

Fairy Tales : Unveiling the Invisible

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Abstract. This paper attempts to look afresh at the hidden meanings and interpretations of infamous fairy tales from the beginning of times. I have also touched upon the status of women in these tales which contributed to perpetuation of male dominance in society only to be challenged and changed by them in future. The tales are written in an attempt to encode the cultural values of their tellers and their society. While some stories go back hundreds, even thousands of years, the ways those stories are told and the elements presented, emphasised or omitted give us a lot of information about the messages each teller thought important.

Keywords : Enchantment; fairy tale; human nature; archetypes.

Each fairy tale has a true and strange hidden
fact in it. You can find it if you look for it.

Wynne Jones

M.H Abrams in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* defines, "Folklore, since the mid-nineteenth century, has been the collective name applied to sayings, verbal compositions, and social rituals that have been handed down solely, or at least primarily, by word of mouth and example rather than in written form" (Abrams 104-105). The title 'Fairy Tales' first appeared in *the Oxford Dictionary* in 1749 and the term was first used in a book titled *Contes des fées* by Madame D'aulnoy in 1698. The early tales come from France and Germany. Charles Perrault, a Frenchman was the first one to write down some of the most famous tales told today. A subgenre under Folklore, fairy tales can be seen as tales related to magic or folklore myths. Edgar Allan Poe said, "a short story can be read at one sitting of from half an hour to two hours, and is limited to a certain unique or single effect to which every detail is subordinate. A short story differs from novel, the unelaborated narration of a single incident, in that, like the novel, it organises the action, thought, and dialogue toward particular effects on an audience" (295). It is believed to have been passed down from generations, there is a little element of truth contrary to the magic and supernatural element emphasised in fairy tales.

Vladimir Propp focuses on structuralist criticism in context of folktale. He says, "... all fairy tales can be reduced to a set of seven characters who generate the entire plot through their various relationships. Propp's list included, Hero, False hero, Villain, Donor or provider, Helper, Princess and her father and Dispatcher. He further identified 31 functions to be found in every folktale namely, absention, interdiction, violation, reconnaissance, delivery, trickery, complicity, villainy and

Received : 30th April, 2020; Accepted : 1st June, 2020

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lack, mediation, counteraction, departure, first function of donor, hero's reaction, receipt of magic agent, spatial transference, struggle, branding, victory, liquidation, return, pursuit, rescue, unrecognised, unfounded claims, difficult task, solution, recognition, exposure, transfiguration, punishment, wedding" (Nayar 17-18).

Fairy tales have over the years been through rigorous interpretations relevant to the times we live in. For instance, the infamous 'Cinderella', instilled the notion of stepmother as someone who is cruel or unfair. It portrays the harsh reality of difference in social order which till today exists. Another famous fairy tale 'Beauty and the Beast' focuses on how every girl firmly believes in meeting a charming prince. The other side of the story tells us how looks are not to be considered as a measure of people's worth. The beauty lies in the inside and as rightly said by Shakespeare in *Love's Labour Lost* that beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder.

"Little Red Riding Hood" could be seen as a means of instilling fear for strangers in children and how dangerous it is in contemporary times to trust strangers as the girl is eaten by a wolf in Charles Perrault's version of the story. The message is to be aware in the unknown paths. Perrault penned this down in 17th century France for aristocratic people:

Children, especially attractive, well bred young ladies, should never talk to strangers, for if they should do so, they may well provide dinner for a wolf. I say "wolf," but there are various kinds of wolves. There are also those who are charming, quiet, polite, unassuming, complacent, and sweet, who pursue young women at home and in the streets. And unfortunately, it is these gentle wolves who are the most dangerous ones of all.
(www.pitt.edu)

The interpretation of this moral could be as a Wolf is smooth talking aristocrat which could be taken as seduction i.e. the wolf is male seducer. Allegorically, it is a story about rape and seduction given the violence of rape in French incarnation of story in 17th century. In another version, it is the cannibalism of grandmother.

In another version by Paul Delarue, oral folktale collected from Peasants a French folklorist who published "The Story of Grandmother" which is a version of the 'Little Red Riding Hood' written by Charles Perrault, a mother sends her daughter to her grandmother with a bottle of milk and loaf of bread. On her way she encounters the wolf who asks her:

"What path are you taking," said the werewolf, "the path of needles or the path of pins?"

