Nostalgic to my Childhood, Symbolic to Your Culture: Discussing the Intercultural Adaptation of Culturally Bound Fairy Tales

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Abstract

Fairy tales are culturally bound stories that serve as the means of preserving and passing on cultural values and collective identity. Acting under the guise of cultural preservation and teaching, fairy tales communicate cultural values to mass crowds and keep cultures ideologically stagnant. However, when appropriated, fairy tales cannot be fully appreciated for their cultural and ideological value. Thus, fairy tales, which preserve cultural values and identity, keep cultures ideologically stagnant; though, when adapted by other cultures, fairy tales cannot be appreciated in full for their symbolic ideation. This paper examines the role of fairy tales as communicative symbols that inform cultural tradition and ideology. First, by introducing culture as a tool kit of symbols, stories, rituals, and worldviews that people use in varying configurations to make sense of their world, fairy tales — as components of the cultural tool kit — are then introduced as complex symbolic structures that play a crucial role in communicating culture and keeping cultures ideologically stagnant. Fairy tales are discussed next for their role in educating children and in shaping children's perceptions of culture. Then, German-written fairy tales are examined for their association with the construction of German culture and the rise of German nationalism. Finally, fairy tales are discussed for their central role in American pop culture, though as appropriated texts, they do not hold the intended cultural messaging.

Introduction

Culture is created through intricate systems of acting, being, belonging, and thinking. Transpiring through ideological values, beliefs, languages, and symbols, culture therefore exists to harmoniously unite groups of people. These transpiring facets of culture contribute to a collective understanding of the norms and traditions that define a culture within certain dynamic parameters. Of the symbols that construct meaning in culture, there are alphabets and systems of writing that create words. Sets of words are then strung together in sentences to convey ideas and thinking. Finally, sentences are interwoven into plots and pieces to express meaning and communicate cultural abstractions through storytelling.

This paper explores stories, storytelling, and fairy tales as symbols of cultural expression and as components of the cultural tool kit. By establishing fairy tales as extrinsic cultural symbols that communicate intrinsic cultural ideologies, this paper argues that fairy tales, which preserve cultural values and identity, keep cultures ideologically stagnant; though, when adapted by other cultures, fairy tales cannot be appreciated in full for their symbolic ideation.

After demonstrating culture as a tool kit comprised of beliefs, values and symbols, fairy tales are established as vessels by which children learn to process problems and influence their

interpretations of life. Focusing on the creation and reinforcement of German culture and nationalism through famous texts from the Brothers Grimm, fairy tales are discussed as they inform cultural beliefs and values. Finally, as iconic texts that reinforce and communicate German cultural ideals, Grimm's tales are discussed in their appropriated American form.

Defining the Symbolic Nature of Culture

Swidler (1986, p. 273) proposes an alternative image of culture "as a 'tool kit' of symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems." Clifford Geertz stated culture as "a historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (1973, p. 89, as cited in McDaniel & Samovar, 2015, p. 9). By these definitions, although culture is an assortment of abstractions collectively shared through transmission and inheritance, our interpretations and applications of culture are defined by how we come to develop our knowledge and attitudes towards life and our cultural identity. Because culture is a tool kit comprised of complex, varying elements that interact, harmonize, and battle with one another, culture cannot be reduced to one defining phrase; culture cannot be centred around one single belief, value, or representation; nor can cultural complexities be understood or appreciated from an outsider point of view.

The nuances of cultural complexity stem from its ever-evolving state. Culture "provide[s] a framework that gives meaning to events, objects, and people" (McDaniel & Samovar, 2015, p 10). Since culture is learned, adapted, and understood through the lived experiences of the individual, culture therefore becomes the driving force behind the formation of our perception of self in relation to others and society, and culture also determines our individual and collective identity. Through advancements in technology, we have come to learn and appreciate that culture is fluid, not stagnant, and that culture changes in stride with society. Symbols, and the significance they carry, are extrinsic artifacts that communicate deep-rooted, intrinsic values. Inner core values and beliefs — those concerning religion, politics, ethics, or morals — in turn shape identity, worldview, and the long-standing traditions of culture that persevere over time. Myths, legends, and fairy tales are extrinsic cultural artifacts that communicate deep-rooted cultural values. Since expressions of morals and traditional teaching or values are interwoven into culturally bound stories, and these stories are told and passed down through multiple generations, artifacts such as classical fairy tales serve to keep cultural worldviews ideologically stagnant. The transmission of classical fairy tales keeps cultures ideologically stagnant by preventing deep-rooted aspects of culture and collective national identity from intermingling with the tides of societal change.

