

# An Evil Stepmother Archetypes In Some Selected Grimms

*by Yulis Setyowati*

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# **An Evil Stepmother Archetypes In Some Selected Grimms**

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## **Abstract**

This paper tries to discuss the archetype of step mothers in Grimms' Fairy Tales. Those fairy tales are *Hansel and Gretel*, *Cinderella* and *Little Snow white*. An archetype is a universal model from which all things of the same type are based on. The stepmothers in fairy tales archetypically present her mistreats to her stepchild(ren). This mistreating leads to the wickedness behaviors and evil abuse and those behaviors come up as jealous, cruel, mean, rude, selfish, eager to kill stepchild/ren for unreasonable explanation and immoral.

Keywords: archetype, an evil stepmother archetypes

Abstrak

Tulisan ini membahas arketipe dari seorang ibu tiri dalam Dongeng Grimm: *Hansel dan Gretel*, *Cinderella* dan *Putri Salju*. Arketipe adalah model universal dari jenis yang sama. Ibu tiri dalam dongeng secara arketipe digambarkan mempunyai karakter yang jahat dan selalu menganiaya ke anak (anak-anak) tiri nya. Tindak tanduk ibu tiri tersebut sering digambarkan dengan kecemburuan yang tidak masuk akal, kejam, kasar, egois, atau bahkan ingin membunuh anak-anak tiri untuk penjelasan yang tidak masuk akal dan tidak bermoral.

Kata kunci : arketipe, arketipe ibu tiri yang jahat

## I. INTRODUCTION

Fairy Tales is something familiar to us both to children or even adults. Fairy tales communicates basic truths about human life and about how the world is. They are archetypal stories present in virtually every cultural tradition and a source of deep wisdom about the world and about the human condition.

Fairy tales mostly always consist of stories of enchanting princesses, emperors, magical spells, talking wildlife, and wicked people. Those characters portray its actors in the story archetypically. Commonly the tales present goodness and wickedness. Those messages are conveyed through its characters. Hero or fairy godmother deal with something nice and good while wicked stepmothers, while evil or bad witches connect to something bad and evil. Fairy tales are also identically related to heroine winning in the end and saving the day.

*Hansel & Gretel, Cinderella, and Snow White* and are all fairy tales which depict the stepmother archetype. Thus, this paper focuses on the discussion of the devil figure stepmother of the four tales. This character, the stepmother archetype represents evil incarnate. She may offer worldly goods, fame, or usually a reversal of the mother figure – the opposite of true mother. It is stated that ‘stepmothers in many fairy tales are attempting to undermine their stepchildren to ensure the biological and financial success of their own children. This figure’s main aim is to oppose the hero in his or her quest “knowledge to the protagonist in exchange for possession of the soul or integrity”’.

## II. THEORY

The following discussion will talk about archetype from the Carl Jung point of view. Carl Gustave Jung was a Swiss psychologist, known for his specific conception of the human mind. The Evil Stepmother is an archetype that is known in all age groups and all parts of the world. They are the villains of the fairy tale and the traits performed are applied in real life.

An archetype is a universal model from which all things of the same type are based on. Archetypes of the evil stepmother include:

1. The stepmother marries a wealthy man and favors her children from her previous marriage (if she was married to her children's father(s)) while mistreated her stepchild.
2. The stepmother is envious of her stepdaughter (usually not the stepson).
3. The stepmother contrives to get rid of - most often by murder - her stepdaughter.
4. The stepmother is usually defeated by her stepdaughter in the end of most tales.

([www.tft.ucla.edu/.../Spring07\\_ThePromise.pdf](http://www.tft.ucla.edu/.../Spring07_ThePromise.pdf)...)

The first question that comes to mind is, what is an archetype? Archetype is an original pattern or model from which later forms develop or from which copies are made. As archetype is an original pattern or model from which later forms develop or from which copies are made. A literary archetype is a basic theme, situation, or character that recurs in life and is reflected in the literature of most ages and languages. Jung discovered that humans have a "preconscious psychic disposition that enables a (man) to react in a human manner." These potentials for creation are actualized when they enter consciousness as images. There is a very important distinction between the "unconscious, pre-existent disposition" and the "archetypal image." The archetype may emerge into consciousness in myriads of variations. To put it another way, there are a very few basic archetypes or patterns which exist at the unconscious level, but there are an infinite variety of specific images which point back to these few patterns. Since these potentials for significance are not under conscious control, we may tend to fear them and deny their existence through repression.