"The path of needles," the little girl said.(1)

Instead of killing her grandmother, he cooks some of her flesh and uses blood as wine in order to serve the girl:

"Take some of the meat which is inside and the bottle of wine on the shelf."(1)

The girl unknowingly eats and drinks her granny and somehow manages to escape thereby leaving the wolf alone and outwitting him with her tactics.

This alludes to Eucharistic prayer, in which according to the teaching of the Catholic Church, Transubstantiation is the change of the whole substance of bread into the substance of the Body of Christ and of the whole substance of wine into the substance of his Blood. The reason the girl outwits the wolf is because she consumes her granny's strength. She incorporates her granny's strength and wisdom. The girl's wit, choice of path of needles and ingestion of grandmother could be read as her initiation into womanhood. The two similar tales convey different interpretations. "Hare and Tortoise" taught us how slow and steady wins the race and overconfidence only hampers the progress of a person. "Rapunzel" explores the notion of long hair in girls and how it is considered as a means to measure a woman's beauty, the stereotypical notion of seeing a girl's worth through her physical features. "Hansel and Gretel" shows the notion of stepmother as being cruel and how children possess the power to outwit ogres into whose hands they have involuntarily fallen. It also focuses on the innocence and naivety of children at the fall in the trap of a witch but later discovers a means to go back to their home.

M. Gaster in "The Modern Origin of Fairy-Tales" differentiates between the plot, or story, and the incidents, or means by which the plot is carried out. The former is the skeleton, the latter the surrounding flesh, blended, not born together, i.e., the tale is composed of two elements, "one stable, ancient, and unchanged, to a great extent, at least, throughout the migration period, the other changeable, derived from various sources, and national" (Gaster 6-7). He further stresses upon the importance of supernatural elements, "... for a novel or a story to become a fairy-tale one essential character had to be added, the supernatural element, something which is extraordinary, either such an object to be acquired, as water of youth, descent to hell, or the hero is helped by the interference of an unexpected and unaccounted-for assistance, coming from a part whence he never suspected it, thankful animals, saints, &c., or the hero fights a supernatural enemy (dragons, giants, ghosts, who haunt deserted houses) intermixed with various similar incidents" (346-347).

Fairy tales help children to explore themselves, to distinguish between good and evil, and no matter how bad the situation is, the end will always be good! Cashden in "The Witch Must Die" talks about the prevalence of seven deadly sins

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in fairy tales i.e envy, deceit, gluttony, lust, and sloth, giving children a safe stage on which to confront their own "deadly sins". For instance, 'Hansel and Gretel' are lured in Gingerbread house by a witch. This relates to Gluttony or excessive need of food. Cashden elegantly analyzes how fairy tales speak to human concerns, highlighting the roles played by iconic images like glass slippers and gingerbread houses, stepmothers, and sorcerers.

A fairy tale is a short story of enchanted tales that takes us to another world. They are the outcome of oral tales which was exercised upon the mind and soul of the people during centuries. It uses symbols in the form of red apple, gingerbread house, castles, a repertoire of picture motifs and incorporates dark sides as well, stepmothers, cruel siblings, parents abandoning children. It is a hallmark of humanity, no other species that survives story telling. The stories are carriers of thought and see life through the lens of a happy ending.

The use of words "Once upon a time" signifies that stories aren't for real. Innocence and seduction in "Rapunzel", monstrosity and compassion in "Beauty and the Beast", cannibalism and abandonment in "Hansel and Gretel", depression and despair in "Batu Belah Batu Berrangkup", male dominance and female empowerment in "The Story of Bayagong" are such words.

The Italian writer Gianni Rodari, famous for imagination, fairy tales, folk tales, children's stories, cognitive development, and compassionate education talks about the protagonists of fairy tales who always end up stepping out of the house. Snowwhite, Red Riding Hood, Hansel and Gretel, all leave their place which can be interpreted as means to confront their own anxieties of abandonment and fear. Reading these stories which end happily gives them the confidence to deal with anxiety in them.

Hans Wilhem, a children's book author says that originally stories were written for adults and later Charles Perrault and Grimm Brothers had to tone them down. He elaborates further that the drama the hero goes through is the karmic effect of courses that we have set in this or previous life that is coming back to us. Our present is the result of our past thoughts, words and actions coming back to us not as punishment but as a learning opportunity to see how our words and thoughts have impacted others. It is an ingenious thought for learning and growing and waking up to the one who will be truly ours. Everything is arranged for the benefit of the hero even if he does not look at it that way while facing witches, giants and other dangers. The message for young girls goes that girls should be beautiful, kind-hearted which sets unrealistic gender expectation and social pressures on girls.

