

Introduction to Fairy Tales: Historical Contexts and Themes

Dr. Hope Jennings
Wright State University

Notes and quotations from: Andrew Teverson,
Fairy Tale (Routledge New Critical Idiom, 2013).

Also see Maria Tatar, ed., *The Classic Fairy Tales*,
Norton Critical Editions (W.W. Norton, 1999).



Studying Fairy Tales (p. 4-5) or Things to Remember

- **Context** – no single, stable original source text; the story always “emerges in a different context, with different features and a different set of potential significances”
- **History** – tales are not timeless but emerge from specific times, places, and cultures; they also carry multiple variants and retellings; they are “plural and many voiced”
- **Interpretation** – fairy tales are symbolic and communal and thus provide multiple models of interpretation



- No single interpretive model or method of interpretation is the “right” one: “Fairy tale is not universal or timeless; neither is it innocent of history and politics. On the contrary, it speaks powerfully of the times in which it has been told.” (7)

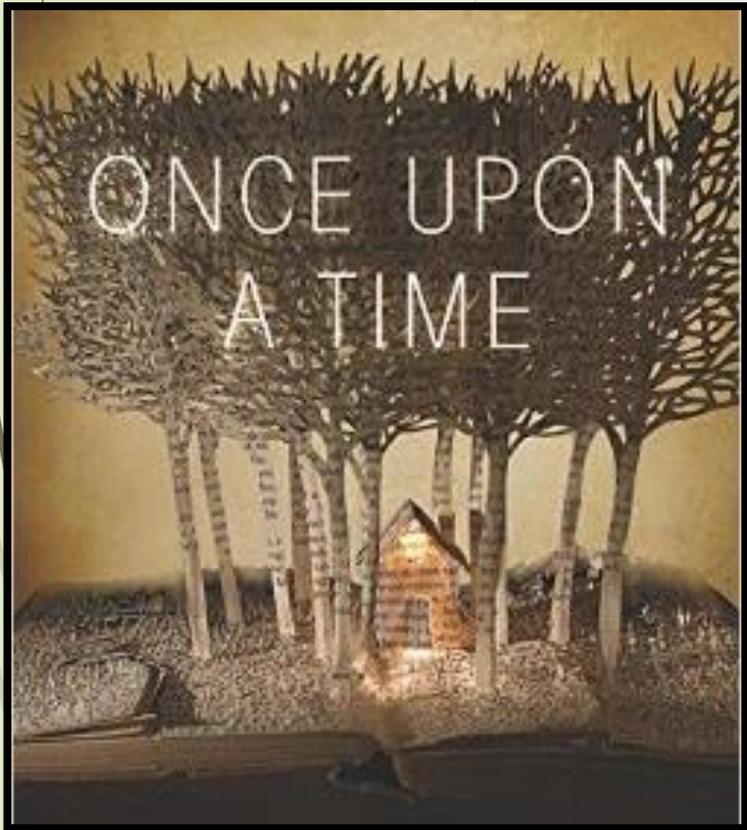
Interpretive Models (p. 5-6)

Depending on the interpretive approach, fairy tales can be read as:

- “survivals of savage practices that codify the rites and rituals of our primitive ancestors” (Anthropological);
- “disguised manifestations of latent fears and desires” (Psychoanalytical);
- “material concerns of particular societies at particular times” (Historical);
- “potent carriers of ideological instruction that shape nascent identities in ways that are most beneficial to those with power in society” (Marxist);
- “mechanisms designed to foster the patriarchal control of women” (Feminist).



What are Folk Narratives?



- **General Definition:** stories that are disseminated both orally and through literature and “have survived for significant periods of time in popular tradition by being passed on, from storyteller to storyteller, both spatially across cultures and communities, and temporally from generation to generation.” (12)

Three Primary Forms of Folk Narrative (pp. 15-16)

- **Legend:** stories that have become attached to a specified personage, locality, or event; often relies on hyperbole while also describing events as if they have taken place.
- **Myth:** these make a truth claim but outside of recorded historical time; deals with grand subjects and characters; provides foundational often sacred narrative for a community or nation, idealizing its values and codifying its belief systems.
- **Folk Tale:** regarded as purely fictional by storyteller and audience; they deal with the everyday, “ordinary” concerns of humanity, with familiar settings and adversities, but typically including an element of magic; its dominant function is to entertain and enchant (not encode morals), to provide wish-fulfillment and/or to facilitate tedious, manual, and repetitive work (spinning, weaving, etc.)

