SAMPLE LITERARY CONTEXT ESSAY

FOR CREATIVE WRITING THESIS PROJECTS

(FICTION)

Fairy tales are an integral part of American culture. From *Grimm's Fairy Tales*—what most people consider the "classic" or "traditional" fairy tales—to Disney movies, the idea of the fairy tale permeates our society, present to such a degree that disciplines from literature studies to anthropology to folklore have considered what fairy tales mean to us. While the written fairy tale is, at its base, literary, the social sciences also can illuminate the origin and meaning of fairy tales. The concept of the fairy tale has gone through many permutations in western society, and in recent years, fairy tale retellings have become ever more popular, suggesting that fairy tales still have a deep resonance here. The contemporary[1] literary retelling of the fairy tale simultaneously functions as art, pop culture, and folklore, and as such, can reflect society, influence its norms, and/or question societal values and stereotypes.

Before we can talk about retellings, however, we must define the fairy tale. Despite the prevalence of study regarding fairy tales, attempts to define the genre are rare. A common feature in discussions of fairy tales is the assumption that a fairy tale has certain required elements, but those elements are generally not defined or listed—authors seem to assume that the elements are common knowledge. For instance, Elizabeth Wanning Harries points out that "When we speak of fairy tales, we seem to mean several things at once: tales that include elements of folk tradition and magical or supernatural

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[1] To clarify: By "contemporary," I mean from about 1970 to the present time, regardless of when and where the story itself might be set.

elements, tales that have a certain, predictable structure" (6). She goes on to discuss a

New Yorker cartoon that gives a "story template," with four frames that progress from

"Once upon a time" to "Suddenly," then to "Luckily," and then finish with "Happily ever

after," characterizing this as "stability, disruption, intervention, and stability regained"

(8). The difficulty with this pattern, of course, is that it describes most traditional

storytelling and essentially all genre fiction of today. For a more fairy-tale-specific

commentary, we can examine Vladimir Propp's morphology of the folktale[2]. His analysis

of Russian fairy tale motifs has often been applied to fairy tales overall.

Based on this idea of common or required elements, I have synthesized a

definition of fairy tales. As Propp argues, specific motifs and functions combine to create

the fairy tale, but of Propp's thirty-one motifs of the folktale, many seem inapplicable or

irrelevant to the most well-known fairy tales in the United States. Those which are

applicable I have condensed into six components, taking from Propp's cataloguing as

well as the work of various fairy tale analysts—including Jack Zipes, Maria Tatar, and

Harries—who discuss but do not delineate these concepts. These six components are the

structural elements of the traditional folk tale: an undefined place-time; archetypal/stock

characters with an omniscient narrator providing descriptions of their actions without

delving into internal thoughts; violation of a prohibition or command; some type of

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[2] I have chosen to use "folk tale" and "fairy tale" interchangeably, although some authors differentiate between these, Zipes among them; he states, "Fairy tales have been in existence as *oral folk tales* for thousands of years and first became what we call *literary fairy tales* toward the end of the seventeenth century" (2). Other scholars, including Propp, have attempted to differentiate between the oral folk tale and the literary fairy tale, with "literary" meaning simply "written," rather than "not commercial fiction," as it is often meant today by the term "literary fiction." This distinction would seem to suggest that the fairy tale is not folktale, or not folklore, which I would argue is not the case. While folklore is usually considered something that passes from one person to another by oral communication or behavioral example, and not something that is written or recorded, this is not an absolute definition. I will avoid delving too deeply into the discussion of folklore definitions, as it is tangential to the overall topic of fairy tales, noting only that given the overwhelming pervasiveness of the fairy tale, and considering the myriad forms in which it appears, a characterization of the fairy tale as anything other than folklore seems intransigent. The way in which fairy tales have been and are used in society supports the idea that they are a form of folklore; my interchangeable use of the terms reflects this.

magic; a test of the hero/heroine; and resolution of all conflicts by the end of the tale. Other features are common, e.g., the loss of a family member through leaving the home or dying, but these six components define the classic or traditional fairy tale as it appears in American culture.

