Rewards and Punishments
The Kind and Unkind

Motif Q2

The motif of the kind and the unkind (Q2, “Churlish person disregards requests of old person (animal) and is punished. Courteous person (often youngest brother or sister) complies and is rewarded”) is also found in multiple tale types, the most famous being AT 480, *The Spinning Woman at the Well*. Thompson notes that “a cursory examination of appropriate bibliographical works shows nearly six hundred versions” of this tale type (1977, 126). While addressing uncomfortable family problems such as parent-child hostility and sibling rivalry, this folktale tests the hero or heroine’s character (H1550, “Tests of character”)—specifically, kindness (Q40, “Kindness rewarded”), generosity (Q42, “Generosity rewarded”), and politeness (Q41, “Politeness rewarded”).

Tales about kind and unkind girls follow a typical plotline. A stepmother mistreats her good stepdaughter and dotes upon her selfish, impolite, and usually ugly daughter (S31, “Cruel stepmother”; B848.2.1, “Stepmother mistreats girl”). The good daughter is kind and polite to a supernatural being. Rewarded with a gift for her kindness, the good girl returns home and sparks her stepmother’s jealousy. In order to acquire the same riches for her own daughter, the stepmother sends her to meet the being. The girl is selfish and uncooperative and instead of being rewarded she is punished.

The heroes or heroines who are found to be kind are rewarded with gifts that are a symbolic representation of their inner character (Q111, “Wealth as a reward”). These may take the form of a physical transformation (D1860, “Magic beautification”), jewels falling from the mouth when speaking (D1454.2, “Treasure falls from mouth”), or some similar boon (F545.2.1, “Gold star on forehead”). The heroes or heroines who fail the test (Q280,
“Unkindness punished”; Q291, “Hard heartedness punished”; Q276, “ Stinginess punished”; Q321, “Laziness punished”) are swiftly punished with a gift that is a symbolic representation of their inner nature, such as receiving a box or basket containing bees, toads, or snakes or being similarly physically transformed; frogs and snakes falling from the mouth when they speak (M431.2, “Curse; toads from mouth”), a donkey tail appearing on their forehead, or being dipped in pitch (Q475.2, “Shower of pitch as punishment”). The rewards and punishments are always in clear opposition, mirroring the opposing character traits of the two protagonists who are tested.

The story may begin with the parent thrusting the innocent protagonist out into the dangerous world, where he or she overcomes adversity. The heroine may be commanded to spin by the well (as in the German “Mother Holle”) or in an isolated hut in the forest (S143, “Abandonment in forest”), as in the Russian tale “Blindman’s Bluff”; sent outside in winter inappropriately dressed for cold weather with instructions not to return unless she brings back violets or strawberries (H1023.3, “Task: bringing berries (fruit, flowers) in winter”); or commanded to remain in a snowfield all night (the Russian “King Frost”).

In an African (Ashanti) tale, “Anansi and His Son” it is a father who drives his son away, saying, “I don’t want to see you again.”

In many AT-480 tales, the bad parent, as well as the bad child, is punished. For example, the mother dies of grief in “King Frost” and “Blindman’s Bluff” (Q411, “Death as punishment”). In the Grimm’s tale “Three Little Men in the Woods,” when the king asks, “What punishment does a person deserve who drowned another?” the mother replies, “For an evil deed like that, no better fate than to be put in a barrel lined with sharp nails and rolled down a hill” (Q581, “Villain nemesis. Person condemned to punishment he has suggested for others”). Unable to bear her misfortune of losing her favorite daughter, the mother kills herself in “Humility Rewarded and Pride Punished” (Bengal, India). The mother becomes “black of heart” and dies in “Black of Heart” (Hansa, Africa). In “The Three Heads of the Well” (England), the queen mother hangs herself when she learns that her favorite daughter has married a cobbler.

The magic or fairytale component in this story is derived from the otherworldly, supernatural, and potentially dangerous figure that the children meet, who, unlike the biased parent, bestows rewards and punishments fairly, based on the hero or heroine’s inner qualities. Reinforcing the good mother–bad mother archetypal pattern, this figure is often portrayed as an elderly woman, especially when the main characters are young girls. In other variants, this figure is the Virgin Mary, Saint Nicholas, Saint Christopher, angels, God, and Jesus—religious figures that often function as parent substitutes in prayers and dreams. They also suggest quasi-divine, spiritual essence. Other figures doing the testing include Jack Frost (Russia), cats (Spain), a

