It is impossible to reach a proper understanding of the unconscious structures of storytelling without recognising the archetypal significance of certain numbers. In the beginning, in almost any story, there is an all-important ‘one’: the central figure of the story, the hero or heroine with whom we identify. Then, sooner or later, there arises a sense of division, of a splitting into two, as in the opposition between the story’s hero and its chief dark figure, or the opposition between ‘light’ and ‘dark’ generally: the conflict which creates most of the action of the story. But there is also that other very important ‘two’, the hero and the heroine, the central figure and that ‘other half’ who can make them whole.

The most obvious number we cannot help noticing in stories, however, because it occurs so insistently in the folk tales familiar from childhood, is ‘three’. Again and again we see how things appear in threes: how things have to happen three times; how the hero is given three wishes; how Cinderella goes to the ball three times; how the hero or the heroine is the third of three children.

Few childhood tales are built more conspicuously round the number three than 

\textbf{Goldilocks and the Three Bears}. When the little heroine arrives at the mysterious house in the forest, she sees three chairs round the table, and three bowls of porridge. When she tries each of the bowls in turn, one is too hot, one too cold, only the third is just right, and she eats it all up. When she tries the chairs, one is too hard, one too soft, only one just right, and when Goldilocks sits on it she breaks it. Lastly she goes upstairs and tries the three beds. It now seems quite natural that the first is wrong in one way, the second in another, only the third and smallest just right, and that it is here Goldilocks lies down and goes to sleep. Everything is now set for the alarming shadow to intrude, as the three bears return. At first they are still downstairs, comfortably distant, as we begin the three-fold sequence all over again, with the three bears each discovering in turn that someone has been eating their porridge and sitting in their chairs. When Baby Bear finds his chair is broken, this builds up a sense of mounting apprehension. All the time the shadow is coming closer to the sleeping heroine, even more so
when the bears come upstairs to examine the beds. For a third time we go through the sequence, Father Bear first, Mother Bear next, until finally Baby Bear looks at his bed and Goldilocks is still there! For the identifying child this is the fearful climax. And it is here, as we again reach the third in this cumulative sequence of threes, that the tension is at last released, as Goldilocks leaps through the window and scuttles off home.

A story rather more subtly built up around three is Little Red Riding Hood. When the heroine first encounters the wolf in the forest, he seems quite friendly. On his second appearance, we see him in his true dark colours, when he arrives at the house and eats the grandmother. In his third manifestation, when Red Riding Hood herself arrives at the house, he again initially seems benign, as he tries to pass himself off as the grandmother. But by another, more obvious process of three, the heroine expresses her mounting suspicion (‘what big ears you’ve got’, ‘what big eyes you’ve got’, ‘what big teeth you’ve got’) until, on the third exchange, the wolf jumps out of bed in his true black identity, attempting to eat her: and again of course, at this moment of climax, comes the ‘thrilling escape’, when the woodcutter bursts in to kill the wolf with his axe.

All the childhood tales we looked at the beginning of the last chapter are similarly built up around threes. In Jack and the Beanstalk this takes the form of the hero’s three visits to the giant’s castle, escaping with three golden treasures of ascending value: the gold (which is just itself), the goose which lays golden eggs (guaranteeing an indefinite supply into the future), the golden harp (which is somehow best of all, because it plays wonderful, inspiring music, touching the soul). And as usual it is the last in the sequence of three which leads to the climax, precipitating the reversal and the end of the story. The stories of the Three Billy Goats Gruff and The Three Little Pigs are each built up around two sequences of three. Each has three heroes, who each in turn must confront the dark figure. In the first, the goats are of ascending size, and it is important that the smallest and middle-sized goats each trick the troll into letting them past, until the biggest, strongest goat can at last tackle the troll head on, butting him to destruction, thus allowing all three to proceed up the mountain to their happy ending. In the second tale, it is equally significant that the pigs build houses of ascending strength, so that the wolf can easily blow down the first, made of straw, and slightly less easily the second, made of wood, but is defeated by the third, because it is made of brick. It is this which precipitates the wolf’s destruction and, for the third pig, the happy ending.\(^1\)

The role of ‘three’ in these old folk tales is so explicit that one cannot miss it. When we come to a more modern example, Peter Rabbit, this may not be quite so obvious. But, so unconsciously engrained is the archetype of ‘three’, we see it playing exactly the same role in building up tension towards the climax as in a