Types of the Folk Tale

- Animal Tales and Fables
- Religious Tales
- Formula Tales and Cumulative Tales
- Tales of Fairies and Fairy Land
- Jocular Tales
- The Novelle
- Fairy Tale



History of Fairy Tale as Genre: Italy & France

- ▶ As stories, old as recorded history; but as (European) literary genre, emerges in **Renaissance Italy**
 - ▶ Boccaccio, *Decameron* (1349-50); influenced popularity of *novella*-type stories (medieval romance combined with magical elements, popular culture, and folklore)
 - ▶ Straparola, *La piacevoli notti* (1550/1553); trans. *The Pleasant Nights*
 - ▶ Basile, *Il Pentamerone* (1634/1636) – often carnivalesque, obscene, and for adults
- ▶ **Salon Fairy Tale in France (late 17th to 18th Century)**
 - ▶ **Marie Catherine d'Aulnoy (1690):** “beauty and the beast” tale types
 - ▶ D'Aulnoy and other aristocratic women used fairy tale to critique women's confinement to domestic sphere and arranged marriages; provided more complex heroines
 - ▶ **Charles Perrault (1691-95):** Red Riding Hood; Cinderella; Sleeping Beauty; Bluebeard
 - ▶ Established fairy tale as genre for literary invention and form of social/political critique; his tales often reinforced patriarchal control and came to be more popular variants
 - ▶ **Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont (mid-18th C):** “La belle et la bête” (popular version)
 - ▶ Influential in rise of didactic fairy tale used for moral education and socialization of children; self-sacrificing heroine with emphasis on bourgeois Christian values

History of Fairy Tale as Genre: Germany

➤ 19th C. German Romanticism

- Folk tales were used to reflect “authentic” German identity and nationhood

➤ The Brothers Grimm

- Began collecting and writing tales in 1806; first publications in 1812/1814
 - 1815 edition, claimed their sources came from “peasant” women
 - 1819 edition, excised tales; watered-down violence; and cut anything from supposedly non-German sources
 - 1857 edition, most commonly used to reinforce conventional ideas about family, society, and German identity
- From earliest editions, Grimm brothers consistently revised/reshaped the tales to become more palatable for children and middle classes
- Claimed “authentic” sources (the *volk*, or peasantry) while erasing that most tales were collected from upper middle/artisan classes, many with French Huguenot backgrounds;
- By masking their middle-class literate informants, the Grimms were responsible for large-scale invention of national myth and tradition

History of Fairy Tale as Genre: Victorians

- ▶ **Fairy tale firmly established as literary genre in England**
 - ▶ John Ruskin; George MacDonald; Lewis Carroll; Andrew Lang; Christina Rossetti; Mary de Morgan; Oscar Wilde
- ▶ **Hans Christian Andersen (published from 1835-1872)**
 - ▶ Wrote traditional and invented tales, for adults and children; first to emphasize that children's tales could be entertaining and not simply didactic; simulation of oral narrative, in sympathy with children
 - ▶ Critiqued by contemporary feminist readers for cruelty and misogyny, especially toward female characters
 - ▶ Others argue that he actually positioned himself as female characters, allowing him to explore his bisexual identity and reflect on the suffering he experienced due to his marginalized sexuality
 - ▶ Greatest legacy: influenced experimental modernity of fairy tales and other narrative genres



Fairy Tales & Magic



- Ordinary but magical: “fairy tales depict magical or marvelous events or phenomenon as a valid part of human experience” (Swann Jones, qtd. in Taverson, p. 29)
- Magical approach: the uncanny, the fantastic, and the marvelous (Todorov, *The Fantastic*, 1975)
- Reader knows from the start that “fairy-tale magic entails an acceptance...that magic is normative...and that the ordinary rules are suspended” (30)

