

Bluebeard and its multiple layers of meaning

Denise M. Osborne

Doutoranda em Second Language Acquisition and Teaching pela University of Arizona; professora pela University of Wisconsin-Platteville. Mestre em Applied Linguistics pela Columbia University.

E-mail: osbornede@platt.edu

Abstract: This article challenges the position taken by some experts in the field of fairy tales that critics have misinterpreted fairy tales (ZIPES, 2007). I argue that one cannot be sure of the narrator's intention and that the meanings conveyed by a fairy tale can be constructed in different ways (NODELMAN; REIMER, 2003). Supports for this argument come from the analysis of *Bluebeard* (PERRAULT, 2002) from different perspectives: historical (ZIPES, 2006), feminist, and Jungian, (e.g., ESTÉS, 1995), Freudian (e.g., BETTELHEIM, 1977) and Lacanian (HERMANSSON, 2009). Discussions of the various layers of meaning that these approaches might convey are explored. I conclude by showing that *Bluebeard*, a complex work of art, is remarkable for its contemporaneity.

Keywords: *Bluebeard*. Fairy tales. Meanings.

Resumo: Este artigo desafia a posição tomada por alguns especialistas no campo de contos de fadas de que críticos têm interpretações erradas dos contos de fadas (ZIPES, 2007). Argumentam que não podemos ter certeza das intenções do narrador e que os significados transmitidos por um conto de fadas podem ser construídos de formas diversas (NODELMAN; REIMER, 2003). Suportes para este argumento vêm da análise de *O Barba Azul* (PERRAULT, 2002) sob perspectivas diferentes: histórica (ZIPES, 2006), feminista e Jungiana (e.g., ESTÉS, 1995), freudiana (e.g., BETTELHEIM, 1977) e lacanian (HERMANSSON, 2009). Discussões das várias camadas de significação que essas abordagens podem ter são exploradas neste estudo e concluo mostrando que *O Barba Azul*, uma obra de arte complexa, é notável por sua contemporaneidade.

Palavras-chave: Conto de fadas. *O Barba Azul*. Significados.

1 Introduction

Since the first publication of *Bluebeard* in 1697 by Charles Perrault in *Histoires ou contes du temps*, this powerful fairy tale has fascinated and intrigued generations. Although there is some speculation that Perrault's *Bluebeard* was based on fact (e.g., Cunmar the Accursed, who decapitated his pregnant wife; Gilles de Rais, who murdered hundreds of children) (TATAR, 2002), *Bluebeard* "remains a construction of collective fantasy, a figure firmly anchored in the realm of folklore" (p. 146).

Inasmuch as fairy tales have been with us for thousands of years, they have gone through many changes and "it is difficult to determine the ideological intention of the narrator" (ZIPES, 2007, p. 6). In this article, I explore the different approaches that *Bluebeard* has had from a range of different perspectives (e.g., historical, psychological,

and feminist approaches). The article starts by discussing the characteristics of fairy tales in *Bluebeard* (NODELMAN; REIMER, 2003) where the characters, settings, and structure of the story are combined in a way to induce wonder. The various layers of meanings that *Bluebeard* might bring are explored, by reviewing the contributions of experts in fairy tales (e.g., ZIPES, 2007), as well as by scholars in the area of psychology (e.g., BETTELHEIM, 1977). I also include readings from a Jungian perspective (e.g., ESTÉS, 1995), in which fairy tales are representations of *the wild woman* archetype. I conclude by showing that the argument stated by certain experts that critics “have mystified and misinterpreted the fairy tale” (ZIPES, 2007, p. 1) does not really hold, since we cannot know for sure what is the narrator’s intention, nor we can limit the various meanings conveyed by fairy tales (NODELMAN; REIMER, 2003).