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1. Again ‘three’ plays a central part in all the folk tales we looked at in the chapter on ‘Rebirth’. Sleeping Beauty and Snow White, for instance, both unfold in three stages: the first when the heroine initially falls under the shadow of the dark power as a young child; the second when she arrives at the threshold of adult life and the dark power succeeds in imprisoning her in the state of living death; the third when, years later, she is finally redeemed and brought back to life by the Prince.
folk story. When the hero finally comes face to face with Mr McGregor, he first runs away and gets caught in a net by the buttons of his coat. He is about to be caught when he wriggles out of his coat and makes his first 'thrilling escape'. He is then pursued by Mr McGregor into a shed and hides in a watering can, but gives himself away by sneezing, thus having to make a second 'thrilling escape'. Only when he feels finally trapped does he leap up onto the wheelbarrow, giving him the vision to see how to make his third 'thrilling escape'. Once again it is the third which proves the charm, allowing him at last to run off home to his happy ending.

What we see in all these examples is how 'three' is the final trigger for something important to happen. Three in stories is the number of growth and transformation. Much as we say 'Ready, steady, go' to prepare and concentrate the runners at the start of a race, so the process of three conveys the steady build up to a moment of transformation which enables the hero or heroine to move on to the next stage. It conveys to us a sense that the miraculous developments which take place in stories do not just happen instantly and effortlessly; they require a steady accumulation of experience, concentration and effort, until everything is ready to allow the transformation to take place. And we see this rule of three expressed in four main ways:

(1) The 'simple' or 'cumulative three', where each thing is of much the same value, but all three have to be put together or succeed each other in sequence before the hero or heroine can move on, or come to their final transformation: e.g., Cinderella’s three visits to the ball, the three treasure-caves Aladdin has to go through before he discovers the lamp.

(2) The 'progressive' or 'ascending three', where each thing is of positive value but each a little more important or valuable than the last: e.g., the ascending value of Jack’s three treasures won from the giant (this idea is more explicitly expressed in those folk tales where the hero has to win three objects, made in turn of bronze, silver and gold). There is also the 'descending three', where each is of negative value, but similarly working up to a climax (e.g., Red Riding Hood’s three questions to the wolf, leading to ‘all the better to eat you with’ as the wolf reveals his true deadly character).

(3) The 'contrasting' or 'double-negative three', where the first two are inadequate or wrong (essentially in the same way) and only the third one works or succeeds. We see an element of this in the three little pigs, two of whom get eaten, although it is most commonly seen in folk tales where the hero or heroine is the third child, contrasted with two identical others, usually older, who are dark. Cinderella’s two ‘ugly sisters’ are as alike as identical twins. They are there merely to present a double-negative to Cinderella’s positive, as do the heroine’s two sisters in Beauty and the Beast.

(4) The final form of three, the one capable of the most sophisticated development, is what may be called the ‘dialectical three’ where, as we see reflected in Goldilocks, the first is wrong in one way, the second in another or opposite way, and only the third, in the middle, is just right. This idea that the
way forward lies in finding an exact middle path between opposites is of extraordinary importance in storytelling and, as we shall see, some of the ways in which it finds expression are of breathtaking subtlety.

So far in this introduction to the role of numbers in stories we have focused on those simple childhood tales where the ‘rule of three’ is obvious. But in earlier chapters we have already caught glimpses of how this rule plays the same function, rather less blatantly, in more sophisticated types of story. We saw how often in Quest stories, for instance, the hero has to face three final ordeals before he can secure his goal: as in the three tests imposed on Jason before he can win the Golden Fleece; or the three battles faced by Aeneas before he can marry the Princess and safely establish his new kingdom; or the three ordeals faced by Allan Quatermain and his friends in *King Solomon’s Mines* before they can overthrow the Tyrant Twala and the Witch Gagool to secure the treasure. In *King Lear*, as in a folk tale, we see Cordelia as the third, light daughter, contrasted with the double-negative of her two dark, scheming sisters. In *A Christmas Carol* we see the character of Scrooge in his dark state initially defined by three acts of anti-social heartlessness; these trigger off the three successive nightmares centred on the spirits of Christmas Past, Present and Future which eventually trigger off his rebirth; and this is confirmed when, in his reborn, light self, he finally reverses each of the acts of rejection with which the story began.

