, cannibalism and abandonment. The tale of Hansel and Gretel was included in the first volume of 'Kinder-und Hausmarchen', Children's and Household Tales, published in 1812. This narrative originated in the Baltic region around 1315 AD. It is seemingly assembled from a collective nightmare which seeped into family memory with the realisation that deserting children in the forest to die or leaving them to fend for themselves was not unknown. Hansel and Gretel are a brother and sister who fall prey to a wicked witch. Their story examines family life of the time, childhood horror, initiation, poverty and greed. To uncover this truth we have to dig deeper beneath the surface in order to discover that a whole level of our past may have been deliberately erased or distorted. Unbeknown to many, millions of children have faced fear, abandonment and abuse in times of global catastrophe which continues to this day. Scholars contend that the Brothers Grimm heard the tale of Hansel and Gretel in 1809 from the family of Wilhelm's friend and future wife, Dortchen Wild.

Some believe that this particular narrative was inspired by the Great European Famine of 1315-1317, when many children in medieval Germany were abandoned by their parents. This was a period in history when the climate collapsed with much cooler temperatures and continual torrential rain caused massive crop failure. During what has been called a 'Little Ice Age,' parents resorted to deserting their children or stealing from and murdering others to feed themselves. Many were forced to eat vermin, dogs and horses. The elderly from outlying villages forewent food, choosing to starve to death in order to save the young people in their families and communities. Documents of the time record incidences where villagers killed the weakest children first to sustain the population. From the children's perspective, those who were meant to protect them became their greatest threat. In the early 1850's, many children were left to fend for themselves in a rapidly changing world. The Irish famine, mass immigration and the devastation of war contributed to an explosion of children living without families. The Lunacy Act of 1845 and Lunacy Act 1890 were pivotal UK laws regulating mental health care, focusing on licensing asylums and introducing legal certification for patient admission. This act meant that a mother who had lost her husband during the war was considered insane and as such her children became the property of the state. Charitable institutions suddenly emerged together with a global network of institutional houses, orphanages and foundling homes. There was a sudden appearance of orphans all over the world (Anderson G. 2025).

In Hansel and Gretel, fear is ever present as the parents plot their children's demise. Hansel and Gretel are led into the forest and left to their fate, Hansel drops pebbles along the path. Later by the light of the moon, the pebbles are illuminated and the children are able to find their way home. Sadly, the children are returned to the forest and Hansel makes a second abortive attempt to return home using breadcrumbs which the birds eat. In their wanderings, the children come across a cottage inhabited by an old woman who welcomes them in with the promise of bread. She locks Hansel in a cage and Gretel is reduced to servitude. It is the old woman's intention to fatten Hansel for eating. However, overcoming their fear, the children devise a plan together. When the woman tells Gretel to light the oven, she provokes the women to stand in front of it and pushes her in and she is burned alive. We are told that the children joyfully return home to find that their cruel mother has died.

From the terrifying experience of Hansel and Gretel, we glean that it is not possible to protect children all the time and the child will be challenged to face something that frightens them. However, "*Fairy tales do not tell children that dragons exist. Children already know that dragons exist. Fairy tales tell children that dragons can be killed."* G. K. Chesterton.

In the decades leading up to the 7th edition of this story in 1857, Wilhelm Grimm heavily edited the narrative of Hansel and Gretel by writing a cautionary tale for children, sugar-coated in Christian and European Catholic values with sanctification of the sacred mother. In these later writings, the children's mother was displaced by a 'scape goat', a cruel and evil stepmother. In an effort to determine a possible motive for this edit, we may surmise that there is a possibility that the author intended to write a warning for widowers and divorcees who were preparing to take a second wife to care for their children. In later versions, the Brothers Grimm seemingly wanted a father who protected his children and they wrote copiously about the misery and consequence of making an unfortunate choice. In the story of Hansel and Gretel, the father is weak and complicit.

At the time of rewriting the narrative, a second wife in a marriage who takes on the role of stepmother was not an uncommon occurrence. In those earlier times, many mothers died in childbirth and the father was more likely to marry someone younger to parent his children. His second marriage could well have instigated inheritance issues, incurring resentment and jealousy on both sides. According to statistics, an insecure step parent is more likely to favour their biological child. Added elements in later

sanitised versions for 19th century children included white pebbles and a white duck to help Hansel and Gretel to cross a river.