Fairy Tales, Culture, and Childhood

From Lau (1996, p. 233), "as the interplay between structure, symbolism, and cultural context is to understanding a language, so too is it for the interpretation of folklore." As language plays a

crucial role in preserving and communicating a culture, fairy tales do the same. Thus, by acting to preserve and communicate culture, fairy tales keep aspects of the cultures from which they derive ideologically stagnant. To understand the role that fairy tales undertake as a facet of culture, one must acknowledge the dual-purpose fairy tales have. That is, while serving as a medium of entertainment, fairy tales also fulfill the roles of symbolic representations of culture and of systems of thought, belief, knowledge, morals, or customs within a culture. From a critical theorists' perspective, communication is used as a means of domination (McDaniel & Samovar, 2015, p. 7). Relating to the idea of fairy tales first as a form of symbolic communication, then as a form of cultural preservation and stagnation, fairy tales become prominent artifacts of culture and fulfill the purpose of dominating cultural ideology and discourse. Therefore, as language preserves tradition, fairy tales preserve ways of thinking and knowing.

Fairy tales, culture, and childhood exist in influential tandem. Children learn and develop culture from a young age; fairy tales teach and transmit culture; and children seek entertainment and joyful fulfillment through fairy tales. Because of the influence fairy tales have on culture, it is important to understand then how fairy tales come to influence children's perceptions and understanding of culture. "'[C]hildhood' as an idea is embedded in 'culture,' and children are participants (with varying degrees of agency) in many if not all of those relationships that are governed through cultural practice" (Lykissas, 2018, p. 305). In other words, children's perceptions of culture and their ideological beliefs are controlled by the artifacts they are exposed to. Children have limited agency concerning the way they are raised, or the lessons deemed most important for them to learn and make sense of the world, and thus build their cultural tool kit through classical stories written to exemplify ideologies of a particular time. Or, in their role as systems of childhood entertainment, fairy tales — as symbolic artifacts of the cultural tool kit and centred around long-standing, deep-rooted intrinsic cultural values and vastly more impermeable to societal change — reinforce old cultural frameworks despite societal change.

During the18th century, the concept of childhood transitioned from "a time of moral learning" to "a romanticized notion of children as the embodiment innocence and childhood and as a time for play and learning" (p. 305). Therefore, when cultural traditions of fairy tales arose during the late 17th to early 19th centuries, the tales were not intended for children's audiences, nor were they intended to act as entertainment. Rather, fairy tales were suited to the adult audience and intended to be matters of teaching not, enjoyment (2018, p. 305). For example, Charles Perrault's *Mother Goose Tales*, published in 1697, is a collection of stories comprised of popular tales such as *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, and *Cinderella* (Ashliman, 2013), written "to offer moral prescriptions" for improperly educated French courtesans (prostitutes with wealthy or upper-class clientele [Merriam-Webster, n.d.]), thus solidifying the notion and tradition of fairy tales as moral education.

It was not until the early 19th century that fairy tales — like the second edition of the Brothers' Grimm, published in 1818 — shifted to serve as children's entertainment. Fairy tales became valuable tools for children to "process and deal with their own internal struggles by 'transforming internal struggles into visual images'… and learn the lessons found in the stories" (Lykissas, 2018, p. 305). This further demonstrating how fairy tales become part of the cultural

tool kit. Though since the 19th century fairy tales have been intended for young audiences, Zipes (2012, as cited in Lykissas, 2018, p. 305) argues that "fairy tales are important for both children and adults as they help readers process their world and come to a resolution about the problems in their life and society." Due to their real-world conceptualization and interpretation of problems and dominant discourses of the time they are written, fairy tales do not have an age limit. Though to reinforce and propagate cultural ideals in children, fairy tales, under the guise of fantasy motifs and mythological imagery, and are the perfect vessel to do so.

