

Fairy Tales and Postmodern: A Bizarre Paradox

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Abstract

This paper attempts to redefine fairy tales in the light of postmodernism. Fantasy art has been a part of all human societies throughout history. It is found in abundant forms, fairy tales, folklore, mythology, science fiction and religion. It has been illustrated to reality to which it is inextricably linked. Fantasy as a theme isn't pure escapism, being a definite factor, it is also a tool for analyzing the reality in symbiotic relationship. Fairy tales and folklore were popular throughout Europe as set off by 'Grimm brothers', 'literary tales by Andersen' and memorably consolidated by 'Andrew Lang's twelve colored fairy books. In the 19th century these literary fairy tales made a curious impression and experienced a huge vogue as 'fairy tale genre'.

Fairy tales are those simple stories that function in the vernacular as a synonym of lies, are shorthand for predating literary fantastic, reflecting critical, cultural and historical context in which they have been formulated. As a genre, they provide a familiar literary form that demonstrates fundamentals of literature. The tales are living stories that continue to speak of the universal human condition and struggle to find the meaning of life. My endeavor in this paper is to connect fairy tale genre to postmodern culture, which is filled with images, as the narrative construction and manipulation of magic tale contributes to make different ideological effects within historical and social contexts.

This paper, through well-known fairytale intertexts, will demonstrate that postmodern era fairy tale is still relevant because of its nature combined with the facts that gives its lasting power over imagination.

KEYWORDS: fairy tales, postmodernism, intertexts, narrative

"Narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the story of mankind.... It is simply there, like life itself!"

Roland Barthes ("Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative")

Our constant, universal habit, scarcely changed over time, is to tell stories. Fantasy art has been a part of all human societies throughout history, it is found in abundant forms; fairytales, folklore, mythology, science fiction, religion and has been illustrated to reality being inextricably linked. Stories are important, irreplaceable and act as pacifiers. 'In this strange world of magic, they are often raw uncensored fears of the humans who created them from dark woodlands to cannibals, incest and wicked stepmothers.' They voice human thought, narrate the history, declare metaphors and unwraps human nature and behaviour. The stories that continue to speak of universal human conditions and struggle to find the meaning of life were narrated for entertainment and to some extent to help transmit their culture. Steadily, tales that

descended from the word of mouth were written and transmitted from culture to culture.

When we speak of fairy tales, we mean of several things at once. ‘Merriam Webster’ defines fairy tales as ‘A story in which improbable events led to a happy ending.’ One universally agreed upon matter is that fairy tales do not require fairies; they are just simple stories of humans and their dealings with magical beings or supernatural events. Fairy tales have certain predictable structure, they embody many folktales; in fact, it is a subgenre of folklore along with myths and legends. (Folktale is a term reserved for any tale derived from or existing in oral tradition and is generally preferred by folklorist and anthropologists. Having distinct etymologies and meanings fairy tales and folktales are used interchangeably.) ‘Tolkien’ further adds to the definition by stating that the main purpose of the tale may be ‘satire, adventure, morality, fantasy’. ‘Jack Zipes’ in his ‘The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales’ defines fairy-tale as “synthetic, artificial, and elaborate in comparison to the indigenous formation of the folk tale that emanates from communities and tends to be simple and anonymous.... The literary fairy tale is not an independent genre but can only be understood and defined by its relationship to the oral tales as well as to the legend, novella, novel, and other literary fairy tales that it uses, adapts, and remodels during the narrative conception of the author.” Jack Zipes in his book ‘Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre’ writes that

“If we accept the premise that most “simple forms” of narrative such as the fable, myth, anecdote, proverb, animal tale, exemplum, fabliau, and fairy tale owe them origins to oral transmission that cannot be dated, and if we also accept the premise that the interaction of oral modes of telling with writing systems brought about the development of literary genres, we can achieve a greater understanding of how and why the literary fairy tale took root as literacy developed.”

‘Jack Zipes’ says “Basic instincts are same throughout the world in human species “Basically fairy tales assimilate every culture in itself. They are not mere escapism but a tool for analysing reality in a symbiotic relationship with the imaginary. The Fairy tales and folktales have a long history within the civilizing process whereby the society determines its own structure of behaviour and relationships. ‘Having a long communal fireside, to the salons of the elite, to the psychologist’s couch, to nursery and finally returning to the modern big screen their meanings have changed over time as the stories have been edited due to distinctive flora and fauna and reedited to fit the period of the telling Tales being constantly rearranged and transformed to suit changes in tastes and values have drawn numerous interpretations and criticism. Socio-Historians and folklorists have maintained that each variant of a particular story has its own meaning within a given cultural context and is determined by the cultural context in which they are formulated. As ‘Maria Tatar’ points out
“Every rewriting of a tale is interpretation; and every interpretation is a rewriting.”