Once we become aware of the archetypal significance of three in storytelling, we can see it everywhere, expressed in all sorts of different ways, large and small. It is something so fundamental to the way the human imagination works, that it often appears in ways of which not even the storyteller may have been conscious. It seems, for instance, quite natural that when Aladdin gets trapped in the cave after retrieving the lamp, he should be stuck there for three days. It seems the right number to convey the process of him gradually losing all hope until, when the third day is up, he at last despairingly rubs the ring on his finger and is confronted by the genie who releases him. It seems equally natural that when Charlotte Brontë describes Jane Eyre running away across the moors after her aborted wedding, she should have shown her heroine wandering distractedly for three days until she finally becomes so desperate that she throws herself on a doorstep to die. Only then is she discovered by St John Rivers and taken in to be restored to life.

The real point of this emphasis on three is the way it conveys to us, by a kind of symbolic shorthand, just how tortuous and difficult is the process whereby the hero or heroine is working towards their ultimate goal; and how there is only one, correct way for them to thread the path which will eventually lead them to their prize.

Indeed one of the more obvious ways in which this can be presented is in all those stories where, to reach the goal, the hero or heroine has to pass precisely between two equally deadly opposites, representing a ‘double negative’. We saw this in all those Quest stories where a passage between the opposites was one of the
ordeal the hero and his companions have to undergo, from Jason's Argo navigating between the clashing rocks to the 'straight and narrow' path to which Christian must keep to survive his perilous journey through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. In the version faced by Odysseus, when he has to sail exactly between Scylla and Charybdis, this emerges as more like a 'dialectical three', where each opposite poses a different threat, which is why Odysseus has to run the gauntlet twice. First he steers too near the monster Scylla, the second time too near the whirlpool Charybdis, so that he suffers the ill effects of both. But at least in the end he comes through; unlike Icarus who, ignoring his father's instruction to keep to the middle position, errs too far in one wrong direction, by flying too high, with the result that he is plunged into the opposite direction and is destroyed. Another explicit echo of the 'dialectical three' is the instruction given by his father to Robinson Crusoe that he must pursue a 'middle station' in life, not aspiring too high or sinking too low; which is where, after learning all the profound lessons his adventures have taught him, he finally reaches the happy ending of his story.

What all these different forms of the rule of three have in common is that they convey the gradual working out of a process, which will eventually lead to some kind of transformation. This can just as well be a transformation downwards as upwards. But most often we see it related to that essential theme of so many stories, the process of growth. It symbolises the slow process whereby the hero or heroine are striving towards some hugely important goal which, when it is finally achieved, we can see represents full maturity, the realisation of a state of fulfilment and wholeness. And this is why, as a story moves towards its ending, we are usually made aware of that which is needed for all the developments which we have seen taking place in the story to reach a state of completion: a word we use in two senses. Firstly it can mean that a process is complete, as when a sequence has unfolded to its conclusion. But secondly it can mean the putting together of all the component parts of something to make a complete whole.

A story which in very simple form presents this need to integrate all the parts in order to make a whole is a little tale from the Grimm brothers collection called The Three Languages. The hero is an apparently stupid boy who is sent off by his father for three successive years to be educated. After the first year he comes back having learned nothing but to understand what dogs are saying when they bark. In the second he learns nothing but the language of frogs. In the third he learns nothing but the language of birds. His father is enraged that the boy has so wasted his time. But together these skills have made a whole. The hero has learned the language of animals in all three elements, the dogs of land, the frogs of water, the birds of the air – and we recognise that somehow each of these skills will eventually have to be used in turn, to complete his transformation. Sure enough, after a while, the hero goes on a journey. His first skill enables him to win a great treasure, guarded by fierce dogs. The second enables him to interpret a prophecy by frogs that he will become the Pope, so he heads for the city of Rome, where he discovers the existing Pope has just died. The third, as the assembled cardinals are looking for a sign as to whom to choose to succeed, causes two snow-white doves to alight on the hero's shoulder (making a three)
and whisper into his ear the words of the Mass. The hero is chosen. He has developed and integrated three elements in himself to make a ‘whole’, and the result is that he becomes a ‘supreme ruler’.

