Dictionary of Semiotics

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A Semiotic Analysis
of
Sleeping Beauty
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Sleeping Beauty*

There once lived a King and Queen who were very unhappy because they had no children. They had been married a long time and had almost given up hope when, to the Queen's great joy, she found she was going to have a baby.

Not long after the baby, a beautiful daughter, was born, the King and Queen arranged a huge Christening party. All the fairies in the kingdom were invited, for the King and Queen knew that they would each give a wonderful gift to the new princess. All that is, except one, whom nobody liked because she was so bad-tempered.

After a magnificent feast, the fairies began to offer their gifts. The first fairy gave the gift of Beauty, the second gave Happiness, the others gave Goodness, Health, Gracefulness and Kindness. The seventh fairy was just stepping forward when the door burst open. In rushed the bad-tempered fairy, furious that she had not been invited to the Christening. Everyone shrank back as she rushed up to the cradle.

'On your sixteenth birthday you will prick your finger with a spindle and die', she hissed spitefully at the baby princess, before disappearing in a puff of smoke. Everyone shivered with horror, but at that moment the seventh fairy, who was also the youngest, stepped forward.

'Take heart', she said to the King and Queen. 'Your daughter will not die. My magic isn't strong enough to break the wicked spell but I can weaken the evil. Instead of dying, the princess will fall asleep for a hundred years.'

The King, hoping to save his daughter, immediately ordered every spinning wheel and spindle in the land to be burned.

For fifteen years, everything went well. The princess grew into the most beautiful, the kindest, the most graceful child anyone had ever seen.

At last, the day of her sixteenth birthday arrived. The King and Queen held a magnificent party for her in their castle. They thought

* Taken from Tim and Jenny Wood, Favourite Fairy Tales (London: Conran Octopus, 1988), pp. 4-7.
that this would stop her from finding a spindle on that day and so protect her from the wicked fairy's curse. After the feast, the princess asked if they could all play hide-and-seek.

When it was her turn to hide, the princess ran to the far corner of the castle and found a small doorway she had never seen before. She climbed a spiral staircase to a high tower thinking that this would be a wonderful place to hide. When she reached the top, she found a little room. Inside was an old woman sitting at a spinning wheel.

'What are you doing?' asked the princess, fascinated by the twirling wheel and the whirling spindle, for, of course, she had never seen anything like it.

'I am spinning', replied the old lady cunningly, for she was the wicked fairy in disguise. 'Would you like to try?'

The princess sat down and took the spindle. No sooner had she picked it up than the point of the spindle pricked her finger. At once she fell to the ground as if she were dead. The wicked fairy's curse had come true.

But the good fairy's spell came true, too, for the princess was not dead, only sleeping. Immediately everyone else in the castle fell asleep as well. The King and Queen nodded off on their thrones. The guests dozed off as they looked for the princess. The cook started snoring in front of her oven. All over the castle, nothing could be heard but the gentle sounds of hundreds of people sleeping.

As the years passed by, a great hedge of thorns grew up around the castle. Nearly everyone forgot about the King and Queen and their beautiful daughter.

But one day, a hundred years later, a young prince rode by and saw the great hedge of thorns. He stopped and asked an old man what was behind it. The old man told the prince about the castle. The prince was excited by the story and, impatient to find out whether it was true, he drew his sword and started to hack at the briars.

To his surprise, the thorns seemed to part in front of him and in a very short time he had reached the castle. He went through the open door and was amazed to see all the people inside fast asleep. Every single thing was covered in dust and there were huge cobwebs hanging from the ceiling. He explored all the rooms in turn and finally climbed a spiral staircase to the top of a high tower. There, in a small room, lying on the floor, was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. She was so lovely that, without thinking, he leaned forward and kissed her.
Immediately his lips touched hers, the spell was broken and the princess opened her eyes. The first thing she saw was the handsome prince. As the prince and princess gazed at each other, they fell in love on the spot.

The prince led the princess gently down the spiral staircase. All around them they could hear the sound of the castle coming to life. The prince asked the King and Queen for permission to marry their beautiful daughter. They agreed, and soon plans were being made for the wedding.

The seven good fairies were invited to the wedding feast. They wished the princess and her prince a long and happy life together.

