

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Title: Fairy Tales Revisited: Identity Making and Unmaking

Subtitle: Fairy Tales and the Poetics of Identity – a Shift of
Perspective from Modernism to Postmodernism

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Abstract

My primary aim is to show how important the aesthetic of the time is in the interpretation of fairy tales, in the way they are viewed, perceived, felt, and assimilated. The philosophy of art and its signifying practices, as has been pointed out, are often (always, according to Michel Foucault in his "Order of Discourse", 1970) shaped by the historical context in a very broad sense, feeding on characteristic political ideas, movements, agendas, ideologies, power relationships, social theories, scientific ideas, actually on the whole discursive field in which the literary work is embedded. Reimagining language was crucial for the successive phases of modernity. From a transparent medium for conveying the world, language turns into an autonomous network of communication. The ways of speaking and writing make social classes, genders, races and nations seem real and enable them to elicit feelings and justify relations of power. This is a comparative study of fairy tales in two different stages of what is known as "late modernity": modernism and postmodernism. In the early modern period, of the Enlightenment and preromanticism, fairy tales were seen as the roots of the ethnic soul, the mirror of every people's character. They were thought by Herder, Goethe, Charles Perrault, or the British preromantics to nourish people's imaginative hunger in an age of dry rationalism, and to complete their national typology, becoming thus, a mark of identity. On the contrary, with the passage of time and the concomitant historical changes, in the postmodern period, the perception of the fairy tales as a provider and keeper of any kind of identity or unity is lost, they becoming only a pattern, a fragment, an excuse for something else, a stage on which other plays are performed, keeping up with change, with postmodernist ideas concerning their use and perception.

Keywords: fairy tales, identity, modernism, postmodernism, stereotypes.

People all over the world have been telling stories since the beginning of time. A fascination with the past and the desire to be entertained during leisure time allowed oral tradition to survive and continue. I argue in this article that the aesthetic of time is of utmost importance for interpretation. Fairy tales are a “tool”, often neglected, in the study of identity poetics. Identity seen by no means as an “ever- fixed mark” which “looks on tempests, and is never shaken” (as Shakespeare says of true love) but a fluid concept better looked at through the lens of combined disciplines. I enlarge my analytical focus through the study of fairy tales in the two periods of “late modernity”, modernism and postmodernism. By following this shift in identity poetics that divides the two stages of late modernity, we set on a path that relates fairy tales to society and its civilizing process. We perceive fairy tales as a marker of unity, spirituality and identity in the first stage of modernism and of a more fluid identity in postmodernism, imbued as it is with the spirit of internationalism and multiculturalism.

In the earlier half of the last century philosopher Martin Heidegger evolved a distinction between *Sein* und *Zeit*, Being and Time, which has had a powerful influence on the critical theories that have emerged since then. Time, as measured by the clock, knows of no difference. It is the various outlooks on the world reified as cultural objects that allow us to speak of period terms: medieval, modernist, postmodernist, etc. Being (*Sein*) is revealed as specific presence: *Dasein*, being there before a reflective subject. *Dasein* is actually *Sosein*: being one way or another. As pointed out by Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs in *Voices of Modernity: Language Ideologies and the Politics of Inequality* (2003), modernity developed through two distinct projects: 1. John Locke’s project of a purified language, freed from relationships with society, relying solely on its rationality and intelligibility, and 2. J.G. Herder’s project of nation states, which could be realised through the recognition and promotion of characteristic national features. He saw tradition as a source of social order and political strength, language as something deeply social, linguistic differences and resemblances being the ones which define families, communities, regions and nations. The Grimm Brothers followed his agenda, publishing fairy tales reflective of the German spirit and studies in German mythology. They embraced Herder’s nationalist project and provided it with a linguistic and textual base. Their fairy tales collected and published as *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (1812-1858), perhaps the most famous “folk” texts of all time, furthered Herder’s attempt to revitalise German literature. The Brothers Grimm assimilated provincialism and nationalism as its discursive foundation. Thus, two divergent and influential models of language and modernity were available to writers and politicians in Europe. Both perspectives modelled social order and the blueprints to produce it.

Modernity, marked by changes and relativity, deconstructed the simplistic view of such narratives. They too acquired a wider scope as they joined the various ideological agendas of post-Enlightenment history. The imperialist politics of the nineteenth century brought about a corresponding upsurge of nationalist movements and a growing interest in the construction of a national identity among peoples fighting for independence, such as the ones at either end of the continent: the Irish and the Romanians.

On the contrary, the process of globalization in the postwar period, the reality of massive migration and the emergence of new political concepts, such as imaginary community (one

bonded not by language, common past, national literature, racial features and origin but by allegiance to the Constitution), political correctness, multicultural society, etc., has fuelled a different poetics in the treatment of the fairy tale as a generic form and as a carrier of ideology. The study of this phenomenon helps us understand something of the nature of the relationship between art, politics and history, aesthetic change (which is not merely a question of taste), and generic change (using fairy tales as a case in point).