2 Characteristics of fairy tales in *Bluebeard*

The way a narrative is organized gives us clues to understand and interpret the text (BLACK, 2006). According to Nodelman and Reimer (2003), we are able to recognize a fairy tale because it has certain characteristics that are peculiar to this genre (e.g., the location and time in fairy tales are a combination of the real world and fantasy; and the characters’ polarity: they are either good or evil). Although *Bluebeard* is a story of horror, we know that it is not real because there is an element of magic: the bleeding key. The way the text starts also signals a fairy tale: “There once lived a man who...” (PERRAULT, 2002, p. 147). Such elements that characterize fairy tales in *Bluebeard* are critically discussed in the section below.

3 Setting

Bluebeard’s (PERRAULT, 2002) story begins as “Here once lived a man who owned grand houses...” (p. 147), showing that time and location are not precise. It is rather an imaginary time and place, where luxurious castles are filled with gold and silver, and rich and poor people are part of them. The timelessness and unspecified location create utopian connotations (ZIPES, 2007, p. 4), which captivate the readers’ imagination. In general, fairy tales begin with vagueness (e.g., *Once upon a time*, *At a time when animals still talked*), which indicates that “we are leaving the concrete world of ordinary reality” (BETTELHEIM, 1977, p. 62).

It is interesting to note that we can also leave the world of “concrete reality” when reading other forms of art, such as the literature of magic realism. In Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1971), for example, there are elements that can be seen as fairy-tale-like throughout his novel (e.g., there is a character who rises into the sky). Márquez also begins the book with a reference to a vague beginning of time: “[...] when the world was so recent that many things lacked names...” (p. 11).

4 Characters

The characters in fairy tales are defined as good or evil. From the beginning, readers are able to recognize who is the hero or heroine and who is the villain. *Bluebeard*

starts with a description of how wealthy Bluebeard is, surrounded by gold and fine tapestries. However, he encounters misfortune: “But this man also had the misfortune of having a blue beard” (PERRAULT, 2002, p. 147). Because of the blue beard, he is considered ugly and women are afraid of him: “women and girls alike fled when they set eyes on him” (p. 147). The blue beard introduces an exotic element to the character; it tells us that there is something out of the ordinary, something not quite right about this picture.

Despite his frightening figure, “a respected woman who lived nearby” (PERRAULT, 2002, p. 147) and her two daughters accepted his invitation to go to his house for a party. After seeing how rich he was, the youngest daughter “began to think that the beard of the lord of the manor was not so blue after all and that he was in fact a fine fellow” (PERRAULT, 2002, p. 148). She then married him. The fairy tale introduces the heroine: a young girl who becomes intrigued by this rich man. She is innocent, and has not yet learned to recognize a predator. She ends up making the wrong choice of marrying the wrong man: “What woman does not recognize this scenario?” (ESTÉS, 1995, p. 46)

The goodness in a character is defined by situation, not by action (NODELMAN; REIMER, 2003). The youngest daughter was in a position of vulnerability, of being abused, of being in danger. She is therefore good. Moreover, in fairy tales, doing nothing confirms the character’s goodness (e.g., *Sleeping Beauty*, who just sleeps).

After defining who is good and who is evil, fairy tales continue in a way that is supposed to sustain our initial assumptions about the characters throughout the entire story: Those who are good remain good; those who are evil remain evil, independent of what they do. The fact that the youngest daughter and her mother were only interested in the lord’s wealth, for example, is not relevant and does not affect the way we see the heroine. The roles of the characters can be considered stable (NODELMAN; REIMER, 2003, p. 315).

Another characteristic of the characters in fairy tales mentioned by Nodelman and Reimer (2003) is that in order to fill the role of a hero or heroine, a character has to be in a lower position, or possess less power, in relation to the evil character. Bluebeard is an older, rich, and a powerful man, whereas his wife is from a lower social stratum and is young and innocent.

This straightforward way of portraying characters (either good or evil) is seen by the child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim (1977) as a symbolic way to help children in their personality development: The characters in fairy tales introduce children to the idea that there are good and evil people, and that one has to make a choice about who he or she wants to be. Since the characters in fairy tales are not ambivalent, but rather defined in terms of polarity (good versus evil), the child can easily comprehend the difference between the two; something that it is much harder to do given the complexities that characterize real people.