‘Four’: The number of completion

At an even deeper level, as we saw at the end of Chapter Twelve, the whole of the way in which the human imagination unconsciously shapes a story is itself rooted in the ‘rule of three’, in that it follows that three-fold rhythm which provides stories with their most basic archetypal structure. Firstly, we see the central figure in some way constricted, but then enjoying a phase of limited enlargement. Secondly, we see the dark power closing in to impose a more severe sense of constriction (the ‘central crisis’), which leads in turn to that gradual constellation of the light and dark elements in the story as they move towards their final showdown. Thirdly, in the story’s climax, we see the most acute phase of constriction of all, as the prelude to that reversal which leads to the overthrow of darkness and the liberation of light.

Thus is the rule of three, as the pattern of growth and transformation, built into the very foundations of the way we imagine stories. But the nearer we get to the moment of completion or wholeness at the end of a story, the more likely we are somehow to see the number four appearing. In *Cinderella* the heroine is three times transformed from her rags into her finery, as she goes to the ball. Each time she returns to her rags and ashes, until she has gone through a second process of three, whereby the two ugly sisters try on the slipper and fail and she succeeds. Then at last, as the story reaches its conclusion, we see her make the fourth and final transformation back into her fine clothes.2

We see many similar examples of how some image of four emerges at the ending of stories. Hans Andersen’s little ugly duckling, after his transformation, joins the three ‘kingly swans’ to make the fourth. At the end of *The Three Musketeers*, as the young outsider D’Artagnan finally emerges triumphant from his long battle with his monstrous opponent Lady de Winter, he is at last accepted by his close-knit trio of comrades as ‘the fourth musketeer’. In *A Winter’s Tale* and *The Marriage of Figaro*, we see the power of the Comedy ending reinforced by the bringing together not just of one couple but two, so that the stage can be dominated by four joyful figures, all at last at one with each other. In *The Secret Garden* the redeeming figure of Dickon triggers off three successive ‘rebirths’, those of Mary, Colin and finally Mr Craven, so that the closing image of the story is of all four standing joyfully together in the garden.

2. In the first published edition of the Cinderella story, included in Charles Perrault’s collection of French folk-tales, *Histoires ou Contes du Temps Passe* (1697), he describes her as only going to the ball twice. This may have been because Perrault heard an already corrupted version; or that, in adapting the story for a French court audience, he shortened it because he did not understand the significance of the Rule of Three. But in almost all other folk-versions of the story (e.g., *Aschenputtel*, in the collection of German folk-tales by the Grimm brothers), the heroine sees the Prince-hero three times in her disguise, before the final fourth encounter which reveals her true identity.
Four in stories is the number of completion and perfection. Even during the earlier stages of the story, we often have a subconscious sense of the presence of four elements or figures which have not yet come together and revealed their potential, as when the hero of The Three Languages is waiting with his three skills for the moment of transformation. And in the next part of the book we shall see just how profoundly the number four as a symbol of totality provides the bedrock for the unconscious processes which create stories in the human imagination.

But of course the supreme symbol of completion in storytelling is the union of two people, hero and heroine, masculine and feminine, to make a whole: because they are seen as complementary in a more fundamental way than anything we know. Only when this has been achieved can hero and heroine together succeed to the kingdom: because the two have finally become one.

Such is the complete happy ending which lies at the heart of storytelling. What this really stands for is the theme of the next section of our book. And in exploring this we shall see how the hidden significance of numbers in stories opens up in a wholly new and dramatic way.3

3. Although the chief archetypal numbers around which stories are structured are one, two, three and four, other numbers which appear less often are those which combine and reinforce their significance, particularly compounds or multiples of three and four. Back into prehistory seven has taken on symbolic or magical significance as a combination of three and four, as in the mythical seven gateways to the underworld, the seven sages of the Greek world, the seven against Thebes, the seven ages of man, the seven deadly sins, the seven cardinal virtues. The Sumerians and later civilisations spoke of seven planets or ‘heavenly wanderers’, including the sun and the moon. Nine is significant as three times three, as in the nine Muses. Twelve is significant as three times four, making up a totality, as in the twelve apostles or the twelve supreme Greek gods on Olympus. Dante’s Divine Comedy, which as we shall see in Chapter 33 is structured round the rule of three as comprehensively as any story in the world, is divided into three books each of 33 cantos, apart from the first which acts as prologue to the whole work, to make a round 100 in all.