As for the wicked fairy, nobody knew what happened to her, but she was never heard of again!
The semiotic method presented below has been used for several years now in the teaching of literature to university and other students. The approach has yielded outstanding results, proving itself to be particularly effective in the uncovering of the multiplicity of meanings within – and beyond – the text. When applied to opening paragraphs, the method has also provided a means of access to difficult and challenging works (Calvino, Sartre, etc.). The intention of the present authors, however, is not to be prescriptive: semiotic analysis is open-ended and flexible and can be adopted to meet specific requirements. For instance, a student may wish to concentrate on a particular aspect of a novel such as the treatment of place or of time. In this case the analysis – especially of the discursive level – will restrict itself to these components and it will not be necessary to list all the figurative isotopies. Similarly, depending on the nature of the text, a student may wish to concentrate more time and energy on one level of meaning (see below) than another. S/he may even feel it necessary to omit a particular methodological device (e.g. the semiotic square) if its application to the text yields little of interest or relevance.

Our semiotic analysis of *Sleeping Beauty*, then, will start with a reminder that, in contrast to more traditional literary approaches, semiotics postulates the existence of different levels of meaning. Any analysis of a story will begin, therefore, with what is known as the discursive level, that is, with an examination of the specific words – grammatical items/structures – that are visible on the surface of the text. It will then proceed through a process of decoding to uncover ever deeper and more abstract layers of meaning until we arrive at what Greimas terms the elementary structure of meaning. For precise details on the models used in the analysis of the different textual levels, please turn to the Introduction (pp. 7–13). We will now begin with an examination of the discursive level and focus in the first place on the figurative component of the text.
The discursive level

The figurative component

Figurative elements are those elements in a text that correspond to the concrete physical world and that can be apprehended by the five senses. They are essential ingredients in the construction of a reality effect or illusion of a real world. In other words, their primary function is to create an impression of time, of place and of character.

Let us begin by exploring the vocabulary of Sleeping Beauty and grouping together notations relating to place (including objects), time and actors (characters). These groupings of words with similar meanings (i.e. with at least one meaning in common) are known as lexical fields, or, in more strictly semiotic terms, figurative isotopies. The words ‘house’, ‘shop’, ‘street’, for instance, have the meaning ‘city’ in common (‘city’ is the common denominator): we say, therefore, that these lexical items belong to the isotopy of the ‘city’.

Figurative isotopies in Sleeping Beauty (page numbers)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Objects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>kingdom 145</td>
<td>gift 145 (3 ×)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>land 145</td>
<td>spindle 145 (2 ×), 146 (4 ×)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cradle 145</td>
<td>spinning wheel 145, 146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>castle 145, 146 (6 ×), 147</td>
<td>thrones 146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>door/doorway 145, 146 (2 ×)</td>
<td>oven 146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>place to hide 146</td>
<td>dust 146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inside 146 (2 ×)</td>
<td>cobwebs 146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>top 146 (2 ×)</td>
<td>sword 146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>room 146 (3 ×)</td>
<td>every single thing 146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>spiral staircase 146 (2 ×), 147</td>
<td>thorns 146 (3 ×)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>floor 146</td>
<td>briars 146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ceiling 146</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ground 146</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>down 146, 147</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>high tower 146 (2 ×)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dictionary of semiotics

Time
once 145, 146
a long time 145
at that moment 145
sixteenth birthday 145 (2 x)
for fifteen years 145
a hundred years 145, 146
immediately 145, 146, 147
on that day 146
after the feast 146
no sooner 146
at once 146
in a very short time 146
finally 146
as the years passed 146
but one day 146

Actors (characters)

King 145 (6 x), 146 (2 x), 147
Queen 145 (7 x), 146 (2 x), 147
children 145
baby 145 (3 x)
daughter 145 (3 x), 146, 147
princess 145 (4 x), 146 (6 x), 147 (4 x)
the fairies 145 (2 x)
seven good fairies 147
bad-tempered fairy 145 (2 x)
wicked fairy 146 (3 x), 147
seventh fairy 145 (2 x)

everyone 145 (2 x), 146 (2 x)
nobody 145, 147
guests 146
cook 146
hundreds of people 146
prince 146 (3 x), 147 (5 x)
old man 146 (2 x)
all 145 (2 x), 146 (2 x)
all the people 146
old woman/lady 146 (2 x)
girl 146

The following isotopies also contribute to the construction of a reality effect:

States of being
born 145
will fall asleep 145
only sleeping 146
fell asleep 146
hundreds of people sleeping 146
opened her eyes 147
and die 145
as if she were dead 146
fast asleep 146
nodded off 146
snoring 146
Looking back at these lists of figurative isotopies, the reader may be struck by the relatively sparse nature of the references to place and to objects. Indeed, in keeping with the timeless nature of fairy-tales, it is left to the reader’s imagination to fill in the descriptive details – appearance of actors, etc. – and to locate the action within a more specific cultural and historical setting.