Fairy Tales: Part of the Cultural Tool Kit

As systems of communication and symbols of cultural ideology, fairy tales "engage … analytical faculties and expose [audiences] to [the] culturally and linguistically embedded nature of folk tales, leading them to a deeper appreciation of language, culture, and history" and "offer a productive literary lens through which to critique both contemporary society and the historical cultural systems from which they come" (Soltau, 2021, p. 38). German-authored fairy tales are closely associated with the construction of German culture and the rise of German nationalism (Soltau, 2021). Highlighting German author Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Soltau (2021) discusses how Goethe's *Das Märchen*, published in 1795 (Oxford University Press, 2022), "disseminated ideas about national and social identity through the literate classes" using "myth, symbol, and didactics" (Soltau, 2021, p. 42).

Goethe's works are credited with frequent attempts to confront the imperial, racial, social, and political fears that were present at the time they were written. Exemplifying this, *Das Märchen* specifically "had an enormous influence on the creation of [German] national identity… as an expression of [Goethe's] political and social views." Written during the French Revolution, *Das Märchen* is an "intentionally vague and allegorical" social commentary on the "immobility of social class … the necessity and usefulness of each class in its own right and serves primarily to consolidate social power in the middle class" (Soltau, 2021, p. 42). Soltau compares Goethe's writing to Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's *Volksmärchen*, wherein the tales "contain moral and pedagogical elements … due to the use of folktales as vehicles for education and explanation … and [were] deliberately constructed…to aid in the formation of a German national identity" (Soltau, 2021, p. 42). The Grimms' tales reveal "the artificial nature of the cultural and racial myths upon which nations are founded" (p. 43).

The Brothers Grimm and the Formation of German National Identity

Contributing to the formation of German culture and nationalism in the Brothers Grimm fairy tales are ideological themes derived from the romantic era framework (Snyder, 1978). Romanticism itself is "an aesthetic revolution, a resort to imagination … rich in emotional depth, more potent in magic evocation" (Kohn, 1950, p. 443) and in Germany, romanticism was a philosophic interpretation of nature and history and "came to concern itself with political and social life and with the state" (Kohn, 1950, p. 443) German romanticism placed "emphasis on the peculiarity of the German mind" and grew the consciousness of German uniqueness (p. 443). Critics of the Grimms' tales comment on their use of "particularly Germanic attitudes" and

"praiseworthy national traits of the German people" — "authoritarianism, militarism, violence toward the outsider, and the strict enforcement discipline" — as well, the distinct separation of social classes and glorification of the hero (Snyder, 1978), all which taken together constituted and developed a sense of German national identity.

Through their tales, the Grimm brothers "offered … even invented a distinctive and apparently romantic image of German tradition" (Bronner, 1998, p. 189). Further, through the embellishment of the romantic era viewpoint, the Brothers Grimm fairy tales express "profound wisdom" and ideas of human vitality, social cohesion, harmony, peace, and unity against a contrasting backdrop of "the fragmentation and weakness of German-speaking states, the conflict of the Napoleonic wars, and intellectually, the spread of French Enlightenment ideas of progress and rational reasoning" (p. 189). Romantic era thought was a means to emphasize "a medieval poetic vision of a golden mythopoeic age of humankind that could still inspirit and reform the present" (p. 190). The fabrication of these stories through the lens of romanticism solidified the purpose of fairy tales as traditional means of teaching and learning, as symbolic artifacts, and as methods by which to communicate beliefs and create a symbolic cultural narrative. Further, the romanticized notion of German culture through fairy tales, such as the Brothers Grimm, places emphasis on the subjective beauty of the values and worldviews particular to the German cultural tool kit.

