

Powers of the humanistic conscience in a fairytale medium

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“ Ashputtle”, a cousin story to the famous Cinderella written by Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm, is a fairytale about a young woman whose mother dies and whose father remarries an oppressive woman dubbed “ stepmother” whom Fromm would characterise as an irrational authority figure. Ashputtle, following her humanistic conscience, after a series of events finds herself in a position to start her life anew with the handsome prince of the land. There are several key relationships in “ Ashputtle” that play different roles from a psychoanalysis standpoint.

These relationships show authoritative characteristics that demonstrate the difference between the rational and irrational authoritative conscience and humanistic conscience, ultimately showing that in Ashputtle – a story characterising morals for a younger generations – those with a strong humanistic conscience will dominate over those with a weak humanistic conscience. If we examine the individual successes of the father, stepsisters, and Ashputtle, it will become apparent that the differences between their lives proceed from the varying strength of their humanistic conscience.

Erich Fromm identifies two types of conscience, the authoritarian and the humanistic. The authoritarian conscience comes from the will of an authority figure that we either admire or are afraid of displeasing (Fromm 404). The authoritarian conscience is similar to the Super Ego; the rules enforced by the father and accepted by the son out of fear (Alper 313, Fromm 402). The authoritarian conscience requires complete obedience; by obeying another person, one loses the ability to rebel. Listening to this conscience is the

submission to the authority's power to govern and to punish to the extent that they see fit.

Furthermore, there are two types of authority: rational and irrational authority. Rational authority refers to the relationship between teacher and student where either both succeed or both fail. Irrational authority is the relationship between master and slave. Both types of relationships are based on the scenario where one is responsible for the actions of another. Where they differ, are the interests of the authority in relation to the interests of either the student or slave. If the teacher teaches well, then the student learns more.

If the student does well on tests, then the teacher is praised for his/her teaching abilities (Ebert); their interests run in the same direction. However, the slave, unlike the student, benefits from doing less work for the master and the master benefits from making the slave do more work (Ebert); their interests run in opposite directions. The relationship between the prince and the father in Ashputtle represents irrational authority. The prince approaches the father and declares " the strange girl has got away from me and I think she has climbed up in the pear tree "(Grimm 597).

Immediately, to appease the prince's desire to know if the strange girl has taken residence in the pear tree, the father calls for an axe. In doing so, he hopes to gain an allegiance with the prince. The father represents the operation of an authoritarian conscience because, without the prince asking, he has tried to please him, satisfying the prince's wishes has become an

action redundant in the father. However, the relationship between the father and prince is irrational.

Whether the father benefits from the prince's wishes is inconsequential to the prince; this is irrational due to the fact that the authoritarian conscience the prince has instilled within the father takes focus only on the prince's best interest. As can be gathered from this example, irrational authority relationship will result in the best of scenarios no loss to the slave, and in the worst of scenarios, the loss of everything to please the master and not be punished. Ultimately, those with a weak humanistic conscience in Ashputtle are susceptible to oppression from others.

The relationship between the stepmother and stepsisters is similar to the relationship between the prince and the father. The stepmother has the best interests of her daughters at heart and provides them with the most beautiful dresses and best lifestyle she can afford. However, when the decision presents itself to either endanger the daughters' lives for the possibility of a better life, or to continue their lifestyle, the mother chooses to take the chance to better herself and endanger her daughters. The mother tells to both daughters at different times " cut off a chunk of your [foot].

Once you're queen you won't have to walk anymore" (Grimm 599). This again embodies irrational authority. Both of the daughters' responses were to cut off parts of their feet. To them, the pain of rebelling against their mother's wishes was less than the pain of a knife, demonstrating the negative effect of an authoritarian conscience. The challenge to the

authoritative conscience is the humanistic conscience (Fromm); however, a weak humanistic conscience may result in a strong authoritative conscience. The humanistic conscience is our own voice screaming out our own morals and beliefs without external influence (Ebert). It is the owner's voice that tells him or her to be productive and develop to the fullest potential possible. It is the love we have for ourselves, "the guardian of our own integrity" (Ebert). There are two ways to strengthen one's humanistic conscience. First, self reflection, being with one's own self, without external distractions, allows one to carefully interact with one's own ideas and reach logical conclusions, conclusions that morals and ethics are based upon (Ebert). Second, being productive.

Achieving goals set by the individual and being proud of the accomplishment helps form a strong humanistic conscience. Reflecting on the productiveness and the achievements that follow is a form of self reflection. The more productive one is, the more that person reflects, and the stronger their humanistic conscience becomes (Ebert). The relationship between Ashputtle and her mother, however, is of a different nature than that between the Prince and father or the stepmother and stepdaughters. It is similar to the relationship of any parent and child, an authoritative relationship.

We can determine that the relationship between Ashputtle and her mother is a rational relationship because the morals passed on to her by her mother are rational as they are for the common good. She encourages Ashputtle to develop her humanistic conscience by "be[ing] good" (Grimm 595), which requires a strong moral system. Furthermore, because the mother is on her

death bed, we can assume that she is not telling anything that will hurt Ashputtle for her benefit, as she, the mother, has nothing to gain.

The winter, following Ashputtle's mother's death, leaves Ashputtle to take her mother's place in the household, allowing her to produce and accomplish in maintaining the household which strengthens Ashputtle's humanistic conscience. Ashputtle is left without an authoritative conscience, her mother, to disrupt the strengthening of a humanistic conscience, so when the stepmother takes the role of an authority towards Ashputtle, Ashputtle is strong enough emotionally to withstand the pressures of giving in.

While she physically may not be able to rebel against her stepmother, Ashputtle has the confidence to ask for what she wants and the conscience to decide if she deserves it. This shows that a strong humanistic conscience is beneficial to the individual as at the very least, the individual has the power of will to mouth what they desire, the beginning of achieving that which they desire. The fairytale " Ashputtle" demonstrates that individuals with a stronger humanistic conscience have a greater ability to achieve their wishes.

Those with a weaker humanistic conscience, meaning a stronger authoritative conscience, can be used by authoritative figures, rational and irrational, and therefore have to hope that their wishes do not interfere with the wishes of their authority figure and that their authority figure wants them to reach their wishes. Ultimately, " Ashputtle" characterises the value of a stronger humanistic conscience and portrays to its readers - mostly children

—that a healthy humanistic conscience is the most beneficial of all consciences.