Having extracted and made lists of the principal isotopies, the next stage in our analysis will be to look for oppositions. These oppositions can be found (a) either within the individual isotopies or (b) between one isotopy and another.

**Oppositions**

**Place:** within this isotopy the following oppositions can be discerned:

1. **high** versus **low**
   - high tower
   - the top
   - ceiling
   - up
   - castle
   - ground
   - floor
   - down

2. **wild/natural** versus **cultivated/artificial**
   - briars
   - hedge of thorns
   - hacked
   - castle
   - door/doorway
   - room/tower
   - spiral staircase

3. **outside** versus **inside**
   - outside
   - hedge of thorns
   - inside
   - castle
   - door/doorway

With indications of time, there is an opposition between durativeness (a continual process) and punctuality (happening at one particular moment in time):
For *actors*, the key oppositions that emerge are old versus young, fairies versus humans, male versus female:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>old</th>
<th>versus</th>
<th>young</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>old woman/lady</td>
<td></td>
<td>baby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>old man</td>
<td></td>
<td>daughter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>fairies</th>
<th>versus</th>
<th>humans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>all the fairies</td>
<td></td>
<td>King and Queen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>seventh fairy</td>
<td></td>
<td>daughter/princess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bad-tempered/ wicked fairy</td>
<td></td>
<td>old lady/guests/cook</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>male</th>
<th>versus</th>
<th>female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>king</td>
<td></td>
<td>Queen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prince</td>
<td></td>
<td>daughter/princess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>old man</td>
<td></td>
<td>bad-tempered fairy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Within this isotopy of the actors there is also an opposition between plural and singular. Notations such as 'all the fairies', 'everyone', 'all the people', 'all the rooms' are contrasted with references to individual people and places.

And finally, within the isotopy of states of being, notations of 'death' are contrasted with those of 'life'; notations of 'sleep' with those of 'awake'.

We must now ask ourselves: What do these oppositions signify? With what values are they being invested by the narrator? As Denis Bertrand has commented, the figurative level makes no sense on its
own, it only acquires meaning in relationship to a subject – the narrator – and to the feelings and judgements of this narrator. It is at this point in our analysis, therefore, that we bring to bear what is known as the thymic category – the category related to the world of emotions/feelings and situated at the deep level of the utterance. This category is articulated in the opposition euphoria versus dysphoria (pleasant versus unpleasant) and gives rise to a basic positive/negative evaluation.

In *Sleeping Beauty* the opposition euphoria versus dysphoria is of particular significance in the construction of the actors. As is customary in the fairy-tale, divisions between pleasant and unpleasant, happy and sad, positive and negative are very clear-cut and unambiguous. The reader is left in no doubt as to where her/his sympathies should lie.

Bearing this in mind, we can extract the following isotopies and oppositions:

(1) The isotopy of the emotions with the opposition euphoria versus dysphoria:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>euphoria</th>
<th>versus</th>
<th>dysphoria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>joy</td>
<td></td>
<td>unhappy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>happiness</td>
<td></td>
<td>bad-tempered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>excited</td>
<td></td>
<td>furious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>surprise</td>
<td></td>
<td>spitefully</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>amazed</td>
<td></td>
<td>hissed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fell in love</td>
<td></td>
<td>with horror</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>happy life</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here positive emotions are associated with one group of actors – the King, Queen, Princess, Prince and seven fairies – whereas the negative are linked (with one exception at the beginning) with the wicked fairy. A process of evaluation is clearly taking place, producing a second grouping:

(2) The isotopy of evaluative terms (physical and moral) with the opposition positive versus negative:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>physical</th>
<th>versus</th>
<th>negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>positive</td>
<td></td>
<td>negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beautiful</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beauty</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lovely</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wonderful</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Positive physical terms are associated with the princess – beauty, grace, health. These are coupled with positive moral terms: goodness, kindness. The prince is described as handsome but he is not invested explicitly with any moral attributes. Implicitly, however, he could be linked to curiosity (‘impatient to find out whether it was true’, p. 146) and determination. The other actors in the story are devoid of any physical attributes. The fairies, for example, are evoked in exclusively moral terms: the seven good fairies and the one wicked one.