As art, any tale reflects the social order and worldview of those who create it and makes a statement about their goals for telling it. The distinction between a fairy tale and another kind of story, however, lies in the cultural significance of the fairy tale as a form of folklore. In his essay "The Four Functions of Folklore," William Bascom indicates that those functions are amusement, validation of culture, education, and enforcement of cultural mores; folklore is "a means of applying social pressure and exercising social control" (346). Fairy tales reflect society's perception of itself and the desires of the portion of society in which the fairy tale originated. Many fairy tales reinforce stereotypes, as well, providing dire predictions of doom for straying from the prescribed path, particularly for personal gain. Zipes argues that, as folk tales moved from oral to literary at the end of the 17th century, they were appropriated: these "products of the imagination are set in a socio-economic context and are used ultimately to impose limitations on the imagination of the producers and receivers" (9). This presumes that there was a *change* in folk tales which resulted in their being used to perpetrate the value system of the upper class upon the peasantry. This seems like a very difficult assumption to prove, given that the majority of folk tales, in all their multiplicity of forms, reinforce long-standing cultural beliefs; additionally, Zipes implies that folk tales belong to only a particular segment of society, rather than being present in every aspect of a society. An alternative conclusion to draw from his evidence is that telling fairy tales has always had

a purpose, and the only things that change are the social norms and those telling the stories.

In a literary world where originality is prized, we have to wonder why the retelling of fairy tales remains so popular. Multiple small-press magazines devoted to fairy tales exist, along with a journal devoted to fairy tale studies[3], and many studies and critiques of fairy tales have been published in the last couple of decades. Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, published in 1979, remains popular today. Interestingly, Carter, as quoted by Helen Simpson in *The Guardian*, stated that she intended not to retell fairy tales, but "to extract the latent content from traditional stories and to use it as the beginnings of new stories" (1). Simpson, as she reviews Carter's stories, notes "these are new stories, not re-tellings," going on to say that Carter has "uncovered fresh folkloric fields." This seeming contradiction—how can a "new story" be "folkloric"?—is at the heart of the fairy tale retelling and explains why the concept, and the stories that result, are so popular. Bruno Bettelheim believes that the "struggle against severe difficulties" present in fairy tales reflects the same struggle in reality, serving as a way for individuals to explore their subconscious drives rather than as cultural artifacts for societal analysis (8); Tatar suggests that the primary purpose of fairy tales, past and present, has been a combination of entertainment and admonishment; and Zipes goes one step further, arguing that the upper class uses fairy tales to impose social control. I suggest that the purpose of fairy tales, while ostensibly entertainment, is more fundamentally intended— as Tatar and Zipes suggest, and as the categorization of the fairy tale as folklore would indicate—to reinforce traditional cultural values and stereotypes. A retelling can either serve the same purpose, or question those values.

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[3] *Marvels & Tales, Journal of Fairy-Tale Studies*

In considering the six functions and this idea of purpose, it seems that there are several possibilities for retelling the fairy tale, each of which can dictate or alter its purpose. One possibility is to retain every one of the six elements, along with the form. By form, I mean each plot element is retained and placed in order exactly as in the "original"[4] tale; details are altered merely so that they are, as Tatar puts it, "tailored to the cultural context in which they [are] told" (xvii): a literal retelling. The second option is to retain the plot elements while altering the form, as the Grimm brothers, Disney, and others have done. Alterations in form in these cases usually amend the tale to a story more suitable to the prevailing culture than the original; rather than changing only the wording, as in the first case, the *meaning* of the story becomes one more fitting to current societal ideals. Disney fairy tale movies, for example, primarily have reinforced, not questioned, mainstream culture. The versions from both Disney and the Brothers Grimm would be "duplicates," according to Harries' explanation of the way Zipes differentiates between retellings: "duplicates reinforc[e] 'the deeply entrenched modes of thinking, conceiving, believing that provide our lives with structure'" (14). Thus, the "duplicate" retelling acts in the same way that folklore usually does: to reinforce culture.