Cinderella and Snow white are expected to be passive and obedient. Their beauty and kindness makes sure that someone else i.e a handsome prince will take care of them. The stories depict men or rather heroes as strong, brave and clever.

Symbolic archetypes, such as, glass slipper and light versus dark in case of Cinderella, the colour, red in "Little Red Riding Hood", the crossroads, and Haven versus wilderness in "Hansel and Gretel" only build up on the expectations of society and females in general. It is a painful process that we have to go through to become who we truly are. Every fairy tale follows a set pattern of guaranteed happy ending in every situation, story and circumstance. He emphasises on the importance of faith. The structure of fairy tales is flat, simple, hardly any description just names, forces us to build imagination, to fill the gaps.

"Adventurous Princess and Other Feminist Fairy Tales" by Erin-Claire Barrow is a retelling of nine traditional fairy tales with a feminist twist. The tales open up new worlds full of enchantment and adventure, but many of these traditional stories also reinforce rigid gender roles and norms, perpetuate stereotypes, and lack diversity in their characters. In the book, the charm, whimsy, and magic of traditional fairy tales remain, but the diverse characters challenge stereotypes about who they should be or how they should act, stand up for themselves, and shape their own futures. What if Beauty stood up, Stepmothers stood for compassion and Cinderella took her revenge on all the females of her household.

William Kilpatrick, writer of the book *Books That Build Character* states, "We think many parents want books for their children that are not simply a good read but good in the other sense of the word- books that not only capture the imagination, but cultivate the conscience as well." (Kilpatrick, 1994).

Aaron Tinker mentions in "Explaining Adolescent Reality: How Fairy Tales Explain Uncomfortable Truths", they show us a watered-down version of the grotesque world we reside in. Before we were exposed to the "diseyfied" version of these stories, classic fairy tales, such as the ones written by Perrault and Grimm Brothers emulated brutal truths about society. These became cautionary tales meant to teach moral lessons that adolescents could one day recall as they cope with injustices of human life and human nature. The adaptations to the stories add elements that capture the eye and at the same time teach us valuable lessons. The foremost popular fairy tales have changed with each telling and yet their core remains the same.

As rightly said by Albert Einstein, "If you want your child to be intelligent, read them fairy tales". (Winick. blogs.loc.gov) Fairy tales have been pursued by children for a long time by guardians trusting these stories of heroes, heroines and legends would give an enjoyable and intriguing approach to teach morals and values. These tales furnish children with an engaging approach to manage strangers. Children discover that when you don't follow the rule and converse with strangers you're placed into situations that can cause pain and suffering to others. Children additionally create unconscious messages and start to analyse the underlying messages as they develop and consider themselves the characters in the stories

and themselves in the various situations that the characters encounter.

One study conducted by German Center for Fairy Tale published in the journal *Innovation in Aging* to analyze and better understand the effects of fairy tale narrations on people with dementia and challenging behaviour living in nursing homes states the leading question as: Do fairy tale narratives as psycho-social intervention improve the participants' well-being? "The study provides scientific evidence that structured and free fairy tale narrating addresses the needs of people with dementia, reduces their challenging behaviour, activates resources and should be offered regularly to enhance their well-being" (I. Kollak 171-172).

I conducted a survey with the first year college students and discovered that students who were exposed to these stories in the early childhood were more creative and imaginative contrary to the students who were far away from oral storytelling and attending schools in childhood.

In "Folklore and Fairy Tales", Clarese associates "the tales with primitive myths such as to associate Bluebeard and his forbidden chamber with Perseus and Andromeda, Sleeping Beauty with Persephone, Jack and the Beanstalk with Icarus, is but to supply another and intermediate link in the chain that joins the fairy story to its remote and primitive. We have abundant vestigial remains of an original primitive myth if we co-relate our modern tale with classical myth and legend" (James Clarese, 6-7).

The power of fairy tales lied in its simplicity. They give us hope and optimism because no matter how grave the situation, by magical transformation, supernatural occurrences, helpful and talking animals, marrying a prince and outmaneuvering a wolf would solve the situation and give us a happy ending.

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