Fairy tales, under the veil of enchantment, actually take “roots” in the “metanarratives- master narrative” of their period; in Modernism, the priority of imaginative perception over objective reality, the determining role of the collective unconscious over the individual mind, the fall of dynastic connections and the rise of nationalism; in Postmodernism, the fall of totalitarian societies, the triumph of liberty and human rights, the holistic philosophy of science, the emergent and non-linear view of phenomena which acted as a battery of change in identity poetics.

In his *“Essay on Human Understanding” – “On Identity and Diversity”*, John Locke relates identity to consciousness rather than to some substantial substratum:

Self is that conscious thinking thing, — whatever substance made up of, (whether spiritual or material, simple or compounded, it matters not) — which is sensible or conscious of pleasure and pain, capable of happiness or misery, and so is concerned for itself, as far as that consciousness extends. Thus every one finds that, whilst comprehended under that consciousness, the little finger is as much a part of himself as what is most so. Upon separation of this little finger, should this consciousness go along with the little finger, and leave the rest of the body, it is evident the little finger would be the person, the same person; and self then would have nothing to do with the rest of the body. As in this case it is the consciousness that goes along with the substance, when one part is separate from another, which makes the same person, and constitutes this inseparable self: so it is in reference to substances remote in time. (Locke: web).

Landmarks to pin down the two paradigms from a chronological point of view are hard to identify, although, in the years following the Second World War a shift in poetics occurred which is described by Brian McHale as “a shift of dominant from problems of knowing to problems of modes of being – from an epistemological dominant to an ontological one”. (McHale: 10).

Although there has been of late a keen interest in theorizing about issues addressed in identity formation studies, such as social action, social agency, meaning and, most recently, individual and collective identity, scholars have paradoxically kept approaches to fairy tales from this perspective at a distance. Fairy tales as identity narratives bridge the gap between sciences and humanities, linking identity and action research to narrative analysis.

Through fairy-tales, life itself is “storied”; such narratives guide action and construct identities, locating as being located; in such stories people make sense of the world they live in, and integrate this world into stories, tales, they construct “experience”. Brought together,

the two concepts of Fairy Tales and Identity can offer a new perspective upon the social theories of action.

Undeservedly overlooked, fairy-tales, as identity narratives bring about a revolution with ponderous consequences for our contemporary culture, since the concept of narrative at present is being appropriated into the epistemological framework of a spectrum of other disciplines including medicine, psychology, anthropology, gender studies, biology, law, physics, etc.

Within the context of modernism, fairy tales, as a subspecies of folk literature, were called upon to serve as a mark of identity for a specific culture in the context of the collapse of dynastic rules and the rise of independent nation states after World War I. The study of folklore had previously been associated with emergent romantic nationalistic movements in which scholars searched the folklore record of the past, not just to see how people had lived in by-gone days, but also to discover historical models on which to reshape the present and build the future. In Herder's words quoted in Robert Reinhold Ergang's *Herder and the Foundations of German Nationalism* (p. 222): "Methinks I see the time coming when we shall return in earnest to our language, to the merits, to the principles and goals of our fathers and learn therefore to value our own gold."

The aim of my approach resides not only in contextualizing fairy tales in two different stages, modernism and postmodernism, using relevant examples, but also in a comparative approach meant to highlight the shift in poetics from one phase to another. This comparative study reveals the importance of fairy tales as a remedy for a society in distress, such as the great role they played as a mark of national identity in the period of Bessarabia's union with the Mother Country: Simion Teodorescu Kirileanu's *Povesti basarabene (Stories of Bessarabia)* recorded by the folklorist in March, 1918, underwritten by and agenda of cultural unification of Bessarabia with the rest of Romania, or their function as a marker of identity at the time when Ireland had set out to win its independence (*Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Poesantry* by W.B.Yeats).

In the history of literature, 'modernism' emerged as a reaction to realism and naturalism. Being a break with tradition, it subverted established religious, political, and social views. The protagonists of the movement gave priority to subjectivism over all these indices of an objective reality. The assessment of the individual according to one's inner strength was one of the most prominent characteristics of modernism.

Speaking of identity and moral topography in modernism, Charles Taylor remarks:"

Our modern notion of the self is related to, one might say constituted by a certain sense (or perhaps a family of senses) of inwardness . . . The unconscious is for us within, and we think of the depths of the unsaid, the unsayable, the powerful inchoate feelings and affinities and fears which dispute with us the control of our lives, as inner. (Taylor: 111).

I argue it is possible to view fairy tales as networks of relationships embedded in time and space, constituted by causal emplotment. They produce meaning, are sense-making and enfold symbolic, institutional, material and cultural practices, as holders of historicity, relationality and identity.