**Figurativity and grammatical/syntactical features**

The illusion of the real may be strengthened through the use of linguistic devices such as repetition, ellipsis, active/passive, nominalization and cohesive markers. In our particular version of *Sleeping Beauty*, adapted for very young children, the sentence structure is very simple. What is striking is the frequent use of temporal connectors, particularly at the beginning of sentences, for instance: ‘there once’, ‘not long after’, ‘after a magnificent feast’, ‘on your sixteenth birthday’, ‘for fifteen years’, ‘at last’, ‘no sooner’, ‘at once’, ‘immediately’, ‘as the years passed by’. The effect is to heighten the drama and pace of a narrative in which the passage of time is itself an important theme.

Another interesting device is the use of repetition – a characteristic feature of writing for children. Nouns are frequently employed to refer to people where it would be more customary to use a pronoun. For instance, the terms ‘the wicked fairy’ and ‘the good fairy’ are repeated in close proximity. The effect once more is to heighten the drama by foregrounding the opposition between good and evil. A sense of symmetry is conveyed, of a universe that is highly ordered. The almost incantatory repetition of these two sets of terms in the last paragraph
has the effect of reassuring the child that the threat has been lifted, and that the good is restored.

Further linguistic devices worthy of attention include the use of lists (e.g. 'The King and Queen . . ., The guests . . ., The cook . . .', p. 146), the frequent positioning of the subject (human) at the beginning of a sentence and finally, the marked preference for the active voice.

**The enunciative component**

The enunciative strategies are clearly those of traditional story-telling. The narrator is third-person and extra-diegetic (i.e. not an actor in the story). This hidden narrator is also omniscient in that the reader has access to the thoughts and emotions of all the actors. The story is told in the past, we are kept at a distance from the events recounted; indeed, telling itself becomes a narrative motif: it is the old man's account of what happened in the castle that prompts the prince to embark on his quest.

Looking at the use of modality – the degree of the speaker's adherence to a statement – the utterances are of a categorical nature. They express certainty on the part of the narrator, there are no tentative utterances suggesting probability or possibility. An impression of narratorial distance and of complete objectivity is thereby conveyed.

At the same time, however, the presence of a narrator – of a subjectivity – can be discerned indirectly in the abundant use of evaluative terms. The sharp divisions between positive and negative, good and evil that we analysed above suggest a particular interpretation of reality or vision of the world.

The enunciative strategies employed in *Sleeping Beauty* thus contribute to a strong sense of reality and to a fictive world whose authenticity is never open to doubt or to questioning. The explicit and clearly delineated categorization – whether in terms of space, time or the actors – serves to reassure the reader, and the child in particular, suggesting a world that is stable and inherently meaningful.

**The narrative level**

The next stage in our analysis will be an examination of what is known as the narrative level. More abstract than the figurative, this is the level of story-structure proper, that is, the level at which operate underlying universal narrative models. (See also Introduction, pp. 9-12.)
These models can be applied globally to a whole story and/or they can be applied to smaller units or episodes. In order to decide on our approach, it may be helpful to answer the following question: What is (are) the principal event(s)? In other words, what is (are) the principal transformation(s)? If we are having difficulty in selecting key transformations, it may be useful to try to summarize the plot in one or two sentences. It may also help to look at the end of the story – the final event – and compare it with the beginning.

In *Sleeping Beauty* two principal transformations are apparent:

1. the princess pricks her finger and falls to sleep for a hundred years;

2. after a hundred years a prince arrives, wakes her (breaks the spell) and marries her.

These transformations are also marked on the surface level by actorial and temporal disjunctions: after the feast (her birthday party), the princess meets an apparently new actor (an old woman) who gives her the spindle with which she pricks her finger (p. 146); another new actor (the prince) arrives on the scene ‘one day, a hundred years later’ (p. 146). The story thus falls neatly into two parts or two major episodes (narrative programmes). Our analysis will therefore mirror this pattern. The divisions will be: Part 1: from the beginning to ‘Nearly everyone forgot about the King and Queen and their beautiful daughter’ (p. 146); Part 2: from ‘But one day, a hundred years later’ (p. 146) to the end.

