

Natalism in Fairy Tales

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Publication info: Pre- and Peri-natal Psychology Journal 11. 3 (Spring 1997): 163-175.

[ProQuest document link](#)

Abstract: None available.

Full Text: Headnote ABSTRACT: Evidence of birth and prenatal memories has been postulated as revealing itself in myth, fairy tales, and works of art. This paper presents natalistic symbology as previously proposed by Otto Rank (1929), Nandor Fodor (1949), T. W. Dowling (1988), and Michael Irving (1989) and proceeds from there to the natalistic analysis of two fairy tales; "Mother Holle," and "Pitcher's Bird." The analysis of "Mother Holle" relies primarily on previously established symbols, whereas the analysis of "Pitcher's Bird" moves into the more esoteric realm of very early prenatal symbols and is an incomplete analysis. It is hoped that this contribution to natalism in myth, fairy tales, and art will add to the growing body of literature in this area and help to establish this as a vital part of understanding birth and prenatal experience. NATALISM IN FAIRY TALES This discussion of natalism in fairy tales begins with a compilation of symbols identified as natalistic. Natal is defined as "of, or related to birth." This concept will include the prenatal period and the term natalistic is used to refer to the symbolic expression of birth and prenatal consciousness. Table 1 is a re-ordering of information gleaned from the analysis of the writings of Michael Irving (1989), Otto Rank (1929), Nandor Fodor (1949), and T. W. Dowling (1988) categorizing the symbols associated with specific prenatal and birth experiences. In addition to the categories in Table 1, Irving mentions the circle as related to the ovum, Rank mentions the setting of the sun as being associated with a return to the womb, or the underworld. Fodor mentions descending steps as symbolic of going into the past: transcendently as referring to the Great Before as well as the Great Hereafter; imaginally {fairyland} associated with the kingdom of the unborn; and as the Lorelei, symbolizing a fascination with pre-natal return. He also suggests mountains as associated with pregnancy and the number nine (the months of gestation) as having special significance.

Table 1
Pre- and Perinatal Symbolism

Womb (Uterus) Symbols

Irving: Basket, box, cave, circle, sanctuary, vessels, jar, grave or tomb (associated with return to the womb).

Rank: Luggage (trunk, box), vehicles (ships, automobiles, carriages, wagons, etc.), caves, hollow trees, edible house, building, cupboard, ravines, hollows.

Fodor: Stoves, ovens, fireplaces, bathtub, gardens, parks, landscapes, islands, boats, trains, carriages, houses, rooms, cellars, lofts, bed, ark, draperies or rich furniture (especially red or blue, associated specifically the folds of the uterus).

Dowling: None

Generally among the four sources: Eggs, seeds, germs, fruits, things that grow underground and a tooth (pulling of a tooth associated with the birth experience) all associated with the fetus. Strangers who evoke feelings of embarrassment and poles associated with father's penis.

Umbilical symbols

Irving: Caduceus, ropes, snakes, ties, dragon

Rank: None

Fodor: None

Dowling: None

The Birth Experience

Irving: Beach (out of birth canal), birth/death, blood, bodies with bottom half or legs hidden, cruelty, death/rebirth, earthquake (contractions) fighting/ wars, fire, guilt/judgment (internalization of mother's birth pain), hell, imagery of agony or fear, isolation, knife (early cutting of cord), light (opening in birth canal), passage from one world to another, scales (related to judgment) shadow narrowing effect, skeletons, volcano, white skin paint (vernix).

Rank: Greek temple pillars and tree trunks associated with mother's legs upon emergence from birth canal. Witch associated with evil primal mother.

Fodor: Being thrust out, claustrophobia, falling, compression, suffocation, burial alive, any form of slow and painful death, ghosts, animals, or machinery, tooth pulling, bear (associated with "bearing"), cage, river banks, rails, and "V" shaped structures associated with mother's legs, grass, bushes, forest, fur, and hair associated with pubic region. Bars and arches associated with the pubic arch.

Dowling: None

Placental symbols

Irving: Cross, trees, vine

Rank: None

Fodor: None

Amniotic fluid

Irving: Water, flood

Rank: None

Fodor: Seas, lakes, rivers, waterfalls, island (fetus floating in amnion)

Dowling: none

Birth canal

Irving: Circle, crown, crown of thorns, desert (dry birth canal), door, dragon, geometric lines and patterns, halo, labyrinths, passageways, repetitive framing, sun, symmetrical arcs, tunnels.