<sup>3</sup> According to the Jung's notion of the psyche, the human mind can be divided into the conscious and the unconscious part. The conscious part of mind covers the all life experience, knowledge, education and social training. Precisely, the conscious contains aspects of any skill acquired during the life. The skill is later brought into practice consciously, with the awareness of its reason and consequence. There is another layer of the mind called the personal unconscious. The personal unconscious covers acquired life experience and behaviour, of which reasons and origin cannot be easily identified. They are hidden in the personal unconscious. An example of the conscious is the particular knowledge of a fact or experience such as locking the door of a house. Another <sup>3</sup> example of conscious experience is fear of a dog. The person is aware of his/her fear, because of a previous attack. If a dog attacks a small child and it forgets it, the experience it suppressed and becomes a part of the unconscious. The child then feels uneasy with dogs for the rest of the life, without knowing the reason. In addition, a way of a human interaction in a particular society, which was acquired during life, is also unconscious.

<sup>3</sup> Over these two layers of the conscious and unconscious, there lies the collective unconscious. The collective unconscious covers the experience of the whole humankind, acquired during millions of years of the human evolution.

According to Jung, the collective unconscious is the part of the psyche, which was not formed by personal experience. ... The capacity of the collective unconscious has never been a part of a consciousness and has never been collected individually. The heritability is the only mode of its existence (Archetypy a Nevědomí 147-148).

<sup>3</sup> Jung described the content of the collective unconscious more explicitly. He <sup>4</sup> claims that there are collective behavioral patterns in every human mind. He presents the notion of an archetype – a symbolic demonstration of such a behavioral pattern. “These archetypes can be found only in the human’s unconscious, and people consciously do not know that they follow a general pattern of behavior.” (Jung “Archetypy a Nevědomí” 97) In other words, <sup>3</sup> this theory suggests that all people have all the possible archetypes in their unconscious part of the mind. The adequate archetype activates and controls our behavior according to various life situations. “The number of archetypes matches the number of the typical life situations.” (Jung “Archetypy a Nevědomí” 155).

<sup>4</sup> The continuous repetition of these situations implements them into the psychical constitution. “Whatever happens in our lives and it responds to an archetype, the archetype is activated and becomes instinctive behavior (even despite the will and the reason).” (Jung 155-156).

<sup>4</sup> Dreams, fantasy and visions are supposed to be the link between the archetypes from the human unconscious and the world of conscious. “Dreams and fantasies of a man mediate meeting with archetypes.” (Jung “Archetypy a Nevědomí” 70, 97).

<sup>4</sup> As the archetype can be seen only through such an occasion as a dream or a vision, it cannot be accurately described. Jung differentiated some forms that the archetypes can take over. The most important were the self, the anima, the animus, the persona, the shadow, the mother, the child and the wise old man. The context of characters, situations and places can provide a space for a particular archetype to occur. The archetypes themselves rank logically from the Puer/Child to Mother, Hero, <sup>3</sup> Wise Old Man etc. also represents the inevitable stages of a growing up of a man.

<sup>3</sup> The unconscious aim of all people is to become their own self. This process is called individuation and represents the central concept of the archetype theory. Individuation is the final stage of the human’s development that represents the union of matured individual identity with one of the unconscious archetypes. The individuation is a process that can take the whole of life, but it can be also achieved through a particular life situation. The individuation is a reconciliation of a man with his real self, which has to be consciously accepted (Jung “Osobnost a Přenos” 69). An archetype is “(in Jungian psychology) a collectively inherited unconscious idea, pattern of thought, image, etc., universally present in individual psyches” (“Archetype”). In other words, an archetype is a character, a place, or an event that happens frequently enough in human society to be the standard of understanding literature or, as the psychologist Carl Jung believed, human nature. It can be understood that archetype is such kind of original model from which similar characters are patterned. Archetypes are universal forms that channel experiences and emotions, resulting in recognizable and typical patterns of behavior with certain probable outcomes. (A Critical Dictionary of Jungian Analysis, Samuels, Shorter and Plaut.) In fictional narratives, it is assumed characters with strong archetypal features will automatically and unconsciously resonate with a large audience.

