
Brothers Grimm: Analysis Of Fairy Tales

Fairy tales have been passed down from generation to generation, each person in one way or another altering the tale to reflect a piece of their life at work. The Brothers Grimm wrote hundreds of fairy tales in their life time and in these works they used their childhood experiences as reference. Because of the hardships they faced growing up their tales take on a more gruesome approach to fairy tales. Because their mother was their only caregiver growing up, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm reflect their fondness towards her through the strong-willed, independent female characters in their fairy tales. Female heroines are rarely seen in modern-day fairy tales, but as a result of their childhood the Brothers Grimm utilized them frequently in their works to illustrate the love and devotion they hold towards their own mother. This Predominance of heroic female characters in the works of The Brothers Grimm is a result of being raised without a strong male figure.

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm experienced numerous tragedies in their adolescence that left them emotionally impressionable. Jacob was born on January 4, 1785 and Wilhelm was born on February 24, 1786, in Hanau, Germany. Misfortune first struck with the death of their father, soon followed by their grandfather's death, which left the family in shambles. Their father, Phillip Wilhelm, passed away when Jacob and Wilhelm were merely children and very easily influenced. (Brothers, 9) Two years after the death of Phillip Wilhelm, the brother's grandfather also died, leaving the family to struggle in reduced circumstances. (Brothers, 9) Their lives changed drastically as they adapted to their new situation being raised by only their mother. After the death of their father, the family had to move into a cramped urban residence to make ends meet. (Brothers, 9) Their mother had to raise all six children who had survived infancy all by her lone self. A true hero in the eyes of Jacob and Wilhelm, their mother single-handedly overcame opposition in their family, just as their sister did growing up with five brothers. (Grimm, 11) The sentiment of being abandoned as children unlocked a new territory of potential as their creative juices began to surge. 'Child abandonment is a many-faceted concept within myth, folktale, and literature,' and the Brothers Grimm explored this concept in great detail (Garry, 3). As they began to express themselves through literature, male figures, such as fathers, were often dismissed as the females stole the spotlight in their fairy tales. "Some modern psychologists have argued that [their] harsh family background influenced the ways the Brothers Grimm interpret and present their tales" (Grimm, 15). Without a prominent male figure growing up, they only had their mother to look up to and to idealize as the strong-willed individual who never gave up despite all the privation send her way. The Brothers Grimm incorporate their own perspectives to generally recognized fairy tales, often adding a twist and a more callous feel to them. They first started their collection of fairy tales in 1806 by writing down those that they had previously heard from the females in their neighborhood while growing up. This serves as another female sway on their fairy tales that influences their stance on men vs. women in regards to heroes and villains. In the first edition of the Grimm's fairy tales, there are a total of two hundred and ten stories. Out of those two hundred and ten, about forty have female protagonists. (Ragan, 2) These feminine protagonists are directly associated with their strong-willed mother who worked hard her entire life to raise her family without the support of a male figure.

The Grimm's tales, like most folklore, reflects on their childhood as they consistently downplay

the roles of fathers and idealize the mothers and young women. Folklore is documented in assorted traditions, the oldest and most indispensable being that the Brothers Grimm simply recall what they experienced as children. Folklore is compromised mainly through an individual's character and behavior. (Georges, 4) The stories that came to be re-written in their collection of tales came from family members, friends, neighbors, peers, colleagues, and acquaintances, just like in the majority of folklore. The Brothers Grimm were in the progression of alluring children who were in quest of retribution against those who tormented them or abandoned them. This category of tales has, "obvious charm for children who feel that they too have been disciplined unfairly," just as Jacob and Wilhelm feel after being abandoned by their father and grandfather in their early childhood (Garry, 3). Generally, close to ninety percent of characters in folklore are male figures, and those who happen to be female are painted in a negative light. (Ragan, 2) The Brothers Grimm do not depict all women as heroic in their tales, but vast majorities are illustrated in an optimistic approach. Like any parent, their mother had her good and bad sides and qualities, so Jacob and Wilhelm created the characters of the 'evil stepmother' to portray the appalling qualities and a heroic maiden to symbolize the mother that raised their family. The vicious "fairy tale step mothers" are frequently tortured to death; where as their male counterparts are simply put aside. (MaCallum, 7) "Typically a stepmother's abuse is motivated by her attempts to promote the welfare of her own offspring," and in doing so the Brothers Grimm place all the focus on the young heroine who is in direct conflict with the stepmother, as the father stands absentmindedly by. (Thum, 6)

In contrast to the evil stepmother, the Brothers Grimm illustrate the heroic qualities in their own mother by painting the female heroines as survivors in their fairy tales. In the fairy tales by Jacob and Wilhelm, a dynamic heroine sets out alone and depends on her intelligence, determination, and bravery to make her own way in life, just as their own mother did. These heroines are, "women who, while limited by their clearly defines the roles of the time are very positive figured. They are depicted as intelligent, prepared to take initiative and capable of change." (Thum, 6) These are roles typically assigned to their male counterparts in fairy tales. The woman in the times of the tales contest the previously set notions held by woman in the time that they must stay at home and take care of the family and be passive characters. These women go against their 'clearly defined roles' in society as they try to survive against great odds. This reflects on how their own mother handled the situation of being left a single mother after their father and grandfather died. (Georges, 4) Through their mother's deep inner strength and her ability to declare herself despite the discouragement of her gender, she was able to overcome numerous adversities just as the female heroines do in the fairy tales. (Ashliman, 1) In the standard fairy tale, it is always the male character who is the protagonist who holds all the power, yet the Brothers Grimm place the men in submissive roles, shedding light on the female survivors. In the standard fairy tale, "the passive heroine is portrayed as waiting for deliverance by a prince, king, or another male figure of authority" (Thum, 6). In contrast, the Brothers Grimm utilize, "courageous mothers, clever young girls, and warrior woman," to reveal that these women are survivors, and against all odds they will rise up to the occasion and overcome any adversity they face in their journey to happiness. (Thum, 6) This affection that Jacob and Wilhelm harbor for their mother is clearly observed in their works as female heroines progressively overcome adversity in the time periods where men ruled and happiness and wealth would only come from a good marriage.