Rank: Thorns, flames, glass mountain, passing through closing rocks.

Fodor: Throat, tunnels, caves, stoves, archways, windows, doors

Dowling: None

Dowling: Trees (This reference contains a more complete discussion of the special natalistic symbolism of trees. It does not address other symbols.)

Amniotic sac (caul)

Irving: Drapery, veils

Rank: Crown, hat

Fodor: None

Dowling: None

The interuterine experience

Irving: Drum (womb rhythm), other rhythmic patterns (wavy lines (contractions). Wings, angels, birds, and flight associated with weightlessness.

Rank: Heaven, Paradise, Rhythmic games (swinging, hopping, etc.).

Fodor: devouring animal (fear of absorption by mother), balcony (position in upper part of uterus), lobby (vaginal entrance)

Dowling: None

As may be seen from Table 1, these writers have arrived at similar symbolic associations in most cases. Consideration of the time period of the writing sheds light on discrepancies. For example, the fact that Rank and Fodor did not have access to observations of intrauterine experience, such as is now available with ultrasound and interuterine photography, helps to explain the lack of symbolism associated with the umbilicus and placenta in their writings. The presence of amniotic fluid was, of course, known. Fodor's projections on that aspect of prenatal experience seem in line with the findings of later research. Rank's assumption of an idyllic interuterine experience was, perhaps, a projection based on lack of knowledge. Also, this view supported his theory that individuals wish to return to the womb. Later work, Verny (1981), Chamberlain (1988), Janov (1970), Emerson (1993 to the present), and others, seems to indicate that far from being idyllic, the intrauterine experience can at times be quite horrifying, and, at the very least, is beset with its own trials and tribulations. With that in mind, I would like to expand the list of symbols from the prenatal period. The following is based primarily on training with William Emerson from March of 1993 to the present. Dr. Emerson has denned fourteen stages of prenatal experience and seven stages of birth experience, each with its own set of symbols. His birth stages correspond somewhat to the four birth matrices discussed by Grof (1985), but are more clearly defined and elaborated. Grof's first birth perinatal matrix is the prenatal period, which Emerson has expanded to fourteen stages, as mentioned earlier. Grof's second stage (BPM #2) corresponds to Emerson's birth stages #1a and #1b, Grof's BPM #3 to Emerson's birth stages #2a through 3b and Grof's BPM #4 corresponds directly to Emerson's birth stage #4. As knowledge of prenatal experience continues to expand, the quote from Samuel Taylor Coleridge cited in Michael Irving's (1989) article ring ever more true. The history of man for the nine months preceding his birth would, probably, be far more interesting and contain events of greater moment than all the three-score and ten years that follow it. All of Dr. Emerson's fourteen prenatal stages will not be elaborated here. One concept, however, is of particular relevance. That is that symbols from the early prenatal stages are often repeated in the birth experience. For example, such symbols as tunnels and passageways have significance for the journey of the fertilized ovum from the fallopian tube to the uterus as well as for the journey down the birth canal. Visions of war and going off to battle may be associations from the sperm journey, while experience of a sisterhood may come from the long association with "sisters" in the ovaries prior to the maturation of the ovum and release for possible fertilization. Conception itself has been associated with images of rape or with a joyful union of opposites for the creation of something new. The first hero's journey of the conceptus down the fallopian tube brings images of overcoming great hardships to reach the goal of implantation. Dream images associated with implantation include desperate searching for a nourishing home and clinging onto a slippery slope. The most powerful image from the intrauterine experience seems to be the "tree of life," which, now that we have seen pictures of the placenta seems very clear. It is quite amazing that this image appeared cross-culturally for many centuries prior to our more direct knowledge about the appearance of the placenta, which quite literally is the tree of life during our prenatal experience. Comparison of art work from many cultures and historical periods with intrauterine photography reveals a striking similarity. Carl Jung, collected statements by alchemists regarding this tree. "It is like a tree planted in the sea', 'It is red and white', 'It's trunk is red tinged with a certain blackness', 'From it all flesh is fed', 'Nature has planted the root of the tree in the midst of her womb', When the roots 'are torn from their places, a terrible sound is heard and there follows a great fear'." (Dowling, 1988). As explicit as these statements are when viewed from a natalistic perspective, Jung did not make this connection. One wonders how many other archetypes identified by Jung and his followers might have their origins in primal memories. Once the process of viewing fairy tales, myths, art work, and dreams from a natalistic perspective is begun, additional possibilities and connections present themselves. It becomes tempting to view all these phenomena as originating in birth or prenatal experience. It is important to remember that many levels of interpretation are valid and may be simultaneously accurate. The natalistic perspective makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of what it means to be human. With the foregoing material as a foundation, I

