AN APPROACH TO LITERATURE

Fifth Edition

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CLEANTH BROOKS
Professor (Emeritus), Yale University

JOHN THIBAUT PURSER
Professor, Southeastern Louisiana College

ROBERT PENN WARREN
Professor (Emeritus), Yale University

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INTRODUCTION

THE NATURE OF FICTION

Why do we like fiction?

The most obvious and fundamental answer is that we like it because we like it. The hairy brutes of prehistory huddling around the night fire of the cave were bemused by a tale, and the telling of tales, in one form or another, has not ceased since then. To like a story seems as natural to us as to like food or drink. It is an attribute of our nature.

We can, however, go beyond that fundamental answer to our question. As civilized, self-conscious human beings, we want to see what aspects of our nature are involved in our apparently instinctive liking. In other words, we want to know more about our own nature, more about the nature of fiction, and more about the way in which the two are related.

Even the hairy brute by the cave fire was a human being. In fact, we might say that he had become truly human just at that moment when he could become bemused by a tale—when, that is, he could escape by the magic of imagination* from the bonds of time, place, and, even, the self. And since the hairy brute had reached the stage of being truly human, for him the appetite for a tale must now have been far from simple. He was, already, the most complex thing in nature, and in one dimension—insofar as he had language—had left nature behind.

We can't know exactly what passed through our ancestor's unbarbered, low-browed, and jut-jawed head as he listened to a tale, but it is a safe guess that the underlying reason he listened was that the tale enhanced his sense of life. The hunt or the battle was relived, with the evocation of all the emotions associated with the literal event—but now without the literal risks, so that those emotions, even the terror and despair, might be savored and, in some sense, understood. The tale was of conflict—that is, something was at stake in the events narrated; and conflict, as we shall see, with its awakening, imaginatively, of our emotions and the enhancing of our sense of life, remains the great central fact of our fiction, from the simplest tale to the most complex and sophisticated novel.

Such must have been the underlying reason for the attention to the tale, but for even the most primitive auditor other reasons must have been present, and, from folklore, myths, and fairy tales preserved into our age, we can get some hints of what they were. For one thing, threatened by beasts and other men, darkness, floods, inexplicable thunderstorms, and all the murderously whimsical powers that ruled the world, and aware of his own weakness, the poor creature in the cave longed to be bigger, stronger, and grander than he was. And he could be—for as long as the tale of hero or demigod lasted—or even the tale of some fellow who, though little, was very cunning, or very lucky. So we have the epics of heroes, such as Achilles and Aeneas and Beowulf, and fairy tales such as Hans Christian Andersen's "The Tinder Box," which we give here in summary:

* The anthropologist Carleton S. Coon describes such a group by the tribal fire: "Fire has four basic uses: frightening off predators, keeping people warm and dry, cooking food, and providing a spatial nucleus or center for the home territory of a group of people. Here they can sit at night, warm and secure, seeing one another's faces in the firelight, talking over what they did during the day while they were separated, acting out scenes of the hunt, planning for the next day's adventures, discussing matrimonial prospects, and generally getting to know one another so well that friction can be kept at a minimum. They may also dance by firelight, and conduct ceremonies. It is difficult to see how, without fire, human society could have risen much above the level of that of baboons." *The Origin of Races* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962).

On the highroad a soldier meets an ugly old witch, who indicates an old tree in which, she tells him, is a hole that will let him go down into an underground corridor. There he will find three doors. Behind one is a chest on which sits a dog with eyes as big as saucers and in the chest copper coins; behind the second, a dog with eyes as big as millwheels, on a chest full of silver coins; and behind the third, a dog with eyes as big as the Round Tower, on a chest full of gold coins. If he takes her blue-checked apron, ties a rope round himself so that she can pull him back up, and goes boldly in to each dog in turn and sets him on the apron, he can help himself to all the money he wants. Only he must bring back up an old tinder box, which, she says, her mother had left down there.

The soldier does as directed, comes back loaded with, of course, gold, and when the witch won't tell him what she wants with the tinder box, slashes off her head with his sword and leaves her in the road, while he goes on to the city. At the city he sets up fine quarters in a hotel and leads the life of a gentleman, dreaming meanwhile of the local princess, whose father keeps her locked up in a copper castle, all because there's a prophecy that she will marry a common soldier. Meanwhile his money runs out, he goes into mean quarters, and one night, trying to light his last bit of candle, he strikes the flint on the steel of his tinder box, and suddenly the dog with eyes as big as saucers appears, and asks his command. "Money," the soldier says, and the dog comes back with a bag full of copper coins in his mouth. Strike once, he discovers, and the first dog comes with copper; twice, the dog with silver; and three times, the horrid big dog with gold.

Now the soldier has the power to have the princess brought at night to the grand chambers that he again inhabits, but when the princess next morning reports that she has had a fine dream of riding on the back of a great dog and being kissed by a soldier, the king orders a lady-in-waiting to keep watch by her bed. The lady, seeing the princess taken off by the dog, pursues them to the doorway of a great house, which she marks with chalk. But the next morning, when she leads the king and his court to find the door, all doors are marked with chalk, thanks to the cleverness of the faithful dog.

The next night the dog comes again, but this time the lady has tied a little bag of seed around the neck of the princess, with a tiny hole in the bag so that a trail will be left. So the soldier is found and is condemned to be hanged. On the morning of the execution, he sees, from the window of his cell, a lad hurrying past to be on time for the sport. He hails the lad and promises him a penny to fetch the tinder box from the hotel.

With the box in his pocket, the soldier is led to the great gallows, where the king and queen and all the court wait in state to watch. The soldier asks the boon of smoking a last pipe. When the king kindly grants this request, the little soldier strikes on the tinder box and summons up all the dogs, who kill the king and queen and all the councilors. So the people hail the soldier as their king and the princess delightedly marries him, and they rule happily forever afterward.

The tale is like a daydream. All wishes are here fulfilled with the effortlessness of dream. There is no ordinary logic. The little soldier is not virtuous, industrious, wise, good, or kind. He is not even very clever. He has no quality that would merit success. He is merely lucky, and the only logic in his story is that of the naked wish. So now in our time, not merely for children but for adults, there is a great body of fiction (as well as movies and plays) that, behind the façade of some ordinary logic of plot, simply provides the satisfaction of the same old daydreams—of money, sex, power, status.

Sometimes, however, a dream may be of a less self-aggrandizing sort. Even when we read what is called "escape fiction," we may not be trying to escape into another grander self, but into a world resembling one that our own poor, limited self once inhabited and enjoyed, as when an aging woman turns to stories of young love; or into a world that we have never had and can never have, as when a middle-aged, balding, family-trapped man in straitened circumstances reads stories of travel or adventure in far and glamorous places.

To all of us, that is what, in one sense, fiction is—a daydream. It is, in other words, an imaginative enactment. In it we find, in