Another retelling option involves altering one or more of the structural elements. Tthis usually happens in combination with the retention of what we might consider the "markers" of the story: those things which make us able to identify it as a fairy tale and as a specific fairy tale. This markers lie within the characters and the roles they play, as well

[4] The idea of an "original" fairy tale is of course something of an impossibility; as Tatar notes, "fairy tales…did not require editorial interventions in an earlier age, precisely because they were brought up to date by their tellers and tailored to the cultural context in which they were told" (xvii). There is no ur-form of the fairy tale that can be found, but only increasingly older variations; when we go back far enough, some tales blur into other tales (as can be seen even in the collection of the Brothers Grimm, where we have both "Snow White" and "Snow-White and Rose-Red.") In this case, I am using "original" to mean "the version Americans are most familiar with," which in some cases is the version from the Brothers Grimm, in some cases is Disney, and probably in most is a conglomerate of those two and many others.

as specific plot themes, but is separate and distinct from the structural elements. Such markers are what allow us to recognize the story as folklore. The title story of Carter's collection, a retelling of the story of Bluebeard, might seem to have little connection to the original: only a few happenings are supernatural; it takes place in a set time and place; the husband is never referred to as Bluebeard; it is told in first person and the protagonist is a rounded character; and the ending is significantly altered. However, the story retains the markers that allow us to identify it as the story of Bluebeard. The husband goes away for business, leaving his keys in the possession of his young wife with an admonishment not to use the one key or to look in the one room, and when she disobeys the injunction, she discovers his dead wives. These things are the signposts that tell us we are reading an oft-repeated theme, a story we all know, and one that is part of our culture. It is because of our ability to identify these markers and themes that the retelling—and study of—fairy tales is becoming ever more popular in American culture. Retelling a story with markers that we can recognize provides a way to tell a story that feels familiar, but challenges societal assumptions, in a fashion that an entirely "new" story, or at least, one without specific cultural markers, cannot—a way of working within the system to question the system. This is why I have focused on the area of retelling fairy tales, both as art for their own sake and as stories of cultural significance.

Snow White

The story of Snow White is one of the best-known fairy tales among Americans, and as Tatar notes, it is "widely disseminated across a variety of cultures" (79). The Disney version of the tale is probably the most well-known one in the United States, and may be responsible for the initial popularity of the story. Bettelheim and Tatar suggest

that the core of the tale lies in its mother-daughter conflict. Tatar emphasizes the conflict between the mother and stepdaughter, and also notes the theme of patriarchal beauty standards in the Grimm version. Carter's version presented in *The Bloody Chamber*, "The Snow Child," is very short, with vivid and brutal imagery, keeping the characters the same as the Grimms' version—the queen/stepmother, the king, and Snow White—while almost completely eradicating the structural elements. The theme of the story is the jealousy and conflict between the queen and Snow White, with an interesting minor twist: the king's wish produces Snow White, whereas in most versions, the king's first wife creates Snow White from her wish for a daughter "white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as wood" (Grimm, 329).

Tanith Lee, in *White as Snow*, alters the form of the Snow White story. She retains the magic and, largely, the events that occur, but combines them with the story of Demeter and Persephone, drawing the structural elements together into a changed form. The seeming purpose of the story is first to pay homage to the sex and violence present in fairy tales from the start, and secondly to draw parallels between myth, ancient pagan practice, and fairy tale in a way that the modern reader can understand. We receive the thoughts of the characters, but not in a way that violates the structural elements: both "Snow White"/Coira/Persephone and the Queen/Arpazia/Demeter are baffling figures, ones who move through life in a daze according to the dictates of those around them. The most fundamental differences in this tale are the changing and partial redemption of the dwarfs and the dangerous insanity of the prince, both of which suggest that things are not always as they seem, that judging by appearances can be terribly dangerous, and that the prince may not be the desired goal. Lee presents a slightly subversive tale, but still one

that continues to reinforce cultural values. The female characters are passive/victims and the male characters are actors/saviors. Coira does not want or get the prince, but she does in the end acquire a man to rescue and care for her.

In my treatment of the Snow White story, I chose to write in the second person from the viewpoint of the mirror. While the (step)mother/daughter conflict is central to the *plot* of the story, the other fundamental theme of the story is the significance of physical beauty. In the Grimms' version, we never discover why beauty is so important to the Queen, learning only that she is "proud and overbearing" (329). This seems like an amazing omission that, while characteristic of the distanced narrator of the fairy tale, has not been much addressed in retellings. The mirror has often been seen as a symbolic representation of the father/King, but that interpretation gives short shrift to the potential greater symbolism of the mirror as a reflection of culture, and, within the story, its ability to dictate what the Queen believes. Using the mirror as narrator—and as one shown to be unreliable—allows me to induce uncertainty and ambiguity about what is truly happening in the story, just as cultural influences cause ambiguity in real-world events.