will now explore two fairy tales limited to just a natalistic perspective, with no illusions of having tapped the full depth of their significance even on this level. The fairy tales were both selected from *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, translated by Jack Zipes. The first, "Mother Holle," was selected at the suggestion of Dr. Thomas Verny as being one that deserved attention from this perspective. The second, "Pitcher's Bird," was selected because it had a particular emotional impact that seemed very connected to prenatal and birth experience. The fairy tale narration will be quoted directly from the selected translation, in manageable sections, followed by commentary (in italics) on the natalistic images perceived in that section.

MOTHER HOLLE A widow had two daughters, one who was beautiful and industrious, the other ugly and lazy. But she was fonder of the ugly and lazy one because she was her own daughter. The other had to do all the housework and carry out the ashes like a Cinderella. Every day the poor maiden had to sit near a well by the road and spin and spin until her fingers bled. We began with a familiar fairy tale motif, that of rival siblings, one of whom is not a natural child of the parent, not a favored child, and who is given responsibility for domestic duties. Ashes have been associated with the waxy coating on the body at birth (vernix), so we have some indication that the inner work to be done is involved with "cleaning up" or integrating the birth experience. One of her duties is to sit near a well (a womb symbol of significance, as it also contains water, strengthening the connection). Spinning has many deep associations, but most relevant here is the dual processes of creation and integration. We are also forewarned of coming pain and suffering by being told that her fingers bled. Now, one day it happened that the reel because quite bloody, and when the maiden leaned over the well to rinse it, it slipped out of her hand and fell to the bottom. She burst into tears, ran to her stepmother, and told her about the accident. But the stepmother gave her a terrible scolding and was very cruel. "If you've let the reel fall in," she said, "then you'd better get it out again." A crucial point is reached, perhaps the ovum has matured and its time to begin the journey. The reel becomes quite bloody and, in an effort to cleanse it, the journey is set in motion when the reel falls to the bottom of the well. The mother leaves no doubt that responsibility now rests solely with our heroine and that she has no choice but to follow through on what has begun. The maiden went back to the well but did not know where to begin. She was so distraught that she jumped into the well to fetch the reel, but she lost consciousness. When she awoke and regained her senses, she was in a beautiful meadow where the sun was shining and thousands of flowers were growing. She walked across this meadow, and soon she came to a baker's oven full of bread, but the bread was yelling "Take me out! Take me out, or else I'll burn. I've been baking long enough!" The journey begins without preparation, or "knowing what to do." Lack of consciousness during this difficult transition enables our heroine to survive the difficult journey to implantation. She awakens to a beautiful meadow, but is given little opportunity to become complacent. The image of the oven with baking bread (another womb symbol) serves as a reminder of the task at hand and the importance of timing and her role in the process. She went up to the oven and took out all the loaves one by one with the baker's peel. After that she moved on and came to a tree full of apples. "Shake me! Shake me!" the tree exclaimed. "My apples are all ripe." She shook the tree till the apples fell like raindrops, and she kept shaking until they all had come down. After she had gathered them and she stacked them in a pile, she moved on. Her appropriate response enables healthy continuation of the journey. But, the lesson on timing is repeated, emphasizing its importance. At last she came to a small cottage where an old woman was looking out of a window. She had such big teeth that the maiden was scared and wanted to run away. But the old woman cried after her, "Why are you afraid, my dear child? Stay with me, and if you do all the housework properly, everything will turn out well for you. Only you must make my bed nicely and carefully and give it a good shaking so the feathers fly. Then it will snow on earth, for I am Mother Holle." {Note: Whenever it snowed in olden days, people in Hessa used to say Mother Holle is making her bed.} Our heroine now encounters a third womb symbol, the cottage in the forest. Perhaps a time for recommitment to the journey, the end of the first trimester. The nourishing mother also shows a threatening component, the big teeth. However, our heroine is assured that, by overcoming her fear and doing her housework (care of the womb environment) carefully things will turn out well. She is especially instructed to make the bed properly, giving it a

