

Unveiling The Illusion Of Fairy Tales: Violence And Its Implications On Children

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Abstract: The desire for revenge and eventual murder are often attributed to psychological causes. Oblivious to the adverse impact of fairy tales on the minds of young readers, more often than not children are introduced to crimes like murder, revenge and suicide at a very young age through fairy tale narratives. Two German brothers, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, published a book of fairy tales in the year 1812. According to the Grimms, these stories were founded on ancient folktales, and were intended to provide a blueprint for a new national German identity. However, these fairytales have a darker side to the otherwise happy tales of magic and magical creatures. The objective of this paper will be to trace the concepts of revenge, murder and suicide in Grimm Brothers' The Juniper Tree, Snow White and Rumpelstiltskin and how they are cushioned under the facade of a 'just ending'.

Keywords: Fairy tales, Crime, Grimm Brothers, Murder, Revenge, Suicide.

Fairy tales are introduced to children at a very young age where they are enamoured by the fantastical worlds of magical creatures and enchanted settings. However fairy tales are not restricted to children alone; young and old adults do occasionally indulge in a dose of fairy tales. The sequence of events in a fairy tale unfolds in a way that grasps the attention of the reader: beginning with the description of nature or setting to the hero and his/her adventures followed by a 'just ending'. The origin of fairy tales is unknown for it had emerged from an oral tradition to the present written versions. "Long ago, fairy and folk tales, replete with violence and bawdy humour, were told mostly around peasant hearths or during long, monotonous tasks in the kitchen and barn. It was not until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the French collector of tales, Charles Perrault, and the German Grimm brothers brought these stories into the parlour that they lost some of their violence and much of their explicit humour." The influence of fairy tales over various cultures is tremendous and so is their impact on the minds of young consumers of these tales.

"Considering that most support for the tales praises their value in regard to the psychological development of children, and acknowledging the psychological premise that childhood

experiences determine later adult behaviour" (Clack 7). The paper attempts to look at how three of the Grimm Brothers fairy tales consist of material unsuitable for young readers.

"Fantasy", a key element in fairy tales has been defined as "imagination; the process or the faculty of forming mental representations of things not actually present"(Baker). Fairy tales are written using vivid imagery which produces "images perceived through sensory experience" (Baker) which are stored in the subconscious and it in turn helps in the formation of mental images.

Charles Perrault, the first of the authors who compiled classic fairy tales in a written form, said "Virtue is rewarded everywhere and vice is always punished" (Roberts 512) This is a main recurring feature of fairy tales where the tale seeks to distinguish between the good and the evil by "positive and negative reinforcement" respectively. "...in the Grimms' Snow White, innocent and industrious Snow White is again rewarded by marriage to a prince, while her envious and wicked stepmother is forced to dance in red-hot iron shoes until she burns to death at Snow White's wedding ceremony"(Roberts 513). Fairy tales aim to impart values through a fantastic setting: "For generations of children and adults, fairy tales have encapsulated social values, often

through the use of fixed characters and situations, to a far greater extent than any other oral or literary form. In many societies, fairy tales function as a paradigm both for understanding society and for developing individual behaviour and personality” (Bottigheimer).

THE JUNIPER TREE

Juniper Tree, one of the most famous Grimms fairy tales is concocted with a mixture of jealousy, greed, murder and cannibalism. The fairy tale makes for a perfect horrendous murder story where a stepmother murders her handsome stepson in order to secure her daughter’s inheritance. The stepmother cleans up the murder scene and arranges the slaughtered head on the boy’s body in such a way that, when the little girl punches her brother playfully, the boy’s head topples right over. The mother consoles her daughter for ‘murdering’ her brother and to clear up the crime scene, she cooks the boy into puddings which is fed to the boy’s father who consumes the meal unaware of its contents.

RUMPELSTILTSKIN

A miller once bragged to the king how his daughter could spin straw into gold. The greedy king locked the girl up in a room for her to spin gold from hay. The girl, who was no magician, cried awaiting her inevitable death when an elf appeared in her crisis, and offered to spin her straw to gold. The girl offered the elf jewellery twice and the third time she promised her first born child if she married the king. A year later, after all was forgotten, the elf came back to claim the queen’s new born child.

The queen was given three days’ time to guess the name of the elf, failing which her child will be gone forever. The elf was an arrogant one who believed no one would ever find out his name. Thanks to his own foolishness and arrogance, the queen finds out his name-‘Rumpelstiltskin’. The elf was outrageous. Unable to bear the courtier’s jeering and overcome with shame, “Rumpelstiltskin stamps his foot through the floor, and when he cannot pull it out he turns on himself, seizes his other leg, and rips himself in two” (Grimm and Grimm, 2003).