The mirror's interpretation of reality and emphasis on physical beauty influences the Queen, creating conflict between both women and the mirror as much as between the two women. Tatar comments that the queen in the Disney film is a "figure of gripping narrative energy" while Snow White is "dull" (80). Although Tatar is correct that, at least in that version, the Queen is the driving narrative force, the Queen is very rarely represented in a sympathetic light. When she is, as in Neil Gaiman's "Snow, Glass, Apples," the dichotomy between the "good" and the "bad" woman (yet another variant of the Madonna/Whore complex) still exists; it's simply that they've changed roles.

The Grimms' bare-bones telling of Snow White leaves a great deal of potential. My goal was to create a story in which the Queen retains her usual role, while I direct the action so the mirror tells the reader what is happening, and also place the reader in the position of the Queen due to the use of second person. The Queen may be impossible to *like*, but if the reader can sympathize with her, that could lead the reader to question the patriarchal beauty ideal that is forcing the Queen's actions. With women valued only for their beauty and fertility, age becomes a terrifying enemy to battle regardless of the cost. Additionally, the reasons for the Queen's actions give the story depth that allows the reader to connect with the tale emotionally, one for which the potential has always existed in a story with such cultural resonance, but one that is rarely explored.

The Frog Prince

Another story with easily-recognized elements, the Frog Prince is an odd case. Even the title is unsettled, with "Frog Prince" as the cognomen society most often uses for that character, although the Grimms' version is "The Frog King, or Iron Heinrich/Henry." That version has the princess dash the frog against a wall, thereby changing him into a prince "with beautiful kind eyes" (3). In the first English translation of the story, by Edgar Taylor, the princess still tries to avoid her responsibilities, but she never commits an act of violence against the frog. Tatar notes that "some versions disseminated in the United States" have the princess kiss the frog to transform him into a human prince, but no such version seems to be extant. Despite this, the idea that kissing a frog turns him into a prince is prevalent in United States culture, and many people would be very surprised to learn that a petulant intended homicide by the princess frees the frog from his spell in the Brothers Grimm's story. This, in itself, is one of the reasons that I

chose to retell this story; for something so integrated into our society, the story itself is little-known.

According to Tatar, Bettelheim's Freudian interpretation of "The Frog King" shows the princess balancing between the pleasure principle and the superego; given that she "wins" by giving in to her violent urges, this view seems difficult to support. The story is more of an object lesson in how a woman who accepts favors from a stranger may find herself bound to a much greater degree than she expected. Additionally, the theme of the princess being forced by her father to fulfill her promises, with the resultant marriage, is one that speaks of patriarchal society, with very little interpretation or analyzing required. This led me to present the story as one in which "happily ever after" is questioned: the princess tells the story of how they met and the former frog contests her interpretation of events.

Rumpelstiltskin

One of the few well-known fairy tales with no accompanying Disney film, Rumpelstiltskin is, as Tatar notes, "troubling" (123), with a set of characters who seem "rash, irresponsible, and recklessly opportunistic" (124): the miller who lies to the king, the king who demands that the daughter spin straw into gold or die, the little man who demands her firstborn child in exchange for helping her, and the daughter who then refuses to keep her part of the bargain. By today's standards, none of them seems likeable or sympathetic. Tatar remarks that "Rumpelstiltskin comes off rather well" in the Brothers Grimm version, citing his willingness to fulfill his part of the bargain and even to allow the queen a possibility for escaping part of it (128). While this assessment matches our current moral standards, it seems inconceivable that the Grimms intended

that conclusion, given the negative way in which the story ends for Rumpelstiltskin. Tatar focuses on the theme of Rumpelstiltskin as the demonic helper, while a version of the story in *Black Thorn, White Rose* presents him as a more sympathetic character, with the prince portrayed as evil. In an interesting twist, the miller's daughter in that story forces Rumpelstiltskin to take her child because it is the only way to save him from madness—a fascinating look at the viewpoint of the woman forced into action repugnant to her because she has no other power.