good shaking so that the feathers fly. The reference to feathers and flying confirms the weightlessness of the situation, but also infers a preparation for a softer landing. Since the old woman had spoken so kindly to her the maiden plucked up her courage and agreed to enter her service. She took care of everything to the old woman's satisfaction and always shook the bed so hard that the feathers flew about like snowflakes. In return, the woman treated her well: she never said an unkind word to the maiden, and she gave her roasted or boiled meat every day. Our heroine, by cooperating in the process, is treated well, spoken to kindly, and nourished. But, we know this cannot be the end of the story, the next step must be taken. After the maiden had spent a long time with Mother Holle, she became sad. At first she did not know what was bothering her, but finally she realized she was homesick. Even though everything was a thousand times better there than at home, she still had a desire to return. At last she said to Mother Holle, "I've got a tremendous longing to return home, and even though everything is wonderful down here, I've got to return to my people." "I'm pleased that you want to return home," Mother Holle responded, "and since you've served me so faithfully, I myself shall bring you up there again." It is time to leave the womb environment and go through the next transition. The womb mother (nature) will help with the transition. She took the maiden by the hand and led her to a large door. When it was opened and the maiden was standing right beneath the doorway, an enormous shower of gold came pouring down, and all the gold stuck to her so that she became completely covered with it. She is guided to the doorway (the birth canal) and her covering (vernix) for the passage is pure gold. This aid for the transition will remain as a gift upon the completion of the journey. She is also given the reel, so comes into her new life with her purpose for making the journey intact. "I want you to have this because you've been so industrious." Said Mother Holle, and she also gave her back the reel that had fallen into the well. Suddenly the door closed, and the maiden found herself back up on earth, not far from her mother's house. When she entered the yard, the cock was sitting on the well and crowed: "Cock-a-doodle-doo! My golden maiden, what's new with you?" She went inside to her mother, and since she was covered with so much gold, her mother and sister gave her a warm welcome. Then she told them all about what had happened to her, and when her mother heard how she had obtained so much wealth, she wanted to arrange it so her ugly and lazy daughter could have the same good fortune. Her return (birth) is heralded and welcomed by the family because she comes bearing gifts (talents). The mother then decides the other aspect of her herself could benefit from this process. Often the birth metaphor refers to aspects of the individual psyche that are in the process of change and rebirth and the two daughters in this story seem to be just such aspects. We are simultaneously receiving messages about the effort required to produce a healthy "child" with its talents and abilities intact. Therefore, her daughter had to sit near the well and spin, and she made the reel bloody by sticking her fingers into a thornbush and pricking them. After that she threw the reel down into the well and jumped in after it. The journey is begun under false pretenses. Perhaps the conception in this case is flawed. Just like her sister, she reached the beautiful meadow and walked along the same path. When she came to the oven, the bread cried out again, "Take me out! Take me out, or else I'll burn! I've been baking long enough!" But the lazy maiden answered, "I've no desire to get myself dirty!" She moved on, and soon she came to the apple tree that cried out, "Shake me! Shake me! My apples are all ripe." However, the lazy maiden replied, "Are you serious? One of the apples could fall and hit me on my head." The response to necessary tasks along the way is to deny their importance, therefore the lessons regarding the importance of timeliness are not learned. But, the journey continues in spite of this lack, just as many pregnancies continue in spite of lack of awareness and attention. Thus she went on, and when she came to Mother Holle's cottage, she was not afraid because she already heard of the old woman's big teeth, and she hired herself out to her right away. On the first day she made an effort to work hard and obey Mother Holle when the old woman told her what to do, for the thought of gold was on her mind. On the second day she started loafing, and on the third day she loafed even more. Indeed, she did not want to get out of bed in the morning, nor did she make Mother Holle's bed as she should have, and she certainly did not shake it hard so the feathers flew. The journey continues with the lack of realization of the importance of the process. Some prior knowledge prevents fear of

the coming journey, but there is no awareness of the importance of active participation in, and attention to, the process. Soon Mother Holle became tired of this and dismissed the maiden from her service. The lazy maiden was quite happy to go and expected that now the shower of gold would come. Mother Holle led her to the door, but as the maiden was standing beneath the doorway, a big kettle of pitch came pouring down over her instead of gold. "That's the reward for your services," Mother Holle said, and shut the door. The lazy maiden went home covered with pitch, and when the cock on the well saw her, it crowed: "Cock-a-double-doo! My dirty maiden, what's new with you?" Mother nature steps in to create a premature end to this process. When we do not respect the timing of the process, it may be taken out of our hands, with very unhealthy results. In an actual birth prematurity can have very negative results. The black pitch is a very telling metaphor for another negative result that may manifest during birth, that of an infant emerging from the birth canal covered with meconium. In our dual considerations of this fairy tale (that of a metaphor or actual gestation and birth and birthing new or altered aspects of ourselves) lack of full participation and consideration for the importance of awareness of the process produce unhealthy outcomes in both instances. The pitch did not come off the maiden and remained on her as long as she lived. The consequences of an unhealthy gestation can indeed have lifelong impact.