It is interesting to note that adults continue using polarity as a way to characterize elements in their lives as being either “good” (we) or “evil” (them), as well as a way to justify their actions (e.g., in the 80s, President Reagan applied the term *evil empire* in reference to the former Soviet Union; in 2002, President George W. Bush used the

term *axis of evil* to refer to Iran, Iraq, and North Korea, which were governments that he accused of helping terrorism).

5 A basic story pattern

Evil has its attraction (e.g., Bluebird is a wealthy and powerful man who lives in a castle surrounded by gold and silver). Evil is also situated in the ascendancy at the beginning of fairy tales. However, fairy tales being what they are, we know that evil will be defeated at the end. The hero's path from a position of powerlessness to a position of power is a typical fairy-tale pattern. For Bettelheim (1977), children are attracted to the hero or heroine because they identify themselves with the hero and his or her struggles. The children suffer with the hero and, at the end, the children triumph with him or her. According to Bettelheim, fairy tales have a positive impact in children's psychological development because, among other reasons, at the end of fairy tales, the hero is rewarded whereas the evil character receives his or her deserved punishment, "thus satisfying the child's deep need for justice to prevail" (p. 144) (e.g., on an unconscious level, the child learns that, in spite of all his or her troubles, good things will come at the end).

Bettelheim (1977) argues that fairy tales have an impact on children's psychological development on an unconscious level. The child follows the hero's struggles in which he or she gains maturity. Through the characters, the child projects him or herself and understands his or her own struggles and processes of growth, although the child is not aware of these inner processes. The wife in *Bluebeard* goes through a process of maturity: At the beginning of her life in the castle, she had everything that the money could buy. Her life was stable and predictable. When she opens the forbidden door, she allows a change to start in her life, even though she does not know what is behind the door. She loses her innocence, but she gains knowledge. It is a painful process that almost costs her her life. This process of development from the pleasure principle to the reality principle (p. 43) tells the children about their own development, without actually talking about it.

However, there are other approaches to fairy tales that raise questions about the assumption of their positive impact on our lives: In our real world, good does not always win and, oftentimes, it is quite difficult to ascribe pure "good" and pure "evil" to either side of a conflict. Moreover, fairy tales may cause confusion between reality and fantasy. The feminist approach, for example, argues that a naïve reader of fairy tales "supports the paradigm of female impotence and reliance on external agents for rescue in the real world" (NODELMAN; REIMER, 2003, p. 317). Not all feminist approaches to fairy tales appear to share these ideas. Estés (1995), for example, sees fairy tales as a symbolic description of women in reconnection to their instinctual nature, which she calls *the wild woman*. For her, fairy tales are stories that inspire women to regain their energy and wisdom, connecting them to their true nature.

6 *Bluebeard in contrast with other canonical fairy tales*

Fairy tales start with an unhappy situation at home (e.g., *Cinderella*), and end with a marriage that will last forever. In *Bluebeard*, the story starts with a young woman leaving the safety of her home and marrying a wealthy man, which departs from the traditional fairy tale. Marriage is not seen as living happily ever after. *Bluebeard* is “more a cautionary tale about marriage than a celebration of marital bliss” (TATAR, 2002, p. 145). For Tatar, this “story may have served as a cautionary fable to young women against marrying wealthy men with a past” (p. 156).

7 *Layers of meanings*

Although fairy tales can have different interpretations, most of these approaches seem to have something in common: the view that fairy tales are a symbolic representation of reality. For Estés (1995), many women have lived the *Bluebeard* story: Still very young and naïve, they have married someone destructive in their lives. And, although they could see that the beard is blue, they might have spent much time saying “His beard isn’t really so blue” (p. 50).

Bluebeard is full of symbolic elements. Next section, I explore some of the possible layers of meanings that we can draw from the main elements of this fairy tale.