Despite the impression that tales from the Brothers Grimm were hopeful to inspire a golden romanticized vision of German culture, it is argued that the Brothers' intention was not "breeding an overweening nationalism, but rather paving the way for a profounder comprehension of German character, a national self-knowledge" (Synder, 1978, p. 2). Though, with credit to romantic era thought and the definition of German culture by the Brothers Grimm, the Brothers' idealized German character evolved into an overarching promotion of German nationalism. Moreover, further crediting the Brothers' development of German nationalism were fairy tales themselves — as symbolic artifacts that express and transmit knowledge of deep-rooted cultural traditions, values, and beliefs — and the critical theorist's interpretation of communication as a form of domination. Nationalism, defined as nations "placing primary emphasis on promotion of its culture and interests as opposed to those of other nations or supranational groups" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), therefore derives from a strong sense of shared cultural values and ideals and emphasizes the collective loyalty, allegiance, discourses, and adversities of a nation, thus explaining how a strong sense of German collective identity and nationalism developed out of the Brothers Grimm tales despite not being the intention.

German Nationalism: Lost in Translation

Classical Brothers Grimm fairy tales also "assumed a central role in America, albeit in forms that frequently ignore, mistake, or reshape the Grimms' own texts" (Haase, 1995, p. 17). When translated for an American audience, the Brothers Grimm fairy tales "frequently retain no specifically German cultural identity," meaning the tales lack authority in dominating or disseminating discourse surrounding German culture or nationalism. Nonetheless, fairy tales as a medium of communication are symbolic artifacts that fill one compartment of the cultural tool kit. Regardless of any American translation of the Brothers Grimm fairy tales, the stories, by

nature of artifact, still represent and communicate notions of German politics, social class, and worldview. In combination with the clear definition of German cultural values and the stories' sexist themes, the Grimms' tales were criticized for their perpetuation of "sex-role stereotyping … materialism, racism, and elitist values" to American audiences (Haase, 1995, p. 18). Specifically considering the role of fairy tales in the social and moral education of children, such themes were deemed extremely divisive and controversial during the 1970s when issues of race, ethnicity, gender, and class were beginning to emerge in American societal discourse.

When appropriated interculturally as American myths, "Grimm's Fairy Tales represent the idea of tradition and moral authority," of "timelessness and universality" (Haase, 1995, p. 23). While fairy tales, folk tales, or myths may reinforce traditional morals, values, or ways of thinking, stories lose their symbolic means of domination when adapted or translated to another culture. As components of an American versus German cultural tool kit, fairy tales are solely sources of entertainment to those that have no cultural association with the themes presented or explored within the tale.

Brothers Grimm versus Walt Disney: Translating *Little Snow-White* to *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*

Based off the Brothers Grimm story, *Little Snow-White* (American Literature, n.d.)*,* Walt Disney's adaptation, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs,* reflects Disney's vision of American values through a German nationalist tale (Inge, 2004, p. 132). Think of the translation as an intercultural inception of fairy tales and cultural values. Overall, through American interpretation and adaptation, the Grimms' fairy tales "become stylized vehicles for popular entertainment of romance, music, and comedy rendered gleefully through [cinematic] animation" (Bronner, 1998, p. 187). Tales become "Americanized" with a "cheery message and romantic core, and thereby globalized," and the only connection to German culture "is in the Grimm reference to the German peasantry as the quintessential folk … old and of earthy appearance, isolated and communally rural, poor yet socially content … unusually telling stories, often for children, and being fairy tales unto themselves" (p. 187).

In the classic Brothers Grimm tale, the basic plot structure of *Little Snow-White* sees the tale advance through nine episodes: "origin (birth of heroine), jealousy, expulsion, adoption, renewed jealousy, death, exhibition, resuscitation, and resolution (Inge, 2004, p. 137). Conversely, in Disney's American adaption of *Little Snow-White*, the first episode of the nine-part plot structure — the birth of Snow White and the death of her mother— is left out of the story (p. 137). Presumably because a concurrent birth and death scene at the beginning of an animated children's film would have made difficultly out of establishing a proper tone for the proceeding film (p. 138) and negated the element of cheery children's entertainment, the story begins when Snow White is already a young girl. The audience never finds out that Snow White's parents have passed and there is no questioning or sadness surrounding why or how Snow White begins the story alone as the story quickly takes on the typical Disney charm.