PITCHER'S BIRD Once upon a time there was a sorcerer who used to assume the guise of a poor man and go begging from house to house to catch beautiful girls. No one knew where he took them, since none of the girls ever returned. This journey begins with a sorcerer, symbolizing nature or natural consequences that are not respected for their full power. Sometimes they come in disguise and we are unprepared. Our perspective begins within the ovary and the maturation of ovum, who leave, usually one at a time, never to return. One day he appeared at the door of a man who had three beautiful daughters. He looked like a poor, weak beggar and carried a basket on his back as though to collect handouts in it. He begged for some food, and when the oldest daughter came out to hand him a piece of bread, he had only to touch her, and that compelled her to jump into his basket. Then he rushed away with great strides, and carried her to his house in the middle of a dark forest. Everything was splendid inside the house, and he gave her whatever she desired. Our sorcerer now takes on the form of sperm who has only to touch this most mature ovum to compel her to begin the journey to the womb (the house in the middle of a dark forest) where all her needs are met. "My darling," he said, "I'm sure you'll like it here, for there's everything your heart desires." After a few days had gone by, he said, "I must go on a journey and leave you alone for a short time. Here are the keys to the house. You may go wherever you want and look at everything except one room, which this small key here opens. If you disobey me, you shall be punished by death." He also gave her an egg and said, "I'm giving you this egg for safekeeping. You're to carry it wherever you go. If you lose it, then something awful will happen." Having started the process, nature now gives the message that the new individual must experience aloneness on the journey. Our heroine is given a set of keys, one of which is not to be used, and an egg (new life) for safekeeping. She took the keys and the egg and promised to take care of everything. When he was gone, she went all around the house and explored it from top to bottom. The rooms glistened with silver and gold, and she was convinced that she had never seen such great splendor. Finally, she came to the forbidden door. She wanted to walk past it, but curiosity got the better of her. She examined the key, which looked like all the others, stuck it into the lock, turned a little, and the door sprang open. But, what did she see when she entered? There was a large bloody basin in the middle of her room, and it was filled with dead people who had been chopped to pieces. Next to the basin was a block of wood with a glistening ax on top of it. She was so horrified by this that she dropped the egg she had been holding in her hand, and it plopped into the basin. She took it out and wiped the blood off, but to no avail: the blood reappeared instantly. She wiped and scraped, but she could not get rid of the spot. We are now presented with the paradox of choice and knowledge of life and death. She has been instructed to safeguard the new life, but has also been given the key to death and is driven by curiosity to open the door. The journey down the fallopian tube is filled with a sense of adventure and delight, but it also contains images of destruction and death. It is littered with all the sperm who did not complete the journey successfully, the energies of previous unfertilized