Figura 1 – A 19th-century illustration of Bluebeard, his wife and the key by Gustave Doré. The eyes of the wife fixed on the key reveals her attraction to the forbidden whereas Bluebeard’s eyes convey menace.



Source: Google Images (Public Domain)

8 *The key*

The most fascinating part of *Bluebeard* occurs when the wife opens the door to the forbidden room. The wife disobeyed her husband who gave her the keys and told her she was forbidden to enter a certain small room. One might think that if Bluebeard didn't want his wife to go into that room, why did he give her the key? One assumption is that, in fact, he expected her to disobey. She was young, and he, being a mature older man, would know that she would be curious about the forbidden room. My reading is that Bluebeard marries his wife having her future execution in mind.

On the other hand, one might argue that the key represents a test of fidelity and obedience. Estés (1995) argues that Bluebeard gives his wife a false sense of freedom when he tells her that she could go into any room, and that she could invite her family and friends to stay with her while he is away. However, she is not really free because there is always the forbidden room: The key is a reminder of that.

When the wife opens the door and sees a number of women's bodies hanging from the walls and the floor covered with blood, she is so afraid that she drops the key in the blood. She then picks up the key and leaves. She tries to clean the key, but the blood on the key does not go away. The key is bleeding.

The key can be seen as a sign of disobedience or transgression; it can also be seen as a sign that one should not trust her husband (TATAR, 2002, p. 151). Estés (1995) refers to the key as *the key of knowing* (p. 50) because this key would give the wife consciousness. She could choose not to open the door and live as a naïve young woman, following her husband's rules. Instead, she has chosen to open the door of truth.

The key is enchanted and does not stop bleeding: For Bettelheim (1977), *Bluebeard* can be considered a fairy tale only because of the bleeding key. Otherwise, it would have been only a monstrous horror story. Bettelheim sees the key as associated with the male sexual organ, "particularly the first intercourse when the hymen is broken and blood gets on it" (p. 301). In other words, the blood symbolizes that the woman has had sexual relations. For Bettelheim (p. 302), the blood on the key is a representation of the wife's sexual indiscretion. The jealous husband seems to believe that the wife deserves a severe punishment.

Before leaving, Bluebeard warns his wife that "if you open it [the door] so much as a crack, nothing will protect you from my wrath" (PERRAULT, 2002, p. 150). Although the wife knows that she has disobeyed her husband and that there will be some type of punishment, she does not leave the castle or look for help. She does not confide in her sister Anne. On the contrary, her intention is to pretend that nothing has happened. For Bettelheim (1977, p. 301), her behavior suggests two possibilities: What she sees in the forbidden room is the creation of her own anxious fantasies, or that she has betrayed her husband and hopes that no one will find out.

On the other hand, Estés (1995) sees the act of disobeying as essential in order to go after the truth. The door is a psychic barrier. When the wife opens that door, she loses her innocence. She gets to know the truth, and she thus begins her maturity. The key does not stop bleeding; the young wife cannot return to her naïve nature. "When she noticed that the key to the room was stained with blood, she wiped it two or three times, but the blood would not go away" (PERRAULT, 2002, p. 151). Seeing the truth is

painful. One bleeds. One loses energy. One must stop the pain, try to go back to the early stage, where there was no pain.

Bluebeard comes back from his trip unexpectedly: “His wife did everything she could to make it appear that she was delighted with his early return” (PERRAULT, 2002, p. 152). A woman can hide the devastation in her life and pretend that everything is all right; however, the bleeding key will be there as a reminder of what is in the secret room. After seeing the chamber of death, one cannot pretend that it doesn’t exist. In this sense, the blood also represents life and energy. Estés (1995) argues that after entering the room and getting to know the truth, the naïve wife begins to die, but a new life also flourishes.