### III. ANALYSIS

#### A. Evil Stepmother Archetype in *Hansel and Gretel*

*Hansel and Gretel* is a folklore that originated in Germany during the Middle Ages. The story has been handed down for centuries by word of mouth and is placed into print in the 1800s by two brothers, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, after listening to the fable being told by a storyteller. Hansel and Gretel is about two young children that are abandoned in the forest by their meek father and wicked step-mother. Abandoning children in the forest because of lack of food seemed to be the norm in other folklore tales as well. Most young children tend to always feel that their parents will take care of them and will not let any harm come to them. In the short story of Hansel and Gretel, the idea of parents always taking care of their children is proven to be untrue. The archetype of evil step-mother is portrayed through her wickedness and her action in neglecting and tormenting them throughout the short story. This archetype attributes of evil and places them as the main character of the short story. Hansel and Gretel's evil stepmother has a strong hatred towards the two children and would like to get rid of them by abandoning them far into the woods. The hatred can be seen the following quotation:

“What is to become of us? How are we to feed our poor children, when we no longer have anything even for ourselves?” “I’ll tell you what, husband,” answered the woman, “early to-morrow morning we will take the children out into the forest to where it is the thickest, there we will light a fire for them, and give each of them one piece them alone. They will not find the way home again, and we shall be rid of them.” “No, wife,” said the man, “ I will not do that; how can I bear to leave my children alone in the forest?-the wild animals would soon come and tear them to pieces.” “O, thou fool!” said she, “then we must all four die of hunger, ... (Grimm, 1993: 82).

Those explanations prove that the step mother hates Hansel and Gretel so much and wants to get them away. The will of the step mother is far away to the caring of the true mother. A mother figure generally devoted her time to children. But in this case, the step mother does not really care of them. She does want to take the risk to get in trouble to feed them. For the food shake, she wants to get rid of the children.

The evil step-mother plays a significant role in the tale and acts as one of the main characters. When the word step-mother is spoken, people tend to think of her as a wicked, mean, uncaring, and self-centered individual. The step-mother is a wicked person that disliked her step-children and thought only of herself. Her fear of dying from starvation is evident in the story. She tells her meek husband that “Everything is eaten again, we have one half loaf left, and that is the end. The children must go, we will take them farther into the woods, so that they will not find their way out again; there is no other means of saving ourselves” (ibid). As stated in the quote, it proves that the evil step-mother is naïve and only thinks of herself when it comes to survival.

Parents usually place their children’s need before their own but sometimes a step-parent does not always feel that way when the child is not theirs. It might be the jealousy for the children. The stepmother in *Hansel and Gretel* is one of those exceptions. She is **so afraid of starvation that she is willing to sacrifice the lives** of her step-children to save herself. Their weak father is no better than his wife for he is the one that should have protected his innocent children from harm. **However the father had a guilty conscience and stated** “I feel very sorry for the poor children” (ibid). **But he still continues to listen to his wicked wife and does what he is told by placing his children in harm’s way.**

**The** effort to get rid of the children (Hansel and Gretel) is not only for once but also twice trial. In the story, the stepmother does not succeed to get rid of the children, Hansel and Gretel go back home. Then, still the mother insists to send them away to the thickest forest in order that they will not find way home. And for the second trial, the poor Hansel and Gretel is really got lost in the forest. In this case, the archetype of evil step-mother is selfish, individual and mean. She abandons the children to survive. It shows that people can do cruel and unimaginable acts to others in order to survive.

As *Hansel and Gretel* folktale continues to be told, a wicked witch is mentioned in the story lines. She is portrayed as being a mean and evil person. She is so consumed by hunger that she devises a plan to fatten the children, so that she can eat them.

The witch stated “Hansel, stretch out your finger that I may feel if you will soon be fat” (ibid, 87). The wicked witch’s actions almost mirror the actions of the wicked step-mother in this story. The step-mother is afraid of dying from hunger that she abandons her step-children into the forest to die. At the end of the folktale the cruel witch is destroyed by the brave children and the dreadful step-mother is dead when the courageous children finally find their way back home.

## Discussion

### Evil Stepmother Archetype in *Cinderella*

The mother archetype has a number of consistent characteristics. They are seen as persistent, stubborn, caring and patient. There is always an intense bond between mother and child. This bond, in the mythologies that inspired Jung’s thinking, often turned violent if the mother and the child were forcibly separated.