ovum and conceptuses who did not successfully implant in the uterus. The uterus itself is filled with these energies (body parts) of others who did not successfully complete the journey. The new life is dropped into this environment and absorbs the energies (blood), which then become a part of it and cannot be removed. Not long after this, the sorcerer came back from his journey, and the first things he demanded from her were the keys and the egg. When she handed them to him, she was trembling, and he perceived right away, by the red spots on the egg, that she had been in the bloody chamber. "Since you went into that chamber against my will," he said, "you shall go back in, against your will. This is the end of your life." Entering the chamber prematurely, (induced labor, attempted abortion, fear laden or mixed messages from the mother to the fetal child) against the timing of nature, can bring disastrous results-involvement in a process beyond individual control. He threw her down, dragged her along by her hair, cut her head off on the block, and chopped her into pieces, so that her blood flowed on the floor. Then he tossed her into the basin with the others. "Now I shall fetch the second daughter," said the sorcerer. Once again he went to the house in the guise of a poor man and begged. When the second daughter brought him a piece of bread, he caught her as he had the first, just by touching her. Then he carried her away, and she fared no better than her sister, for she succumbed to her own curiosity. She opened the door to the bloody chamber, looked inside, and had to pay for this with her life when the sorcerer returned from his journey. Now he went and fetched the third daughter, but she was smart and cunning. After he had given her the keys and the egg and had departed, she put the egg away in a safe place. Then she explored the house and eventually came to the forbidden chamber. But, oh, what did she see? Her two dear sisters lay there in the basin cruelly murdered and chopped to piece. However, she set to work right away, gathered the pieces together, and arranged them in their proper order: head, body, arms, and legs. When nothing more was missing, the pieces began to move and join together. Both the maidens opened their eyes and were alive again. Then they all rejoiced, kissed, and hugged each other. Nature does not discriminate, and when we follow our instincts blindly, we too chance becoming victims. But, when we bring awareness to the process, we can fulfill our promises, while putting the pieces together, not only for ourselves, but for others. New life and new understanding is possible. When the sorcerer returned, he demanded his keys and egg right away, and when he could not discover the least trace of blood, he said, "You've passed the test, and you shall be my bride." Understanding nature and becoming a partner in the process (proper pre-natal care and nurturing, childbirth as a natural process) go hand-in-hand . . . The remainder of the fairy tale seems to focus on a reversal of power and the birth symbolism does not seem to hold up. Therefore, I have chosen not to continue the analysis at this time. It may be my current level of understanding, but there seems to be a culturally bound component to the concluding portions of this tale that comes from a time when nature was viewed as an opponent to be conquered and the tale ends with the sorcerer and his wedding guests being burned to death. In spite of the difficulty of completing this analysis from the natalistic perspective, I felt that the images from the first part of the tale are valid and may provide a foundation for further work on natalistic images from the very early months of gestation. Analysis of fairy tales from a natalistic perspective is one part of a larger study using natalistic symbology for analysis of not only fairy tales, but myths, art work, and dreams. These areas provide a rich source for future study and analysis, which will add immensely to our understanding of the universal human experience of birth and the prenatal period. REFERENCES Bourgeois, Louise (1994). *The Locus of Memory Works 1982-1993*. The Brooklyn Museum. New York: Abrams. Chamberlain, D. (1988). *Babies Remember Birth*. Los Angeles: Tarcher. Dowling, T. W. (1988). *The Use of Placental Symbols in Accessing Pre- and Perinatal Experience*. In P. Fedor-Freybergh and V. Vogel (Eds.): *Prenatal and Perinatal Psychology and Medicine*, Park Ridge, NJ: Parthenon Publishing Group. Emerson, W. (1993 to present). *Personal communications as part of training program*. Grof, S. (1985). *Beyond the Brain*. Albany, NY: State University of New York. Irving, M. (1989). *Natalism as Pre and Perinatal Metaphor*, *Pre- and Perinatal Psychology Journal*, (2) Winter, 1989, pages 83-110. Janov, A. (1970). *The Primal Scream*. New York: Putnam. VERNY, T. (1981). *The Secret Life of the Unborn Child*. New York: Simon & Schuster. Von Franz, M. (1980). *The Psychological*

Meaning of Redemption Motifs in Fairy Tales. Toronto, Canada: Inner City Books. Zipes, J. (1987). The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm. New York: Bantam. AuthorAffiliation Jeane Rhodes, Ph.D. AuthorAffiliation Jeane Rhodes completed a Ph.D. in Pre- and Perinatal Psychology through The Union Institute in May 1997. She trained in infant and child Birth Refacilitation with William Emerson, Ph.D. She teaches at Red Rocks Community College in Lake wood, CO and also has a private practice. Address correspondence to Jeane Rhodes, 611 S. Simms Street, Lakewood, CO 80228.

Publication title: Pre- and Peri-natal Psychology Journal

Volume: 11

Issue: 3

Pages: 163-175

Number of pages: 13

Publication year: 1997

Publication date: Spring 1997

Year: 1997

Publisher: Association for Pre&Perinatal Psychology and Health

Place of publication: New York

Country of publication: United States

Journal subject: Medical Sciences--Obstetrics And Gynecology, Psychology, Birth Control

ISSN: 08833095

Source type: Scholarly Journals

Language of publication: English

Document type: General Information

ProQuest document ID: 198684531

Document URL: <http://search.proquest.com/docview/198684531?accountid=36557>

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Last updated: 2010-06-06

Database: ProQuest Public Health

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