sparrow (China and Japan), a troll (Norway), a bear (Russia and southwest American Indian), fairies (Spain), a mermaid (Brittany), the twelve months (Greece and Italy), little men in the woods (Germany and Chile), three heads in a well (England), and a boy (Africa). The German Mother Holle also suggests the embodiment of a nature figure, as the act of shaking her feather quilt, or pillows, influences snowfall (A1135.2.1, “Snow from feathers or clothes of a witch”). Dwarfs are allied with nature so it is not surprising that in variants of “Strawberries in the Snow,” the child sent out into the forest in winter to find fruit or flowers meets little men or dwarfs, the seasons, or the
twelve months (Z122.3, “Twelve months as youths seated about fire”; Z122.4, “The four seasons personified”).

The tests in AT 480 tales are generally simple deeds, requiring no magical intervention. These tests include willingness and competency in completing ordinary household chores, as in “Mother Holle” (G204, “Girl in service of witch”); compassion; as in a Haitian variant where the good girl willingly rubs an old woman’s back that is covered with pieces of sharp glass (“Mother of the Water”); good manners; and obedience. The sharing of bread, a popular motif in folktales (Q42.1.1.1, “Reward for giving last loaf”), is the implicit test in “The Girl and the Hogs,” a Mushkogen (American Indian) tale, in which the young girl shares her bread with old women. In the African “Anansi and His Son,” the greedy father disobeys the directions not to pick vegetables that say “Don’t eat me” and is bitten by snakes. His son, who obeys the instructions, returns successfully with food. In the African (Cameroon) “The Two Brothers,” one boy cuts firewood for an old man, the other does not; the first learns how to get riches, the second gets nothing (Krug 1912, 113).

Steven Swann Jones argues that the structural symmetry of such tales emphasizes “the difference between successful and unsuccessful maturation” in an archetypical narrative ultimately about the kind girl’s initiation into womanhood. Jones maintains that the “tale presents caricatured depictions of proper and improper socialization in order to encourage the child to follow the appropriate model” (1986, 153). Although such tales usually pertain to the maturation of girls, a Syrian tale, “The Good Apprentice and the Bad,” provides an example of the proper and improper socialization of boys. Abu-Kheir, whose name signifies “Father of Good,” is kind, generous, and enterprising, whereas Abu-Sharr, or “Father of Evil,” is selfish and spiteful. However, this tale presents a twist to the idea of reward and punishment. Eavesdropping on three doves, Abu-Kheir acquires information that allows him to succeed. Abu-Sharr wishes to know the secret of Abu-Kheir’s success, and the latter sends him to the place where he saw the doves, who are in fact aefrets (demons or spirits). The aefrets only arbitrarily punish Abu-Sharr because of the meaning of his name. Nevertheless, in the end, the good apprentice is rewarded with good fortune (Bushnaq, 1986).

HOSPITALITY REWARDED, MODEST CHOICE, POLITENESS REWARDED, AND ENCOUNTERS EN ROUTE

In tales closely related to AT 480, the virtue of extending hospitality is tested. In the Greek myth of Baucis and Philemon in Ovid’s Metamorphoses, an elderly couple is rewarded for offering hospitality to strangers, who happen to be Zeus and his son Hermes (W1, “Hospitality is a virtue”; Q45, “Hospitality rewarded”). The inhospitable neighbors have their homes destroyed by a natural catastrophe (Q292, “Inhospitality punished”). The lesson here is that in being kind to human beings, you may find yourself being kind to gods and goddesses.

A second test is often inserted in this story, the selection of a large, mediumsized, or small container containing a gift (L211, “Modest choice: three caskets”; Q3, “Moderate request rewarded, immoderate punished”). Once again, the good person shows humility by selecting the smallest container, which is found to be filled with treasure, while the greedy person chooses the larger container, which is found to be filled with snakes or bees. Shakespeare uses this motif in The Merchant of Venice.

A related Irish variant has a man with a hunchback politely helping the fairies with a song, and he is rewarded by having his hump removed (Q41, “Politeness rewarded”; F344.1, “Fairies remove/replace hunchback’s hump”; F331.3, “Mortal wins fairies’ gratitude by joining in their singing”). The impolite man, who hopes to have his hump removed, instead is given the hump the fairies took from the good man, so he leaves with two humps (Q551.8, “Deformity as punishment”). In a Japanese variant, the men have wents on their faces, psychologically alluding to the Japanese precept, “saving face.”