Mode of Narration

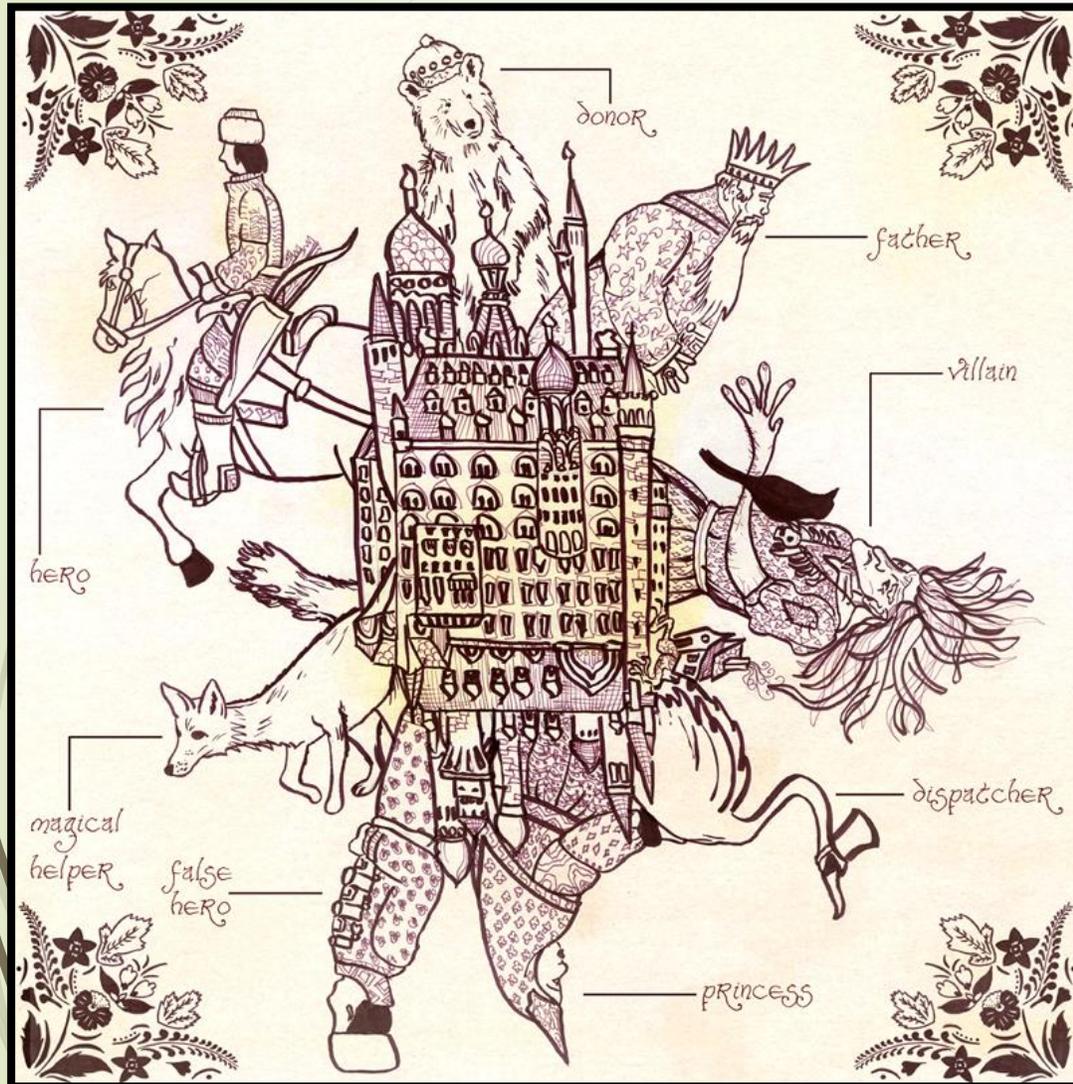
- Both oral and literary
- Traditional and modern
- Communal and individual
- Prosaic and poetic



Typical Plot = Rites of Passage

- **Separation** – protagonist removed from the familiar
- **Initiation** – protagonist faces a series of (gendered) challenges
- **Return** – protagonist reintegrated into society and justice is restored

Fairy Tale Theory: 19th -20th Century



- From the 1800s onward, folklorists began to ask serious questions about the origins, structure, variations, dissemination, content and meanings within fairy tales
- Antti Aarne & Stith Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale* (1910/1928); first to provide systematic index of tale types and motifs (see CFT 373-78)
 - Critiqued for gender bias and inconsistency in variables of narrative content
- Vladimir Propp, *Morphology and the Folktale* (1928/1958 translation): shifted focus to classifying structure/form rather than content (see CFT 378-387)
 - Also critiqued for gender bias and limited sampling of tales; however, was influential on structuralism and providing coherent focus on plot and character in fairy tale
 - Key concepts: thirty-one narrative functions (plot) and seven (or eight) spheres of action (character and conflict)

Fairy Tale Theory: 20th–21st Century

- ▶ Ultimately, 19th C. questions of “*Where does it come from?*” became supplanted by formalist questions of: “*How does it work? What are its component parts? How do its component parts work together to create meaning?*”
- ▶ Underlying hypothesis: “fairy tales work like languages and can be analysed using the same methods that are applied to the study of language by structural linguists” leading to a “*grammar of narrative*” (Teverson 107)
- ▶ Subsequent approaches of psychoanalysis, historicism, and Marxism developed new “questions directed at society and the self”:
 - ▶ *What does it tell us about the human mind?*
 - ▶ *How does it act upon readers mentally?*
 - ▶ *How does it contribute to the fashioning of social and cultural outlooks?* (Teverson, 108)



Why Feminist Fairy Tales?

- Subversion of patriarchal narrative and power structures
- Revision and disruption of binary gender roles/norms
- Provide agency and empowerment for all genders
- Reimagine identities, politics, relationships, and social values
- Make visible marginalized races, ethnicities, sexualities, etc.



SWEET
AND SOUND
SHE SLEEPS
IN GRANNY'S BED,
BETWEEN THE
PAWS OF THE
TENDER WOLF

*She
knew she
was nobody's
meat*