Fairy tales is an attempt to integrate art and life through inclusion of popular forms, popular culture, everyday reality; it is a vehicle for postmodern ideals leading to a

critique of our culture. Fairytale genre actually works to shape and structure our understanding of the world. I believe fairytale has always carried the connotation of “improbable fiction” and their existence is doubted in this postmodern scenario. My endeavor in this paper is to connect postmodern culture with fairytale genre because still “Fantasy and imagination” are part of human existence. It seems bizarre that fairytales, the imaginary, supernatural is aimed at demonstrating our way to live life and understand the world through experiencing technology but, yes such are the paradoxes of life. My argument is that there appears to be no truth outside from postmodern culture, but through consuming fairytales, its formulaic nature makes as much sense as anything else.

‘Kevin Paul Smith’ talks about the “use of fairytale as a genre” because some specialists like ‘Tzvetan Todorov’, ‘Bruno Bettelheim’ and ‘Maria Tatar’ have placed magical events in an entirely other world thus aligning fairytale with fiction of utopian nature. But fairytale tropes can be found in contemporary fiction i.e. its incorporation into novels, ‘Disneyfication’ and to suit the changing times progressing through intertextuality and aiming towards ‘Moral Quotient’. It takes place on both verbal and visual levels.

"The notion of intertextuality refers to all kinds of links between two or more texts: irony, parody, literacy and extra literary allusions, direct quotations or indirect references to previous texts, fracturing of well-known patterns, and so on" (Nikolajeva and Scott, 2001 p. 228).

In this paper I will discuss two fairy tales on the basis of Hypertextuality i.e., ‘the relationship between a late coming text and its pretext’ (Still and Worton)

‘Margaret Atwood’ in her novel ‘The Robber Bride’ uses the technique of intertextuality by embedding a synopsis of fairy tale ‘Bluebeard’. ‘Angela Carters’ collection of short stories ‘The bloody Chamber’ is based on familiar tales such as ‘Red Riding Hood’ and ‘Beauty and the Beast’ many other authors like ‘Salman Rushdie’, ‘A.S.Byatt’, ‘Robert Coover’ and ‘Nalo Hopkinson’ have also used intertextuality as a useful critical tool and emphasize on the use of fairy tale as a genre in postmodern scenario. The purpose of producing revised fairy tale is to create something new that incorporates the critical and creative thinking of the producer corresponding to the changed demands and tastes of the audience.

‘Bakhtin’ talks about ‘intentional hybridization’ in his essay ‘The Dialogic Imagination’ he quotes “two distinct utterances are fused into one, but internally they are still in dialogue with each other” As ‘Lee Harring’ says it “Fairy tales that derive from heterogeneous sources, or are composed of different, incongruous elements, are sometimes called ‘hybrid’ It means that they mingle elements usually thought to be incompatible. Some unexpected elements, perhaps an episode from elsewhere, crosses a boundary and fits in. A narrator may follow his first story with a second part, which is actually another story sometimes told by itself. Like in Cinderella’s first version by Giambattista Basile the protagonist ‘Zezolla’, is advised by her governess to kill the stepmother and to persuade the King to marry her, the governess. But then we find no such mention in Perrault’s and Grimm’s version. They directly talk about Cinderella being banished to the kitchen by her stepmother. In 18th century children were not perceived as needing protection from portrayals of violence due to prevalent surroundings.

Grimm’s ‘Cinderella’ stressed punishment more than the earlier versions of Perrault(1697) where Cinderella forgave her step-sisters for mistreating her and

introduced them at court. The Grimm's first version (1815) has Cinderella's sisters turning pale and being horrified when she becomes a princess, while in the second edition sister's punishment is to be blinded by pigeons pecking out their eyes. Maria Tatar on this observes that

“The weight is given to the punishment (often fully half the text is devoted to its description) and the disproportionate relationship between the childish offense and the penalty for it make the episode disturbing” (Tatar 1992, p. 34).