We begin by examining the distribution in each of the two parts of the text of the six/seven key narrative roles outlined in the *actantial narrative schema* (see also Introduction, pp. 9-10):

\[
\text{sender} \quad \text{object} \quad \text{receiver}
\]

\[
\text{helper} \quad \text{subject} \quad \text{opponent} \quad \text{and anti-subject}
\]

The following questions should be asked of the text:

1. Who (person or persons) is the subject of the quest? The subject is usually the main protagonist but the role can also be enacted by a group of people such as the miners in Zola’s *Germinal*.  

---

**Dictionary of semiotics**

- **sender**
- **receiver**
- **object**
- **helper**
- **subject**
- **opponent**
- **anti-subject**
2. Who or what is the object of the quest? Is there more than one object? The object may be concrete, such as money, or abstract, such as knowledge.

3. Does the subject have helpers and/or opponents? If so, who or what are they?

4. Who is the anti-subject and what is the goal of the anti-subject's quest? An anti-subject, unlike an opponent, possesses its own goal or quest which is in opposition to that of the subject.

5. Who or what is the sender? In other words: what motivates the quest of the subject?

In Part 1 of *Sleeping Beauty* the distribution of narrative roles can be envisaged as follows:

**Subject:** the subject of the quest is the collective actor, the King and Queen.

**Object:** the quest has two objects, one concrete (or pragmatic) and one abstract (or cognitive). Concrete: to preserve the life of their daughter and to prevent the wicked fairy's spell from coming true. Abstract: to protect their daughter from all evil and to preserve the gifts/values of Beauty, Happiness, Goodness, Health, Gracefulness and Kindness that she embodies. To see the triumph of good over evil.

**Helper:** an implied helper are the subjects of the King and Queen who try to burn all the spinning wheels in the land. The magnificent party on the princess's sixteenth birthday is also designed as a helper: 'they thought that this would stop her from finding a spindle on that day' (pp. 145-6).

**Opponent:** the princess's desire to play hide-and-seek as well as her curiosity concerning the spinning wheel function as opponents.

**Sender:** the sender of the parents' quest to preserve the life of their daughter is the wicked fairy's curse that the good fairy can only weaken.

**Anti-subject:** the principal anti-subject is the wicked fairy herself, who, in the guise of an old woman, lures the princess into touching the...
spinning wheel. The object of her quest is the destruction of the princess's life, that is, her goal is in conflict with that of the King and Queen. Her own sender is her desire for revenge.

The quest of the King and Queen fails: they do not succeed in protecting their daughter from evil. The quest of the wicked fairy succeeds (partially) in that the princess pricks her finger and falls to the ground 'as if she were dead' (p. 146). The quest of the good fairy also succeeds, however, in that the princess sleeps rather than dies. To put more abstractly, the values of Beauty, Happiness, Goodness, Heath, Gracefulness and Kindness lie dormant rather than being destroyed altogether.

Having examined the distribution of narrative roles in Part 1 of Sleeping Beauty, we go on to divide the quest into a number of logical stages in accordance with the canonical narrative schema. (See also Introduction, pp. 11-12.) These stages are:

The contract

The contract is enacted in two episodes in the text: (1) the wicked fairy's curse and (2) the good fairy's desire to weaken the curse by changing death to sleep. By pronouncing the curse whose effect the good fairy can only mitigate, the wicked fairy incites in the King and Queen the desire and necessity to protect their daughter (both from death and falling to sleep): 'hoping to save his daughter' (p. 145) and implicitly to preserve the gifts she embodies. The King and Queen, now in possession of the modality of wanting-to-do and of having-to-do, become virtual subjects of a global narrative programme or quest.

The qualifying test

Hoping to acquire the ability to carry out his quest (a being-able-to-do), the King orders every spindle in the land to be burnt. However, his efforts meet only with partial success: we learn later that not all the spindles are destroyed. His competence is undermined by an anti-subject, the wicked fairy. Her intention is to harm the princess and, being in possession of supernatural, magic powers, she is stronger than the King.
The decisive test

The arrival and celebration of the princess's sixteenth birthday is the principal event (transformation) towards which the whole story has been moving; it is also the moment of confrontation between two opposing parties or forces. In this confrontation it is the wicked fairy – with her lure – who prevails over the father's attempts to protect his daughter.