Cinderella represents two mother archetypes, the wicked stepmother and the fairy godmother. But, this paper will more focus on the wicked stepmother represents a woman who is not the rightful mother, but is also not a nurturer of the child. It is a projection of neglect and a loss of a true mother in the child. Evil Stepmother has no sympathy for Cinderella and instead just keeps her in kitchen and makes her clean the entire house. It is proven in the following quotation:

“They took her pretty clothes away from her, put on an old grey bedgown on her, and gave her wooden shoes. “Just look at the proud princess, how decked out she is!” they cried, and laughed, and led her into kitchen. There she had to do work from morning till night, get up before daybreak, carry water, light fires, cook and wash. Beside this, the sisters did her every imaginable injury- they mocked her and emptied her peas and lentils into the ashes, so that she was forced to sit and pick them out again. In the evening when she had worked till she was weary she had no bed to go, but had to sleep by the fire in the ashes” (Grimms, 1993; 105).

From that quotation, it can be seen that how rude the stepsisters treat Cinderella. Indeed, the sisters’ treats to Cinderella is just coping the way their mother does to Cinderella. Cinderella is having not only physical torturing but also psychological bullying from the step family. Even in her own house, Cinderella does not get her right. She cannot enjoy taking a rest in the night in her room where she has to be get comfortable sleeping instead she must spends her nights in kitchen.

Moreover, step mother does not give her an appropriate living. She lets her two daughters taking all the belonging of Cinderella. The stepsister takes all her beautiful dresses, pearls, and even her shoes. Cinderella must receive that condition. And the worst, her step sisters mock her and let Cinderella taking the peas from ashes many times and the sisters enjoy it very much.

Another archetype of evil stepmother in Cinderella is cruel, self-centered and only concern to her daughters. The cruelty is shown from the way the stepmother and indeed her two daughters. As in the previous explanation Cinderella received mentally and psychical abused. The entire story portrays how rude and cruel they behave to Cinderella. Cinderella is treated as a slave who must serve day and night to her masters, in this case is her stepmother and step sisters. Even, she does not get an appropriate clothes and room to spend her time.

The idea of self-centered here is proven when the King holds a festival. The stepmother forbids Cinderella to join the festival and even she makes Cinderella busy to take the peas in the ashes. By doing this, the stepmother will not let Cinderella having fun and see the Prince. She wants Cinderella in the kitchen as dirty and ugly as much as possible. The stepmother just thinks about her daughters and neglect Cinderella. The following quotation will lead to that idea,

...because she too would have liked to go with them to the dance, and begged her step-mother to allow her to do so. "Thou go Cinderella!" said she. "Thou art dusty and dirty, wouldst go to the festival? Thou hast no clothes and shoes, and yet wouldst dance!" As however, Cinderella went on asking, the stepmother at last said, "I have emptied a dish of lentils into the ashes for these, if thou has picked them out again in two hours, thou shalt go with us" (ibid, 106).

The depiction of how no feeling of stepmother in Cinderella is shown when Cinderella finish her task to collect a dish lentils within two hours, Cinderella asks to go with them to dancing festival. But her stepmothers still will not her let go. She says "No Cinderella, thou hast no clothes and thou canst not dance; thou wouldst only be laughed at" (ibid). This evidence shows how the stepmother does not have a feeling to Cinderella at all. Even, she makes another pre condition to Cinderella. And again Cinderella successfully fulfills her stepmother pre condition. But the stepmother keeps on mock her by saying, "All this will not help thee; thou goest not with us, for thou hast no clothes and canst dance; we should be ashamed of thee!" On this she turned her back on Cinderella, and hurried away with her two proud daughter" (ibid, 107). From that explanation it shows that Cinderella is told to do impossible tasks and when she gets them done she is only denied and told to do another difficult task by the stepmother.

In short the evil the stepmother archetype is very inhumane, no heart, no feelings. She is also depicted as self-centered, greedy, and concerned only with her own daughters. Her archetypal characters are portrayed through the rudeness and wickedness of verbal abusing and mean physical torturing. She is cold, wicked, and the root of all evil to Cinderella.