SNOW WHITE AND THE SEVEN DWARVES

Hatred from the stepmother drives Snow White deep into the forests to save herself from the Queen’s evil clutches. She escapes death twice when her stepmother i.e the evil Queen attempts to murder her under disguise. The third successful attempt by the Evil queen ensures that she got the response her “envious heart” desired the most - “looking-glass, looking-glass, on the wall, who in this land is the fairest of all.” And it answered at last, “oh, queen, in this land thou art fairest of all” (Grimm and Grimm).

A Prince who came by Snow White’s lifeless body lay down in a coffin in the forest couldn’t bear to leave the beautiful Princess lying there. He carries her away with her and miraculously the poisoned apple that lay stuck in Snow White’s throat pops out rendering her alive. The Prince offers to make her his bride and the two make way to his Kingdom.

When the queen comes to know that Snow White was alive, she made her way to the wedding only to be made to dance in “red-hot shoes and dance until she dropped down dead” (Grimm and Grimm).

The above three fairy tales each focus on three major crimes –

- ✓ jealousy that leads to murder
- ✓ embarrassment that leads to suicide
- ✓ revenge that leads to death.

“Robbery, jealousy, and vengeance are the three motives responsible for nearly all murders”, according to Dr. George Burgeas Magrath ’94, professor of Legal Medicine, and medical examiner of Suffolk County. Disputes over property have become common over the years. Several newspaper incidents indicate how families and individuals are murdered over disputes relating to ownership of properties. The concept of ‘rightful inheritance’ is brought forth in the Fairy Tale “The Juniper Tree” where the mother wishes to eliminate her stepson – “he would always stand in the way of her own child, and she was continually thinking how she could get the whole of the property for her. This evil thought took possession of her more and more...”

A child reading this story may or may not instinctively react to the story. However, since fairy tales are written in a way that they conjure up vivid visual images; the probability of the child having the image of the fairy tale embedded in his/her subconscious is high. Further on in the child’s life, if he/she encounters unpleasant situations, the prospects of the repressed images are sure to surface which might lead to a greater crime. Because “fairy tales do not merely encode social arrangements from the past, but also participate in their creation for the future, the misogyny, violence, and anti-Semitism in many of the tales can, despite our best intentions, perpetuate itself in the subconscious of younger generations”(Lewis).

When a fantastic fairy tale is introduced to a young child, for eg: Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, which involves the perfect Princess, Dwarves and a ‘Prince Charming’, the image that the fairy tale conjures up is quite unforgettable. Therefore the idea of ‘revenge’ is reinforced by the fairy tale over and over again. “Forgiveness is a rare event in fairy tales; revenge is much more common, and the justice in the fairy tale is primarily retributive in nature” (Roberts). Writing for children might seem simple but unknown to authors, certain images that emerge from stories, embed themselves in the mind of the child and these image resurface later on in their lives only to endanger their lives and the lives around them.

When crimes like murder and suicide are attributed to psychological causes, the root cause for such actions could be the stories that a person must’ve read during their childhood. “To be of optimum benefit, fairy tales should be repeated at least four times. The repetitions allow the child to (1) listen for pleasure and concentrate on the story; (2) listen again already knowing the outcome, regardless of attention to detail; (3) listen once more to the plot, but picking up on the less apparent twists and turns of plot and story structure; and (4) listen with an assuredness that comes from complete familiarity with the story. During this fourth stage children’s fears are allayed as they fully identify with the central character who began his or her adventure at great

disadvantage, only to emerge victorious and receive just rewards” (Sparks). This kind of advocacy for fairy tales which involves repetition, leads to the embedding of the story in the child’s subconscious.

The fairy tales also nurture contempt towards their own parents and siblings. When the queen comes to know that Snow White was alive, she made her way to the wedding only to be made to dance in “red-hot shoes and dance until she dropped down dead” (Grimm and Grimm). The punishment meted out to the stepmother reinforces the recurring theme of revenge and is noticed in many of the fairy tales. When the said theme is emphasised in the fairy tales, children begin to believe in the very notion of revenge which eventually reflects on their behaviour.

The fairy-tale of Rumpelstiltskin portrays the downfall of a morbid character who commits suicide when his grandiose pretensions and sense of special entitlement are crushed (Maltsberger and Ronningstam). Unrealistic expectations of oneself often lead to disappointment, embarrassment and self-hate. These repressed feelings often manifest themselves as suicidal tendencies. The image of an elf “ripping himself into two” is not a very pleasant image for a young reader. Also, the notion of immediately resorting to ending one’s life because of disappointment sends out wrong signals to the readers of the fairy tale.

By the above quotes examples and studies, it can be understood that censorship is a crucial prerequisite in children’s literature, lest they come across values which will hinder their growth and affect their mental process.

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