Relating 'Cinderella's presence in these postmodern times a movie adaptation 'A Cinderella Story' came up in 2005 after few Disney animated versions. Of course, wish fulfilment was at the film's heart and soul, utopian wishes for handsome prince and beautiful princess. But within its own world and on its own terms, the movie symbolises the changing times, Cinderella's glass slipper has been replaced by a sleek mobile phone, and the wicked stepmother spends her days having liposuction and tanning in the home solarium. The ugly sisters practise their Ester Williams aquarobics techniques wearing multi-coloured floral swimming caps, Prince Charming captains the football team, but he really wants to be a writer, and Cinders good-naturedly studies hard to get into Princeton and scrubs the floor of her beloved father's diner - wearing roller skates A Cinderella Story revisits the core of what the original fairy tale is about: real goodness will be recognised and evil will be vanquished and the message about pursuing your dreams comes through clearly. The filmmakers hook a few modern appliances, such as female intelligence ahead of good looks, sincerity and even obedience ahead of being cool. The aim was to promote decent values to a generation so starved of them in general. A Cinderella Story is not classic cinema, but it reasonably revisits the fairy tale with a modern spin in an American cultural setting.

The second tale 'Jack and the Beanstalk' is closely associated with the tale of 'Jack the Giant-killer'. It is known under a number of versions. In 'Joseph Jaccobs' version 'English Fairy Tales' 1890 Jack, a young lad living with his widowed mother and struggling in hard times is in love with the count's daughter and wishes to marry her. In desperation for money Jack is sent by his mother to sell their only cow at the market, but along the way he is apparently swindled by a man who offers him supposedly "magic" beans in exchange for the cow. As Jack slept, the beans germinated in the soil, and by morning a gigantic beanstalk grew in their place. On seeing the huge beanstalk, he climbed it and arrived in a land high up in the clouds, the castle of a giant, the giant quickly sensed a human and tried to kill him. However, Jack was saved by the giant's wife and as he escaped from the castle taking a bag of gold coins with him, later stealing a hen which laid golden eggs and finally stealing a magical harp that played by itself. He then proceeded to kill the giant in a murderous rage, for the all-powerful count must never know of his misdeeds. With the blood on his hands, he quickly climbed down the beanstalk and cut it. However, this was giant's blood and could not be washed off of his hands. The all-powerful count was most pleased with these gifts, and so he disregarded Jack's blood-stained hands. Jack married his beloved and knew riches for the rest of his days. But 'Andrew Lang's' version in his 'Red fairy book' 1895 is different because when Jack climbs the beanstalk, he meets a lady i.e., a fairy who narrates him the story of the castle which formally belonged to a king, Jack's father and now is in possession of the monstrous Giant from whom he should take revenge of his father's death and finally Jack and his mother live happily in the castle. In the film adaptation "Jack and the Beanstalk

2010” A fairy tale character, Jack who is about to flunk out of fairy tale school, must perform a heroic deed by Monday or fail miserably, just like his father before him. Anxious to make good, Jack sells his C.O.W. (Computer of Wonder) a video game for a handful of magic beans and a mysterious book that records his adventures as he's having them. Accompanied by a goose that ate a bean and underwent an amazing transformation Jack climbs the magic beanstalk to recover the fabled Harp of Destiny from the evil Giant who lives in the sky. Helping Jack on his perilous quest is the fearless young girl whom Jack meets on his journey and who also has a hidden agenda, as she was transformed into a harp by the giant when she refused to sing. With the changing technology and to suit the children's imagination, creativity, inquisitiveness fairytales have manifested themselves as the way of socializing them. We just cannot afford to get away with fairytales because Children's literature is a part of adult literature as *Ariès Phippes* clarifies that the 'family' and 'childhood' are ideas that function within cultural and social frameworks as carriers of changeable social, moral, and ethical values.

“If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent, read them more fairy tales.” “Albert Einstein”

Despite the various changes that have occurred in these stories with the advent of the technological era one thing has remained unchanged: the victory of good over evil. The moral behind the stories has not changed. Since the basic purpose of these tales is to teach good moral values and behavior, these tales always end with the defeat of the evil.

I conclude my paper by saying that fairy tales are considered part of cultural archive, when we read fairy tale; we engage in a cultural legacy that connects us with national heritages, hegemonic value systems and canonical ideologies that are both foreign and familiar to our modern-day experience. Walt Disney recognized and consequently capitalized on the universal draw of fairy tales with his animated feature films which again made fairy tales a part of cultural consciousness and mass entertainment.

The tales that have endured are those which most aptly reflect the social and political assumptions of social groups which control communities, economic, political and media institutions. No single approach or methodology is able to arrive at a correct interpretation of fairy tale and its cultural relativism; instead, different methodologies suit different critical and ideological purposes. It is important to consider the implications of fairy tales in the postmodern times, perhaps it is time to begin transforming them to reflect the tremendous changes that have occurred in the world and to make our life bearable.

“Humans need fantasy “simply” to be human.” — Terry Pratchett

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