The glorifying test

It is at this stage in the quest that the reader learns of the outcome of the decisive test, whether, for example, it has failed or succeeded. In other words, it is at this point that the decisive action is being evaluated. The princess falls asleep: it can be said, therefore, that the parents have failed in their quest to protect their daughter from the effects of evil. The narrator interprets the action of falling asleep as follows: 'At once she fell to the ground as if she were dead. The wicked fairy’s curse had come true.' And the next paragraph adds: 'But the good fairy’s spell came true, too, for the princess was not dead, only sleeping' (p. 146).

This global narrative programme of the quest in the first part of the story is preceded by a couple of significant episodes (smaller narrative programmes). We recall here that a narrative programme designates a narrative unit expressing a transformation in the relationship between a subject and an object.

At the very beginning of the tale, the King and Queen are introduced as disjoined from their objects of value: a child and happiness. At the end of the paragraph, they are presented as conjoined with these objects: a baby and joy. This is followed by an episode conveying a similar narrative programme. The subject, the seven fairies, give to the princess a number of gifts which she thus acquires through a process of attribution. It is these objects (Beauty, Health, etc.) that, as we have seen, are at stake when the wicked fairy triggers the quest.

Let us now look at the second half of Sleeping Beauty, Part 2, commencing with the arrival of the prince (p. 146) and continuing to the end.

In the distribution of narrative roles in this section, the following pattern emerges:
Subject: the prince.

Object(s) of the quest: he wishes to discover if the old man’s story about the princess is true. His aim, therefore, is to see the princess and implicitly (by reference to other familiar versions of the tale) to be the one who awakens her with a kiss. The object of his quest, again implicitly, may also be the pursuit of the values of Beauty, Kindness, etc., that is, the values represented by the gifts of the fairies, as well as that of love.

Helper(s): the prince’s own impatience and impetuosity, ‘impatient to find out whether it was true’ (p. 146), together with his sword, are helpers.

Opponent(s): the thorns and briars are initially his opponents: he ‘started to hack at the briars’ (p. 146), only to be transformed into helpers: ‘the thorns seemed to part in front of him’ (p. 146).

Sender: with his story of the princess, the old man implants in the prince the desire to go on this quest.

Anti-subject: the prince meets with no resistance. A potential anti-subject, the wicked fairy, does not appear on the scene.

Let us now divide the prince’s quest into the logical stages of the canonical narrative schema:

The contract

The old man arouses in the prince the desire to go on a quest. The prince accepts the contract and decides to act on his desire.

The qualifying test

The prince chops down the briars and thorns. By overcoming this obstacle he acquires the ability (a being-able-to-do) to attain his goal. In other words, he possesses the necessary competence enabling him to reach the castle and the princess.

The decisive test

The arrival in the small room in the high tower of the castle and kissing the princess constitute the decisive test or principal performance.
**The glorifying test**

We learn that the decisive test has been successful: the princess wakes up, the spell is broken, prince and princess fall in love. The marriage, a further episode in the glorifying test, can be considered a reward for the prince and a confirmation of the triumph of good – love and happiness – over evil. The wicked fairy’s curse no longer has any power: ‘nobody knew what happened to her, but she was never heard of again’ (p. 147).

Finally, a global view of the whole story – Part 1 plus Part 2 – still defines the King and Queen as the subject of a quest to protect their daughter from evil and death. In this perspective, however, the prince and his actions function as helper and the overall quest can be deemed successful.

**The deep level**

After analysing the discursive and narrative levels of meaning, we go on to examine the deep level, known also as the thematic level. This is the level of the abstract or conceptual: it relates to the inner world of the mind as opposed to the outer physical world of the figurative level. Most importantly, it is the level at which are articulated the fundamental values of the text. But how do we arrive at these values?

Let us begin by looking for the fundamental opposition(s) or transformation(s) underlying the text. To facilitate this task, it may be helpful to ask the following questions:

- Can we reduce all the oppositions found on the figurative and narrative levels to one or two basic umbrella oppositions that can function as a common denominator for the text?
- What are the two most abstract poles of meaning between which the text moves?
- What fundamental transformation of values is at stake? Here it might help to bear in mind the object of the quest(s).