Philip Lewis (HERMANSSON, 2009) gives a Lacanian interpretation of the key in *Bluebeard*. For him, the key offered to the wife by Bluebeard represents his superiority (he has knowledge and the wife is excluded) and the wife’s inferiority (he and the wife are not the same). The blood on the key indicates that now she also has knowledge; she has had erased the difference between them, and Bluebeard’s knowledge is now her own. Bluebeard refuses to recognize her construction of identity. In order to mark the difference between them, Bluebeard has to kill his wife, which would mark the return of the wife to her previous stage. For Lewis, the key has two sides because, at one and the same time, it “reveals parallel crimes (murder; discovery of murder), further conflating the difference in their identities into sameness” (p. XVII).

9 *The male key*

Zipes (2006) takes a different stand on *Bluebeard*. For him, Perrault took motifs from French folklore and created this story¹ to debate masculine domination and the role of men and women during Louis XIV’s reign. For Zipes, in order to understand *Bluebeard*, one has to understand the socio-historical context at the time. In the seventeenth-century, France had numerous writings by men about women’s sexual and social roles and male fears of the growing power of women. *Bluebeard* reflects “a major crisis of phallotocracy” (p. 163). For example (p. 162), by ordering his wife not to open the room, Bluebeard shows his power and control. In this sense, the secret does not exist; there is no secret. Bluebeard, like all men, has no power, is impotent, and does not control women. In order to have a sense of power, men apply calculating manipulation to control their wives and children. Zipes argues that by canceling the wife’s knowledge of power, men maintain the myth of superior power. He argues that the grounds for masculine superiority are groundless, and that is something that disturbed Perrault and other male writers of the seventeenth century. (One might want to expand this interpretation to other types of unbalanced power relationships, such as how dictators impose their own views on their societies and that becomes the norm.)

In *Bluebeard*, the wife is saved by other men (her brothers). Later, she is married again, to “a very worthy man, who helped her banish the memory of the terrible days she had spent with Bluebeard” (PERRAULT, 2002, p. 156). Zipes (2006) argues that,

¹ There is no clear evidence that there was an oral tale that served as a model for *Bluebeard* (ZIPES, 2006, p. 158).

from a male viewpoint, women have two choices: “either gloss over their discovery of male impotence and accept their civil role of domesticity [...] or they must calculate how to act to save themselves when the male miscalculates his power” (p. 165).

10 *The room*

“At first she could not see anything, for the windows were shuttered. After a few minutes it dawned on her that the floor was sticky with clotted blood [...]” (PERRAULT, 2002, p. 151). The wife could have chosen to obey her husband and remain naïve. Instead, she follows her intuition and chooses to take the risk. The door of the forbidden room separates her two selves: the one who is the obedient wife and does not question the order; and the other, who represents the one who transgresses in order to discover the truth. Choosing to obey the predator would mean to choose death. Choosing to open the door is choosing life and represents the beginning of an inner change. However, this internal change is not easy: “At first she could not see anything” (PERRAULT, 2002, p. 151). Facing the truth is difficult; it takes a while for the truth to sink in. The wife, however, stays in the room. As Estés (1995, p. 53) points out, “the ability to stand what one sees enables a woman to return to her deep nature,” which means, her true self.

Bluebeard symbolizes the predator, the dark man who inhibits and controls women. All women must learn that predators exist: This is the first step in order to be able to protect oneself of knowing how to negotiate and escape from danger. (In *Bluebeard*, the wife asks him for a time to pray. In this way, she gains some time, which allows her brothers to come and save her life.) Bluebeard’s character can also be seen as representation of obstacles that force women to make hard choices: Stay naïve or facing the truth.

11 *Women and curiosity*

In Perrault’s version, there is a good deal of emphasis on the wife’s disobedience. Perrault chose to highlight the act of insubordination. His version of *Bluebeard*, for instance, ends with a short poem which says that curiosity always “*proves very costly*” (TATAR, 2002, p. 156). The act of disobeying in order to know the truth reminds us of biblical and mythological figures, such as Pandora, who opens her box, thus releasing the evils of mankind; and of Eve, who tries the forbidden fruit and, because of that, humankind has to pay a high price.