The main issue in Jacob and Wilhelm's fairy tale, Cinderella (Aschenputtel in German), is male power vs. female integrity as the protagonist learns to conquer her fears and become an independent self-governed woman. The tale of Cinderella signifies a nature of conflict between

two principle female characters. The mother, who is dead, is of importance, where as the evil stepmother that is male-centered. The evil stepmother is made a fool of as Cinderella becomes a strong independent young woman, no longer taking orders to do various chores and housework for the step sisters. Before Cinderella could stand up for herself she was forced, "from morning until evening...to perform difficult work, rising early, carrying water, making the fire, cooking and washing," with no rest or time for herself. (Grimm, 11) Cinderella is treated like a slave in her own home, and the Brothers Grimm use the strict nature of their mother while growing up to depict this in their own fairy tale. Cinderella must complete these demeaning feminine acts given to her by her stepmother because her own father is dismissive and has no control. This directly correlates with the childhood of Jacob and Wilhelm, because their father also held no control in their uprising due to his early death. Cinderella eventually becomes a courageous young woman and defies the tyrannical administration imposed by her step-family. (MaCallum, 7) She discovers that she can only depend on herself and that a male figure is not obligated to be present in order to find happiness. Jacob and Wilhelm's mother discovered the same thing as she went against many odds by living alone without the help of a male to raise the family and make ends meet. Instead of having a deadline looming above her head during the Ball, the Grimm's Cinderella, "seeks pleasure, not in a husband, and there is no threat of public humiliation to force her to leave." (Grimm, 11) In their version of the fairy tale, Cinderella is independently strong as she takes her fate into her own hands and does as she pleases. "She dances until evening, and then wanted to go home," instead of being forced to leave due to fear of her evil stepmother. Cinderella leaves the ball willingly and voluntarily three times, running away each time trying to hide from the Prince who is seeking her hand in marriage. Each time she runs away, Cinderella is defying the rules of the time period by not relying on a male figure for happiness and wealth. Even Cinderella's father aids the Prince in his search for her, but is unsuccessful in the end. (Clark, 5) This aspect of the Grimm's Cinderella illustrates how she is a self-governing young lady who is not afraid to create her own happy ending in life instead of having a man created it for her.

The Brothers Grimm reflect their childhood in their fairy tales constantly in the form of powerful females, helpless men, and abandoned children. The Knight's Tale from The Canterbury Tales is a paragon tale for when a man must rely on a woman in order to survive the curse. The Knight is facing a penalty of death unless he can answer the paradoxical question, "What do women most desire?" (Garry, 3) In order to find the answer he must surrender to the wishes of Old Hag and marry her, choosing life over beauty in order to live. Beauty and the Beast is yet another example of an emotionally strong young woman, Belle, as she chooses to take fate into her own hands to save her weak father. Her father is imprisoned by the beast, rendering him helpless, just as the Brothers viewed their own father; helpless. (Garry, 3) The Beast must rely on Belle to love him unconditionally and that is the only way he can turn back into a young prince once again. In order for this to happen he must prove his devotion to Belle, therefore giving her all the power in the situation to do as she pleases. The new and improved fearless Little Red Riding Hood is yet another masterful re-creation of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. Little Red Riding Hood willingly walks through the woods alone to visit her grandmother. She is not scared at all of what lies ahead in the dark even though she is alone. She, "Walks through the woods a second time, meets another big bad wolf, and vanquishes the wolf herself," proving that she can take care of herself. (Grimm, 15) The Grimm's mother walked blindly through the later part of her life after her husband died, hoping for the best outcome, dealing with any problems head on just as Little Red Riding Hood does in the version by Jacob and Wilhelm. In the Grimm's account of Sleeping Beauty, it is not only the princess that is enchanted, all the animals and people of the court also who are subjected to fall asleep for a hundred years under

the curse (Garry, 3). This tale, “portrays the evil maleficent as a powerful, determined woman who can irresistibly draw the princess towards her preordained enchantment.” (Garry, 3) Instead of having a male protagonist who controls the land and people, it is a powerful woman, yet she possesses the power to put the entire court under the curse in the Grimm’s version. Abandonment is explored in Jacob and Wilhelm’s fairy tale commonly known as Hansel and Gretel, as the brothers rationalize abuse and abandonment through the adventures of the children on their own. (Garry, 3) The famous tale of Snow White re-written by the Brothers Grimm involves a young woman who is abandoned and seems as if she is not capable of surviving on her own, but stays alive against great odds. (Grimm, 12) In both of these tales of abandonment, all the characters survive despite the hardships they face, just as Jacob and Wilhelm did after being abandoned by every male figure in their life growing up.

Childhood is a time to grow mentally and physically and it shapes an individual's life in multiple ways. Jacob and Wilhelm survived being abandoned by the prominent male figures in their lives and this led to them being raised in a single-parent household in tight conditions with their siblings. This experience left such an impact on their lives that they constantly incorporate strong female characters in their fairy tales to illustrate the positive impact their mother had on their life growing up as she gave up everything to make sure they survived. Through their life time and their hundreds of fairy tales that the brothers published, they are well known for their twists in widely known pieces. These twists add a flare to their writing as they take a different approach to ones upbringing. Because their mother played a predominant role in their lives, mothers and young women play dominant roles in their fairy tales as well.

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