The good heroes or heroines show compassion to people, animals, or plants that they encounter on their journey and are subsequently rewarded. For example, in the African (Hausa) tale “Making Stew,” the bad girls refuse to rub an old woman’s back. The good girl does this task and is told the name of a young man. Later, when they visit a house, the bad girls are denied entrance because they do not know the man’s name. The good girl, of course, passes the test. In another African (Congo) variant, “The String of Beads,” the good girl strips off her garments and uses them to bind the wounds on an old woman’s back (Q41.2, “Reward for cleansing loathsome person”)

GOOD AND BAD NEIGHBORS AND GENEROSITY TO SUPER-NATURAL BEINGS AND ANIMALS REWARDED

Like tales about kind and unkind girls, those contrasting good and bad neighbors follow a symmetrical pattern. While good neighbors demonstrate generosity, kindness, and hospitality to animals and people, bad neighbors exhibit avarice and envy. In the Japanese story “The Old Man Who Made Flowers Bloom,” an old woman finds a peach floating down the river and brings it home. The peach metamorphoses into a puppy, and the old woman and her husband care for it like a grandson. In return, the puppy brings the couple gold coins, igniting the neighbors’ envy. The neighbors kill the puppy, which then transforms itself into other instruments of good fortune for the old woman.
and her husband (Seki 1963, 120–125). Whereas the bad neighbors in this story are punished only with defeat, in another Japanese tale the bad neighbors meet a different fate. In “The Chōja Who Became a Monkey,” Lord Iri and his wife, despite their poverty, welcome into their home a poor traveling priest, who is in fact the sun deity in disguise. When the rich, miserly neighbors of Lord Iri and his wife discover that the priest has granted them youth, the bad neighbors send for the same priest, but he transforms their family into monkeys and dogs (Seki 1963, 142–145). An Andalusian tale recounted by Juan Valera, “The Queen Mother,” similarly opposes a good with a bad couple. The good couple, poor but generous, invite their friends over to celebrate a birthday. Trying to revive the kitchen fire, the good wife blow on it so hard she ends up passing wind. Embarrassed, she wishes the earth would swallow her up, and she suddenly is transported into a rich kingdom, where she is referred to as the queen mother and eventually rewarded with riches. Envious, her friend tries to duplicate the event, but is compensated for her ilill will by a dung-hill swimming with toads and snakes (Fedorchek, 2003). As in the case of the kind and unkind girls, stories about good and bad neighbors reinforce the values of socialization, specifically the values necessary to communal living.

Generosity on the part of a poor woman and her son to a saint, who appears as an old beggar monk, is rewarded in the Chinese tale “The Great Flood.” The tale also integrates kindness to animals. During a flood, mother and son save ants, sparrows, and a wolf, and although the mother is killed by a wolf, the son is saved by the grateful animals and marries the daughter of an emperor (Eberhard 1965). In “The Man Who Cuts Down the Cinnamon Tree,” a man tends an injured sparrow and is rewarded with a seed that produces a pumpkin filled with gold. An envious, cruel boy (J2415) throws a stone to injure a sparrow, then tends it, but instead of gold, his pumpkin is filled with bees. In another variant, a man steps out of the pumpkin and the boy and man both climb a vine to the moon, where the boy is forced to remain, trying to chop down a bejeweled tree that regenerates itself daily.

In “The Good Little Mouse,” Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy similarly combines kindness to animals with kindness to fairies. Imprisoned by an enemy king, a pregnant queen is given a mere three days to eat. One day she invites a mouse to share her peaches, and suddenly a table with partridges and jam appears. Because of her generosity, the mouse, who is in fact a fairy, eventually helps the queen save her daughter from the evil king (Zipes 1989).

When characters assist animals in distress, these animals often become the hero or heroine’s helper. In Straparola’s “Pietro the Fool” (1550), the hero spares the life of a tuna, who grants him his wishes (Zipes 2001). An Iraqi Cinderella, the heroine of “The Little Red Fish and the Clog of Gold,” frees a catfish, who provides her with golden clogs and silk gowns to attend a bride’s henna, a ceremony marking a bride’s separation from her family upon her marriage (Bushnaq 1986). In d’Aulnoy’s “Beauty with the Golden Hair,” the hero Aventan saves a carp, a crow, and an owl, who assist him in finding a queen’s ring, killing a giant, and obtaining magical water (Zipes 1989; see also d’Aulnoy 1997). In the Chinese tale, “The Gratitude of the Snake,” a boy heals an injured snake, which later saves his life (Eberhard 1965).

Anne E. Duggan and Ruth Stotter

See also: Otherworld Journeys.

REFERENCES


376 • REWARDS AND PUNISHMENTS