In *Sleeping Beauty*, a key opposition is that between evil and good. This opposition can be seen as an umbrella term encompassing on the figurative level the passage from high to low, sleep to awake, individual isolation to community.

The fundamental transformation between two poles of abstract meaning can be mapped out on a *semiotic square* (see also Introduction, pp. 12–13). With regard to evil and good, the diagram illustrates
relationships of contrariety and of contradiction (evil and non-evil). It also allows for the transformation in the story to be plotted.

\[
\begin{align*}
S_1 & : \text{evil} \\
& \quad \text{curse, power of wicked fairy}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
S_2 & : \text{good} \\
& \quad \text{lifting of the curse, power of good fairy} \\
& \quad -S_1 \\
& \quad \text{non-evil (intervention of good fairy)}
\end{align*}
\]

This transformation between evil and good parallels that between death and life:

\[
\begin{align*}
S_1 & : \text{death} \\
& \quad \text{curse: princess loses consciousness}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
S_2 & : \text{life} \\
& \quad \text{curse lifted: princess regains consciousness} \\
& \quad -S_1 \\
& \quad \text{non-death (intervention of good fairy: princess remains asleep – in limbo – for 100 years)}
\end{align*}
\]

A third semiotic square could express these transformations in terms of the more specific values represented by the princess:

\[
\begin{align*}
S_1 & : \text{threat to values of Beauty, Happiness, Goodness, etc.} \\
& \quad \text{(curse)}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
S_2 & : \text{affirmation of values} \\
& \quad \text{(lifting of curse)} \\
& \quad -S_1 \\
& \quad \text{non-threat to values (intervention of good fairy and prince)}
\end{align*}
\]
Text and context

Having ascertained the universal values underlying the text, we then open up the analysis to broader considerations of socio-political and cultural context. What additional values can be brought to bear on the text by the contemporary reader? How relevant is Sleeping Beauty to us today? Does the story, like many fairy-tales, lend itself to a multiplicity of levels of interpretation?

We would like to suggest, by way of introduction to this wider canvas of meaning, the following readings which are, of course, by no means exclusive.²

A. Sleeping Beauty can be envisaged as the embodiment of stereotypical attitudes

As such, the story becomes a vehicle for strengthening social prejudice and social inequality in contemporary society. These attitudes – those generally associated with the traditional fairy-tale and with nineteenth-century romantic fiction – are prevalent in today’s media and entertainment literature:

1. Men are active and women are passive. A woman needs the love of a man in order to truly exist, to bring out qualities that lie dormant. It is of course the prince who brings about the key transformation in Sleeping Beauty. He also possesses two important actantial roles, that of subject of a quest and of helper. This contrasts with the princess, who appears uniquely in the role of object of someone else’s quest (be it that of the parents, the wicked fairy or the prince). In her versions of well-known fairy-tales, Angela Carter challenges this traditional distribution of gender roles: in Bluebeard’s The Bloody Chamber, for example, it is the mother, arriving on her gallant steed, who finally rescues the heroine from the clutches of her husband.³

2. The story attaches great importance to the value of physical beauty – we noted the recurrence of this term in our examination of the figurative component. Implicitly, therefore, it is the beautiful people (the princess and the prince) who are successful in life and who attain their heart’s desire. The text thereby legitimizes certain current practices: the tendency, for example, to offer the best jobs to the best-looking. It thus ignores any contemporary concern with the
3. The story also links moral worth with physical beauty. As a baby, the princess is given the gifts of Beauty, Goodness and Kindness (in addition to those of Happiness, etc.). The handsome prince is implicitly associated with bravery: he has the courage and temerity to hack down the thorns around the castle. This linking of beauty with moral value is itself, of course, challenged by some conventional fairy-tales such as *Beauty and the Beast* (although the Beast eventually turns back into a handsome prince). It is further subverted by Angela Carter in, for example, her story *The Tiger’s Bride*: here Beauty, far from being presented as good, is clearly attracted by acts of violence, sadomasochism and sexual perversion.4

4. *Sleeping Beauty* also associates beauty with, on the one hand, youth and, on the other, sexual love. From this point of view, too, the text can be said to reinforce a dominant ideology in Western society: it encourages an overestimation of youth and an accompanying devaluation of the later equally important stages in human life. Such attitudes lead to the dismissal and disparagement of older people in particular. These assumptions are forcefully challenged by, inter alia, Gabriel García Márquez in *Love in the Time of Cholera*, where old age sees the blossoming of physical love, beauty and passion.5

5. The text can furthermore be said to enact a number of fantasies. Most significant perhaps is the desire for eternal youth, recalling the Faust story. This desire in turn reflects an underlying and all-too-human fear of growing old, of change and of death.