Bluebeard has gone on for a trip and left all the keys with his wife, including the key to the forbidden room. The wife, however, “was tormented by her curiosity” (PERRAULT, 2002, p. 151). She leaves the guests in her house and races down the stairs “so fast that more than once she was afraid she was going to break her neck” (PERRAULT, 2002, p. 151). Perrault emphasizes the wife’s curiosity in a negative way. Many nineteenth-century dramatizations of *Bluebeard* had subtitles, such as *The Consequences of Curiosity* or *The Hazards of Female Curiosity* (TATAR, 2002, p. 154). Estés (1995) argues that women’s curiosity has had a negative connotation and the trivialization of women’s curiosity denies them insight and intuitions (p. 51). What *Bluebeard* tells us is

that the wife's natural curiosity leads her to the discovery of what lies beyond the appearance of things, bringing knowledge and consciousness to herself.

Estés (1995) goes further in her interpretation. For her, when a woman leaves her stage of naiveté, she gains an internal masculine energy called *animus*. In Jungian psychology, *animus* appears in fairy tales and dream symbols as the husband, lover, son, stranger, etc. It can be a comfort or a threatening presence, depending on the woman's psychic circumstances. According to Estés, the masculine energy in *Bluebeard* is symbolized by the wife's brothers, who come to kill her husband and save her. A woman with a poorly developed *animus* is unable to manifest her ideas and materialize her thoughts. A woman who possess *animus*, on the other hand, is able to accomplish her goals. After the death of Bluebeard, his wife takes control of her life: "[...] his wife was able to take possession of his entire fortune. She used some of it to marry her sister [...]. The rest she used to marry herself to a very worthy man [...]" (PERRAULT, 2002, p. 156).

12 Conclusion

Bluebeard is a complex fairy tale with a range of intriguing interpretations. A feminist approach sees *Bluebeard* as a tale of domestic violence and the corporal punishment of wives. A Jungian view sees Bluebeard as a predator of the psyche; in this view, every woman has to learn how deal with this inner predator in order to develop a relationship with her true self or, as Estés (1995, p. 43) puts it, "a relationship with the wildish nature" of women. In a Freudian interpretation, *Bluebeard* is about sexual indiscretion and the anger of being sexually betrayed. From a Lacanian perspective, *Bluebeard* is about power and the refusal of sharing knowledge. Zipes (2006), on the other hand, talks about the male key, in which *Bluebeard* is a reflection of the fear that men had of women's power in Perrault's time. *Bluebeard* can also be seen as a cautionary tale about a young and naïve woman who marries an older man with a past. *Bluebeard* is also about making choices and facing the truth, as well as the inner processes of awareness. It is about leaving behind a state of innocence and foolishness and advancing toward freedom, in search of who we really are.

Fairy tales are a very special form of art: Although they may go back hundreds of years, they are always contemporary. For children, fairy tales help them cultivate the imagination and, as Bettelheim (1977) argues, contribute psychologically to their inner growth. For adults, fairy tales are enjoyable and can help us understand the world and ourselves. And, if we pay attention to life, we will perceive that we cannot only see reality in fairy tales, we can also see fairy tales in real life.

The wedding of Diana and Prince Charles in 1981 was seen by people around the world as a fairy tale come true. Diana was brought to St. Paul's Cathedral in a glass horse-drawn carriage and when she left the carriage she was wearing an astonishing dress with a 25-foot (8-meter) train. In 2011, her son, Prince William and Kate Middleton, celebrated their own wedding, which was televised and seen by more than two billion people around the world, showing the fairy-tale spirit is alive among us.

Fairy tales can also be seen in reverse: Sarah Ferguson, who had been married to Prince Andrew, was caught trying to sell information about her ex-husband to some

undercover reporters. She was in a precipitous decline from grace, thus incarnating a kind of fairy-tale-in-reverse. On a more positive note, who didn't think of *The Ugly Duckling* when Susan Boyle sang and stunned a television audience in England? Or, when Ted Williams, who had lived as a homeless person for twenty years, shocked the world with his "golden voice"?

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