THE SYMBOLISM OF THE 'HANSEL AND GRETEL' NARRATIVE

In Jungian symbolism, this story is a series of archetypal events representing phases of consciousness. The innocent children are abandoned in the forest, which is to them the unknown. This is defined as the unconscious level. Hansel's use of pebbles and breadcrumbs is interpreted as his attempt to look within for answers and inner direction to make sense of what had occurred and his attempt to return to the familiar (home).

Gretel's decision to trick the witch to save her brother demonstrates her individual growth and freedom from reliance on others. She tricks the witch into putting her head in the oven and pushes her in from behind. Perhaps unable to challenge the witch head on, Gretel finds another way. With maturity, we are able to observe from another perspective and find different ways to solve our problems.

The oven is symbolic of destructive urges. In overcoming the witch's evil intentions, Gretel re-enacts a symbolic rebirth as her consciousness triumphs over being subconsciously overwhelmed. We can't accomplish anything when we feel overwhelmed but Gretel succeeds through strength, intelligence and timing rather than sheer force.

We recognise integration as the children return home to find that the mother has passed away, indicating that the children have 'triumphed over her devouring nature.' The father is restored to his rightful place, symbolising a rebalancing of the parental archetype to provide positive structure. The children return no longer as helpless dependents. Hunger, anxiety and temptation have been transmuted and transformed.

In order to mature and survive abandonment, the children must unconsciously integrate hunger and false nourishment. There must be deliberate action (vanquishing the witch) to integrate an unconscious desolation. In dramatic terms, it paints the necessity of facing the feeling of abandonment and of being overwhelmed or consumed in order to reclaim inner resources through conscious action.

Symbolic Interpretation of the Ego

The symbolic interpretation of ego development is a journey of initiation. Parental abandonment and fear cause the ego to fragment. The ego can only be restored through a capacity to manage one's inner world by aligning one's thoughts, emotions and actions with authentic values. This process requires a strong belief in one's ability to overcome dire circumstances.

Symbolism of the Forest

The forest in which the children are abandoned, lost and confused represents a state of limbo. A threshold representing an unconscious realm between two spaces. Hansel makes two abortive attempts to return to life as it was, employing identical strategies, both of which fail. We remember that initially he drops a trail of stones and the siblings follow these to return home. However, the children are unwelcome and again taken back into the forest by their parents. Undaunted, Hansel takes charge and tries again, this time dropping a trail of breadcrumbs, which the birds eat. Jungian psychology interprets the strategy of using stones and breadcrumbs as the ego's attempt to navigate uncertainty and to familiarise itself with the unconscious realm (the forest) by finding a way out. The trail of pebbles is solid and successful but fails because of the nature of the parents, which the children in their naiveté and innocence fail to comprehend. The breadcrumbs have no chance of success, an instinctive idea with no thought behind it because naturally the bread would be eaten by birds or forest creatures.

The Gingerbread Cottage

The sugary cottage luring the children to a fateful meeting with the witch, is a symbol of a distorted Moon principle. This is personified by the witch who has an undeveloped and false maternal instinct, desiring a fatal rather than a positive outcome for the children in her cottage. According to astrological symbolism, the Moon, when disengaged from Saturn's structure, symbolises unlimited pleasure without restraint. This is clearly demonstrated by the children. Deprived of love, they insatiably desire sugary treats, illustrating a physical desire to displace emotional deprivation. This leads to capture by the witch. Addiction (unrestrained desire) and false gratification replace a lack of emotional nourishment. The gingerbread cottage is the temptation.

THE ASTROLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Saturnian Symbolism

In astrological terms**,** the Hansel and Gretel fairy tale highlighting the horrors of famine, is historically associated with Saturnian symbolism. The story takes place during a Moon-Saturn polarity. Saturn governs scarcity, deprivation, fear and survival through endurance. The parents' decision to abandon their children not only reflects a moral failure, but also a symbolic environment in which physical and emotional nourishment is lacking (Greene L, 1976). The decision of their parents and the hunger the children are exposed to, corresponds to a distorted or withdrawn lunar principle. The Moon is primarily associated with care, emotional safety and the bond between mother and child. However, where there is a Moon-Saturn imbalance, the ego is under pressure to mature prematurely because it is being forced to survive without maternal support.