6. In its focus on ‘love at first sight’, the story finally reinforces a number of stereotyped assumptions concerning the nature of love. The outcome of events – marriage followed by a long and happy life – rests on the supposition that love (together with physical beauty) will endure the test of time.

As a reflection of stereotypical attitudes and fantasies, *Sleeping Beauty* - and similar stories - have an important function within the contemporary debate concerning human/civil rights and how to foster in the younger generation the notion of world citizenship.6 The story is
not a text for passive consumption but demands a critical reading on the part of the reader—be it an adult or a child. As we have seen, this critical reading will necessarily go beyond the confines of the text itself. It should stimulate active discussion encompassing the wider canvas of contemporary social and philosophical issues.

B. The impact of Sleeping Beauty on the reader is not, however, entirely negative

Indeed, certain aspects of the text call for a positive, more ‘liberatory’ interpretation, one that is not without its own contemporary relevance. The story presents a self-contained meaningful universe in which the boundaries of good and evil are clearly delineated. In his seminal work Language and Silence, George Steiner relates the increasing tendencies in our language usage to blur ethical frontiers to the growth of widespread political inhumanity in the twentieth century (e.g. the Holocaust). In his novel Le Chercheur d’or (The Seeker for Gold) the contemporary French writer J. M. G. Le Clézio links the survival of being human, and of meaning itself, to a memory of this vital distinction between good and evil—a memory that is perpetuated in myth and in the fairy-tale.

Not only, however, is the distinction between good and evil clear-cut and unambiguous. As we would also expect from a traditional fairy story, the unfolding of events heralds the triumph of good over evil, the possibility that our goals may be achieved, that our dreams may come true. It thus foregrounds the value of hope—for many the mainspring of all human action—offering a healthy antidote to current tendencies to cynicism. Moreover, this triumph of positive values, be they aesthetic (Beauty), spiritual (Goodness, Kindness) or personal/psychological, takes place against all odds—the power of the wicked fairy is stronger than that of the good one—that is, it takes place against a backdrop of a realistic acceptance of the power of destructive forces within contemporary society. But, however strong these forces, positive qualities and creative energy can never be entirely destroyed. These values remain in a virtual state, in limbo (dormant) waiting to be activated through the initiative of the individual. We may note here the theme of memory in Sleeping Beauty and its role in preserving these values from eventual oblivion and death: it is the recounting of the past by the old man that awakens the prince’s curiosity to embark on the quest.
In addition to these predominantly moral and socio-political readings of the text, a more strictly mythical/religious interpretation is possible. Our analysis of the figurative component noted the division of space into 'high' and 'low'. This configuration (division) possesses symbolic and, according to Gaston Bachelard, archetypal connotations. The 'high' is linked with semes of myth and magic (the princess pricks her finger and falls asleep). It also represents the spiritual dimension of eternal and universal values - those of Kindness, Goodness, etc. - that cannot be altered or destroyed by time. In contrast, the 'low' is associated with the historic space of social ceremony (christening, marriage, etc.). The princess, herself, inhabits both these dimensions.

Sleeping Beauty presents, therefore, a mythical non-Cartesian view of the world. Like many fairy-tales, it challenges the hegemony of reason, suggesting the workings of powerful unseen and irrational forces. Its insights – meanings – are clearly of relevance to contemporary debates on the nature of the human subject. Indeed, present-day psychologists and philosophers, in their attempt to elaborate ever more complex models of the self, increasingly draw upon folk-tales and myth for their source of inspiration.

Notes

6. The philosopher Jürgen Habermas, for example, links the concept of world citizenship to an agreed acceptance amongst all nations of a number of key moral values/codes.

9. For Bachelard the enclosed space of the attic is also linked to the semes of intimacy and of refuge. See *La Poétique de l'espace* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1957).