One of the aspects I focused on in my retelling of Rumpelstiltskin was that of his physical presentation. Described only as a "little man" in the Brothers Grimm version, the various artistic representations of him—including those Tatar includes—show him as a dark, twisted, and diabolical gnome. The story itself does not give such a description, but the prevailing concept of Rumpelstiltskin is one of ugliness, perhaps due to medieval beliefs that outward appearance reflects inner character. This is something that I have attempted to address in my retelling. The other prevailing theme in the original is the importance of a name, which analysis has often suggested relates to an overall belief in the power of names at the time. However, in a society where a fatherless child is a "nameless" bastard, a name can be significant in other ways.

My retelling partially retains the idea of an unspecified time and place, but there is an inclusion of alchemical activities, which gives it some sense of placement in time. Rather than focusing on the plight of the miller's daughter whose father boasts that she can spin straw into gold, I chose to make the daughter a more rounded character. The story is told from the first-person viewpoint of Rumpelstiltskin, partly because I think it is more interesting to see the viewpoint of the "magical helper," and partly because in its

original form, the story suggests that those who are different—small, dark, crippled—are necessarily evil and not like "us." Providing a viewpoint character (in contrast to the usual fairy tale vantage point, which might most accurately be described as "limited omniscient") gives the story a great deal more depth. Given that we often think of fairy tales as portraying human nature, I want the characters to be comprehensible, plausible, and sympathetic. Instead of creating sympathy for the miller's daughter because she is the victim/heroine of the tale, I think a more balanced story can imply questions about who the true villain is, and whether the situation as presented can allow the reader to judge any character wholly good or wholly evil.

Synthesis

The final fairy tale I will be writing is, in a sense, "original," in that it is not based on one specific story. I've attempted to take cultural fairy tale markers and use them to create a story that should have resonance for Americans without pointing to a particular story. This story takes elements from several fairy tales, primarily those in which a virgin maiden is demanded as a sacrifice to save a town or country from the depredations of a dragon. Jack Zipes suggests that fairy tales are used to force a top-down value system upon societies. I disagree only with his belief that reinforcing value systems is a *recent* function of fairy tales. One of, perhaps *the*, primary function of folklore and folktales is to reinforce culture. The myriad tales of maidens sacrificed to dragons or other monsters reflect society's belief that women are disposable and that their value lies only in their ability to supply dowries and produce offspring. The story is from the viewpoint of one such maiden and gives her reaction to discovering the willingness of her parents and countryfolk to sacrifice her for their own comfort, including a self-reflective aspect in

which she thinks about how her own response to similar tales was never to feel sympathy for the woman's plight but to cheer for the hero to rescue her. This could be seen as the heroine coming to a feminist awakening: firstly, the realization of her connection to other women and her own oppression, and secondly, her decision to act. Feminist critiques of fairy tales often focus on the lack of agency that women in the stories possess, and this offering is one way of addressing that.

Conclusion

In discussing the purpose of retelling fairy tales, it may seem as though the only reason to retell a fairy tale is to support or oppose cultural norms. However, I refer again to the fact that Bascom noted that "amusement" was one of the functions of folklore. Amusement is not merely a sidebar or an irrelevancy; it is fundamental to society. Analysis of fairy tales often implies that the only reason to write or read a fairy tale is to examine the cultural significance of it, but the idea of latent versus manifest function, or secondary versus overt functions, is one that is deeply relevant to this discussion. The functions discussed above, both of my retellings and those of others, are almost entirely secondary/latent. Writing a story to prove a point is rarely successful and one's time would usually be better spent writing a nonfiction essay on the same topic. The overt function of every story in this collection is the same that every piece of art possesses: to entertain, amuse, and perhaps, if the artist is successful, provoke an emotional response. My purpose is to question culture; the function of the stories is to entertain.

What makes using folklore for this purpose particularly rewarding is that by using symbols, markers, and structural elements to construct a story, a writer can create something that can both stand alone as a story and become part of our repository of

cultural knowledge. Bascom's second function of folklore, "validating

culture…justifying its rituals and institutions to those who perform and observe them,"

can be seen another way (344). Validation, in the popular sense, can simply mean

providing a feeling of communality, solidarity, and sharing. When we read a fairy tale,

we are sharing in thousands of years of folktales. Royalty, secluded forest cottages, frogs

with crowns, talking mirrors, talking animals, and the myriad other markers—when we

encounter them, they speak to something within us, telling us that *here* is a fairy tale, that

we are entering the world of "Once upon a time…" That is a connection worth exploring.

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