The Significance of the Moon-Saturn-Pluto Triad

The fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel symbolises the archetypal energies of the Moon, Saturn and Pluto. A Jungian/astrological approach indicates how emotional dependency can collapse under the pressure of destructive inner forces, requiring the development and emergence of a new structure of internal authority

In Hansel and Gretel, the Moon symbolises emotional responses, attachment relationships, proximity to nourishment and safety (Greene L, 1976; Arroyo S, 1978). At the beginning of the story, the lunar safety net is unstable as the parents are unable to provide a nurturing and safe environment. This scenario is often depicted in fairy tales, where there is a breach of the lunar principle, causing an inner imbalance that needs to be corrected (von-Franz ML, 1996).

Saturn, the principle of limitation, deprivation and contraction, is portrayed through famine and lack of resources, which cause the parents to abandon their emotional responses in order to find means of surviving themselves. In psychological astrology, Moon–Saturn dynamics are associated with early experiences of emotional restriction, conditional nurture and premature responsibility (Greene L, 1976). The calculated survival instincts of Saturn overriding the Moon's emotional sensitivities results in the parents' decision to abandon their children, which represents failure of parental protection.

According to Jung, it is the withdrawal of parental projections that force the psyche to develop internal structures (Jung CG, 1954). The children's banishment to the forest (symbolising the unconscious realm) therefore symbolises the transition from dependence on external authority to confrontation with unconscious forces, which according to Joseph Campbell (1949) is a universal component of initiation myths as the individual undergoes transformation,

Pluto is the archetypal force associated with power, destruction and transformation, and has been incorporated into in depth psychology where it represents experiences that are overwhelming, taboo or life-threatening to the individual (Jung CG, 1944; Greene L, 1976).

Pluto manifests in the Hansel and Gretel fairy tale as the witch, who embodies the devouring aspect of the Great Mother according to Erich Neumann (1955). The witch represents a distortion of the Moon's influence when under the effects of Pluto, as she offers nourishment, yet she is feeding Hansel with the intention of devouring him. This portrays a Moon–Pluto dynamic where attachment transforms into entrapment and care transforms into control. Neumann (1955) identifies this pattern as characteristic of the 'Terrible Mother,' who seeks to absorb life rather than sustain it. This pattern aligns psychologically to enmeshment, emotional manipulation or coercive dependency, where vulnerability is exploited rather than protected.

Imprisoning Hansel in the cage represents Pluto's dominance over the Moon, the cage symbolising the ego trapped within a system of control it cannot escape. Offering a bone instead of his finger in an attempt to survive, can be interpreted through the 'trickster' (Mercury) archetype (Jung CG, 1954; Radin P, 1956). The 'trickster' enables a temporary period for adaptation within an oppressive situation without resolving the underlying condition, as Pluto's influence requires transformation.

The transformation occurs through the intervention of Gretel, who symbolises the psychic ability to integrate these archetypal forces, described as the emergence of the Self, the organising centre capable of holding opposites (Jung CG, 1951). She responds to the witch's command to check the oven by redirecting the situation instead of capitulating, managing to push the witch into the oven.

Here the oven is a symbol of transformation. Jung describes fire as a process whereby psychic material is broken down and reconstituted (Jung CG, 1944). Pushing the witch into the oven represents Saturn–Pluto integration, with Saturn providing the boundary and containment and Pluto providing the force of transformation. The outcome is restoration of the Moon, which

has been transformed. In the fairy tale, Hansel is now free, the children discover treasure and return home transformed by their experiences, having internalised the functions of parenthood due to Gretel embodying the nurturing abilities of the Moon, the authority of Saturn and the transformative force of Pluto. Resolution of the plight in fairy tales often symbolises the successful integration of previously conflicting psychic elements (von Franz ML,1996).

The interaction of Moon, Saturn and Pluto provides a structure for understanding the progress of Hansel and Gretel in the story. The Moon symbolises the initial condition of emotional dependency, Saturn symbolises the deprivation and separation that initiates individuation and Pluto intensifies the experience, forcing the psyche to confront the forces of control and possible annihilation. The integration of Saturn's boundary and Pluto's transformation process enables the Moon's influence to be restored at a higher level.