Further changes to the American adaptation of *Snow White* were done so in the name of upholding American standards for entertainment. This, meaning changing elements of the plot to create the most "effective and engaging film" for children, and adults, to sit through and

equally enjoy the duration of the film, and to "maintain the Disney Studio's tradition for safe, family entertainment that amused and edified" (p. 138). Other edits to the adaptation were a matter of common sense — such as changing Snow White's age from seven to around fourteen — though other "illogicalities" of the original plot were never questioned such as "the disappearance of Snow White's father" and how the Evil Queen — "given her all-consuming vanity and concern for beauty … could have allowed herself to be disguised or turned into a horribly ugly old hag" (Inge, 2004, p. 138). This lack of questioning came as "the plots of fairy tales are not to be analyzed in terms of logic or rationality" (p. 138), perhaps because they are adapted from the grievances, fantasies, and culture of a world unknown to the appropriating other.

Even further, the American adaptation of *Snow White* changes the "dramatic pacing" of the story — omitting the birth of Snow White, reducing visits from the disguised queen from three to one, and "not including a final wedding scene, which could only be anticlimactic to the revival by love's first kiss" (p. 138). In favour of true Disney enchantment, the tale induces greater dramatic engagement and creates more interest in the characters or plot through audience sympathy and involvement as through making Snow White into "a scullery maid," giving the mirror a personality, making the Huntsman "sincerely sympathetic," and depicting the dwarfs as needing motherly attention (p. 138).

Conclusion

Though the concept and formation of culture can be defined and explained in as dynamic a way as culture is itself, what holds true in any definition of culture is that culture is medium of communication. Through symbols, stories, world views, and inherited conceptions, humans learn culture and develop their process and procedure for problem-solving and understanding the complexities of life. The tool kit metaphor to describe culture accurately depicts how culture is an all-encompassing idea and how culture is something unique to every one of us. Like a carpenter supplies their tool kit with different sized hammers, screwdrivers, and nails, and logically chooses when to use each tool, we supply our cultural tool kits with different values, abstractions, symbols, morals, and world views that we acquire from our own lived experiences. Like a carpenter, we sort through our cultural tool kit when a situation arises where we need to solve a problem or explain a phenomenon around us. Fairy tales — for their role as mediums of communication, and models of teaching, and as symbolic artifacts — are therefore important components of the cultural tool kit and whether apparent, or intended, or neither, have a crucial role in the development and understanding of culture.

When considering fairy tales as methods of teaching and learning that influence and make up our cultural tool kit, classic tales from the Brothers Grimm can be analyzed for their role in the creation and promotion of German nationalism. Further, since the plots of fairy tales are based off the ideological period from which they come, the values, beliefs and experiences from the past are forever restated and reinforced by the continued sharing and telling of tales. However, whereas for German people tales by the Brothers Grimm are symbolic of triumph, pride, and a romanticized definition of German character, when translated and adapted for

American audiences, fairy tales take on a different meaning within the cultural tool kit. From symbolic representations and artifacts of culture and character, fairy tales are reduced to sources of entertainment and enjoyment.

Changes to the original Brothers Grimm tales show that cultural meaning and reinforced nationalism are lost in intercultural translation. Though classical fairy tales are bound through symbols, values, beliefs, and abstractions to the cultures from which they disseminate, translated fairy tales lose their cultural relevance and semiotic importance and become mere forms of entertainment rather than domination or cultural teaching. As seen through Walt Disney's adaptation of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the story loses its tie to the era of German romanticism in which it was written, due to a desire for keeping children and adults entertained and keeping the stories cheery and child-like (without the cultural nuances of German nationalism present in the German versions of the same tales). Culturally bound classical fairy tales, such as the Brothers Grimm tales, which through their romantic underpinnings enforce idealistic German values, beliefs, and cultural characteristics, serve the purpose of informing and dominating traditional ideology and thinking, create the basis of learned culture, and preserve ways of thinking and knowing culture. Grimm's fairy tales popularized a "collective history" of the German people, and their legacy preserves the "wisdom and cultural life" of a labour state (Li, 2016, p. 412). For centuries, the Grimm's fairy tales have reflected German national and human culture and through widespread means of teaching and education, were the perfect vessel by which to popularize opinion and points of view and communicate cultural ideals to children and adults alike, resulting in a rise in German nationalism. However, for audiences outside of the German culture, appropriated lessons in culture bare no similar ideological importance.

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