### **Evil Stepmother Archetype in *Little Snow White***

The depiction of the stepmother in *Little Snow White* is ruthless, needing everyone to placate her and obey. She is also portrayed as self-centered mother who is dominated by her need to remain attractive physical appearances. The ruthlessness of the stepmother can be observed through the following explanation:

<sup>1</sup> Then the queen was shocked, and turned yellow and green with envy. From that hour, whenever she looked at snow-white, her heart heaved in her breast, she hated the girl so much. And envy and pride grew higher and higher in her heart like a weed, so that she had no peace day or night. She called a huntsman, and said, take the child away into the forest. I will no longer have her in my sight. Kill her, and bring me back her lung and liver as a token (ibid, 156).

From that explanation it can be observed that the cruelty of step mother in her effort to kill Snow White. When the step mother finds out that she is the most beautiful woman, she is shocked and very mad. Then she decides to get rid of Cinderella. She orders a huntsman to bring her to forest and kill her. The meanest attitude of the stepmother in this case is she requests the huntsman to take Cinderella's lung and liver to be her meal. The evil character is successfully conveyed through this evidence. It is also worsened when the stepmother gets the liver and lung, she asks the cook to salt and eat and really enjoy the meal and she thinks that she eats Cinderella's organs of body. It proves,

<sup>1</sup> And as a young bear just then came running by he stabbed it, and cut out its lung and liver and took them to the queen as proof that the child was dead. The cook had to salt them, and the wicked queen ate them, and thought she had eaten the lung and liver of snow-white (ibid, 157).

Another cruelty of the wicked stepmother is shown when she knows that the huntsman betrays her for letting Cinderella alive, she is very shocked and she makes another effort to kill Cinderella. Afterwards, she is at undercover to be an old peddler-woman and successfully makes Cinderella as if dead.

1  
And so she thought and thought again how she might kill her, for so long as she was not the fairest in the whole land, envy let her have no rest. And when she had at last thought of something to do, she painted her face, and dressed herself like an old pedlar-woman, and no one could have known her... But the old woman laced so quickly and so tightly that snow-white lost her breath and fell down as if dead. Now I am the most beautiful, said the queen to herself, and ran away (ibid, 159)

It is understood that Snow White's stepmother is so jealous of her stepdaughter's beauty that she is determined to kill her. In this context, once again the tale in portraying the evil rudeness or wickedness of the stepmother is done well. The only reason why she wants to kills Cinderella is that she does not want that Cinderella beauty to be equal not even exceed her appearance. The stepmother attempts to get rid of Cinderella is not only for once effort but also many times until she is dead.

The archetype of stepmother which is needing everyone to placate her and obey her is performed when she orders the huntsman and demands Cinderella's lung and liver. Actually the huntsman feels so sorry to Cinderella and does not want to kill her. He lets Cinderella goes in the forest and let her lives. Then, he takes boar's liver and lung as proof that as he just killed Cinderella. Knowing that the huntsman must obey the Cinderella's step mother, the huntsman takes boar's organ of body (ibid, 157).

The next evil step mother archetype is self -centered mother who is dominated by her need to remain attractive physical appearances. The only explanation of why the step mother wants to kill Snow White is that she does not want anyone not even Cinderella exceed her beauty. She is so self-centered by having this feeling. All Step mother efforts to terminate Snow White are just to remain her physical appearances and her beauty.

It can be learned that evil stepmother archetype in *Little Snow White* is just the same with previous fairy tales that has been discussed in preceding paragraphs that is *Cinderella and Hansel and Gretel*. Those archetypes are ruthless, needing everyone to placate her and obey. Then, she is also portrayed as self -centered mother who is dominated by her need to remain attractive physical appearances.

## CONCLUSION

From the discussion above, it can be summarized that an evil stepmother archetype emerges in the three of selected fairy tales. In this paper, the wicked stepmother archetype can be found in *Cinderella*, *Hansel and Gretel* and *Little Snow White*. The image of the evil stepmothers occurs frequently and consistently, thus it is presented throughout in the stories, as jealous, cruel, mean, rude, selfish, eager to kill stepchild/ren for unreasonable explanation and immoral. She neglects her role as a mother who the one should care, love, sacrifice herself for her children. Moreover stepmothers are often seen in a negative figure in fairy tales. This universally accepted stigma associated with stepmothers is a mythological archetype and in corresponding to collective unconsciousness. The stepmother has been portrayed in literature as a notoriously evil and cruel protagonist. Moreover, the stepmother is invariably depicted as the villainess, plotting evil against her stepchild or stepchildren and in reprisal meeting a gruesome death.

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