A 21st CENTURY COMPARISON

A 21st century comparison is offered through the case of two fostered siblings, a sister and her little brother who were removed from their family home and placed in care by social workers when the little girl was two and her brother was only 10 weeks old. The family home had been judged unsuitable because of parental addiction to Class 1 drugs and alcohol. On examination, the children were found to have traces of the drug in their system. There was no warning prior to this forced separation. Jimmy, removed from the family home as a baby, was subsequently diagnosed with foetal alcohol syndrome indicative of lifelong physical, behavioural and cognitive problems as a result of his mother's alcohol consumption during pregnancy. His sister, Lesley, was later diagnosed with attachment disorder. Attachment, a basic human need, develops when an infant instinctively turns to their caregiver for safety and comfort, and the caregiver in response protects and cares for the infant. Not surprisingly, a variety of behaviours may arise after a child suffers the loss of the primary care giver.

The children's initial foster home proved unsuitable, and after several short term foster placements covering a period of 10 months, the children were placed in long term care with their maternal aunt. This placement initially had its difficulties because their aunt, who lived alone, was in full-time employment and required ongoing support; however, she was willing to take the children and provide protection and a continuity of care.

Jimmy, at eleven months, was under-nourished and his sister, Lesley aged three, saw herself as his protector. The children clung to each other in response to the trauma of separation from their family home. Both children had issues around food and were always hungry, illustrating an insatiable need of physical nourishment displacing the emotional nurturing they had lacked. Lesley squirrelled food away in her bedroom, in drawers and under the bed. Her little brother demanded sugary food and drinks. Their aunt, together with the children's mother, had also experienced a variety of foster homes before adoption and had her own insecurities and vulnerability issues, which understandably influenced her relationship with the children. Like Hansel and Gretel, both children had initially experienced emotional neglect and a lack of appropriate motherly care with a forced abandonment. They had also been separated from their father, their mother's partner who, because of his addiction, was complicit in their neglect. Jungian interpretive text tells us that our two main fears are that of being abandoned and that of being overwhelmed by the challenge before us.

The Correspondence of Jimmy's Natal Chart with the Significance of the Moon-Saturn-Pluto Triad in the Hansel and Gretel Fairytale

Jimmy's Natal Chart Indicators

Moon conjunct Saturn (Libra, 4th house) square Pluto (Capricorn, 6th house)

Natal birth chart indicators are likely to manifest, especially in childhood. Jimmy's natal chart indicators suggest that emotional freedom of expression was under-developed. Therefore, because of traumatic life events experienced at such a young age, it was important to encourage activities that would provide a firm grounding in the present and play sessions provided an outlet. Moon/Saturn square Pluto adds underlying powerful feelings of destructive energy with a possible tendency to implode or explode if feeling constrained. This configuration also indicates a strict, distant or absent mother figure, leading to early childhood emotional deprivations or heavy responsibilities.

When offered safe space, children are able to create situations which, to the observer, have no bearing on reality, but which allow the vulnerable child to resolve challenges through play much as the characters in fairy tales, albeit in a non-threatening imaginary situation. This impacts upon everyday life as positive learned behaviour.

Foetal alcohol syndrome, and separation trauma in infancy, had impacted upon Jimmy's emotional development. He was unable to express himself verbally and he demonstrated his feelings through his actions and behaviour. Jimmy experienced a sense of inferiority socially. As a consequence of maternal deprivation, delayed development and constant upheaval in his early life, this little boy had difficulty making sense of his home, his school environment and the world outside. This can be likened to the Grimm's fairy tale symbolism being lost in the forest.

Jimmy was challenged by trying to express his thoughts. His inability to reflect on and articulate his feelings limited his ability to sustain relationships. Jimmy's natal chart suggested limitation regarding social interaction with a potential to withdraw and find pleasure in his own company as a way of coping. Finding a creative outlet through which he could connect positively with others would go some way to helping him to resolve the difficulties resulting from his unsettled foster placements. Visits to a local beauty spot with woods and a stream enabled him to familiarise himself with his unconscious fears. As a little boy on outings to explore the woods, Jimmy loved taking the lead for others to follow when endeavouring to find a pathway that would lead to home. This favourite pastime was reminiscent of Hansel's use of pebbles and bread crumbs to find his way back to his parents.

This 'follow my lead' game helped to build Jimmy's confidence just as Hansel had endeavoured to solve the problem of being lost by finding the way out by himself. Like Hansel, Jimmy collected stones that appealed to him and kept them in a box in his bedroom. However, also like Hansel, Jimmy sometimes had difficulty in assessing risk and would climb play equipment in the park but needed assistance to return to safety. As he grew older, he demonstrated a particular aptitude for ball games and football, which provided a creative outlet, built his confidence and provided opportunities for positively interacting with others. Like Hansel, Jimmy's father was complicit in his son's abandonment and had made no attempt to protect him or fight for his return. Jimmy's chart, with the Moon conjunct Saturn in Libra in the 4th house, symbolises home, roots and family psyche. This is indicative of emotional inhibition, a need to keep the peace, a freeze response to conflict and a hyper awareness of fairness and injustice.

The Correspondence of Lesley's Natal Chart with the Significance of the Moon-Saturn-Pluto Triad in the Hansel and Gretel Fairytale

Lesley's Natal Chart Indicators:

Moon wide conjunction Saturn in Leo on 11th / 12th house cusp, Moon sesquiquadrate Pluto, Saturn trine Pluto in Sagittarius in 4th house

(A sesquiquadrate is an astrological aspect where two celestial bodies are separated by 135 degrees. Often called a 'minor' aspect, it represents underlying tension, frustration and a need for adjustment, acting as a milder version of a square aspect (90°). It signifies a dynamic, sometimes stressful connection requiring effort to resolve.)

In Lesley's natal chart, Pluto brings situations that force confrontation with the deepest fears and insecurities. Moon conjunct Saturn combines the emotional nurturing function of the lunar energy with the restrictions and discipline of Saturnian energies, which can result in a serious, cautious and emotionally reserved personality. In childhood, this combination often results in feeling starved of affection, where high levels of responsibility, maturity and self-reliance are developed, together with a tendency towards pessimism, insecurity and a deep-seated fear of abandonment.

A Moon-Saturn aspect can manifest as emotional restriction, low self-esteem and anxiety, which can result in eating disorders such as strict dieting or emotional eating. This combination often indicates a control mechanism in an attempt to manage inner emotional instability or depression by tightly regulating the body and eating habits.

The imprints of Moon wide conjunct Saturn in Leo on the 11th and 12th house cusp in early childhood, can affect behaviour around food and eating patterns. When Saturn (restriction, control, fear, discipline) sits in wide conjunction to the Moon (mother, nourishment, emotional body) in Leo (visibility, pride, heart expression), and the conjunction straddles the 11th/12th house cusp, the imprint is subtle but deep. Because the aspect is wide, the experience may not be overtly harsh but it is structural and food becomes symbolic.

The Moon suggests food and emotional nourishment because the Moon governs hunger rhythms and early feeding patterns, emotional soothing, attachment and security. When Saturn makes contact with the Moon, the body learns something about limitation or emotional restraint. Like Gretel, lack of appropriate mothering and neglect will exacerbate issues around

food. Abandonment in the forest affirms the requirement to fend for one's self.

As a young child during indoor creative play sessions, Lesley created a house in a make-believe wood where in her fantasy world she lived alone with the forest animals as friends and company. Her habit of secreting food up to her bedroom continued into her teenage years. At the age of 14, because of increasing tension, Lesley left home to live with a friend and her family, returning to the family home two years later. Music was her solace; she had a beautiful singing voice. Guitar and singing lessons at school enabled her at the age of 18 to secure a place studying music and singing. In receipt of ongoing counselling sessions, Lesley is gaining self-worth and autonomy. Both children have survival and trust in authority issues, exacerbated from being unable to trust their parents from infancy. In Lesley's case, her natal chart indicates the possibility of her being able to break generational trauma patterns.

As in the Hansel and Gretel story, traumatic out of the ordinary life events would mean that both Lesley and Jimmy would have a strong sense of having to grow up overnight. Hansel and Gretel can be seen symbolically as a demonstration of psychological development under adverse conditions, where restoration of emotional security is re-created through transformation of dependency and vulnerability into self-reliance and inner strength.

"Jung has said that to be in a situation where there is no way out, or to be in a conflict where there is no solution, is the classical beginning of the process of individuation. It is meant to be a situation without solution: the unconscious wants the hopeless conflict in order to put ego-consciousness up against the wall, so that the man has to realise that whatever he does is wrong, whichever way he decides will be wrong. This is meant to knock out the superiority of the ego, which always acts from the illusion that it has the responsibility of decision." Marie-Louise von Franz, The Interpretation of Fairy Tales 1996 (Revised)

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