Fairy tales point to the substratum of fact underlying tradition, to the absorption, within tradition, of many features of the historical life surrounding it, or to the absorption of some great historic event. They help illustrate basic truths about the human experience, truths that have been handed down from generation to generation. These tales focus on universally human themes of family, good versus evil, love, encompassing and illustrating a specific *habitus* or slice of human experience. They can work to uncover cultural trends, psychological elements, and moral values of the people who created them, while also mirroring their social expectations and norms.

Myths and fairy tales are socially important because they allow people to represent components of their psyche into stories, or their concern with an action or behaviour that need to be verbalized, or call for verbalization.

As Jack Zipes puts it in his *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*,

[...] the process of reading involves dislocating the reader from his/her familiar setting and then identifying with the dislocated protagonist so that a quest for the *Heimische* or real home can begin. The fairy tale ignites a double quest for home (home=identity, my emphasis): one occurs in the reader's mind and is psychological and difficult to interpret, since the reception of an individual tale varies according to the background and experience of the reader. The second occurs within the tale itself and indicates a socialisation process and acquisition of values for participation in a society where the protagonist has more power of determination. This second quest for home can be regressive or progressive depending on the narrator's stance vis-a-vis society. In both quests the notion of home or *Heimat*, which is closely related etymologically to *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, retains a powerful progressive attraction for readers of fairy tales. While the uncanny setting and motifs of the fairy tale already open us up to the recurrence of primal experiences, we can move forward at the same time because it opens up to what Freud calls 'unfulfilled but possible futures to which we still like to cling in fantasy, all the strivings of the ego which adverse external circumstances have crushed, and all our suppressed acts of volition which nourish in us the illusion of Free Will. (Zipes: 173).

The world of the fairy tale has always been created as a counterfactual world, the other of the reality inhabited by the storyteller or his listeners. It tells us what we lack and how the world has to be organized differently so that we receive what we need. Fairy tales offer hope that we can change ourselves while changing the world.

Such examples of fairy tales as a mark and maker of identity are two representative collections, one published in Ireland by *William Butler Yeats*, "*Fairy and Folk Tales of the*

Irish Poesy”, and the other, *Povesti Basarabene (Bessarabean Fairy Tales)*, brought out by Simion Teodorescu – Kirileanu in Romania about the time of its state reintegration.

Folklorist Simion Teodorescu – Kirileanu’s concern with tradition and history can be spotted out in his entire work, a special place being held by his collection of *Povesti Basarabene* for it was written during his journey in Bessarabia, in March 1918, the *annus mirabilis* of this province’s union with Romania.

Living under a forced Russification of their language and culture, the Romanians in Bessarabia turned to their past to find strength for future action. As if they had been schooled in Herder’s philosophy, scholars began in earnest to collect and publish folklore in order to recapture the national soul and to put the country back on its cultural foundations. It was by reviving the spirit of the past reified in artefacts that they justified their future destiny in unified Romania.

It was one of the first collections of Bessarabean fairy tales collected by a Romanian from the other side of the Prut River in order to prove that Romanians on both its sides think and feel alike, their spiritual and cultural likeness being the foundation on which the political union was to be edified.

As Herder argues, *language is* the main feature of nationhood, and, thereby, of *identity*: ”whoever was raised in the same language, who poured his heart into it and learned to express his soul in it, he belongs to the nation (Volk) of that language.” (Herder: 294-295). Herder believed that thought is dependent on language and that the specific features of a particular language are conditioned by the sensibility and manner of thought of the people that speaks it. As far as territory is concerned, Herder states that peoples migrate or get dispersed by forces outside their control, and yet, they continue to be identified by their original homeland which leaves traces on people’s early sensibility, thought and language, and these, in turn, get passed on from generation to generation. It is nationalism that creates nations, not the other way round.

Although isolated from the mother county and exposed to a continuous process of de-nationalisation, Bessarabia displayed the same form and core of the fairy tale as found in Romania, as stated in Lazar Săineanu’s typology (1895) or by A. Schullerus in 1928. The nine fairy tales of this collection have a rich subtext, if read and interpreted on a symbolic level. They uncover cultural trends, psychological aspects, and moral values, speak about human experience and create a fictional world which, nevertheless, reflects on that of the storytellers’, of the readership, on the social norms of the nation.

Fairy tales played an important part in proving the spiritual, cultural and linguistic unity of the Bessarabians with the rest of the Romanians, which finally led to the long desired union with the Mother Country. In them are enshrined patterned human experience, moral values, specific for Bessarabians, their expectations, which were the same for all Romanians, irrespective of the imposed borders, showing that people’s imagination, spirit, the way they feel, think cannot be bordered, and in that resided their salvation. It would be wrong to think

of fairy tales as the realm exclusively of fantasy, with supernatural happenings and beings, and not also as the medium wherein are revealed major concerns about people and the society they live in. They are pageants of individual, family and social life including marriage, birth, funeral, physical and moral qualities of people, the psychology of women before and after marriage, the position of men and women in society, the ill-matching in marriage of those belonging to different social categories, the big differences among social classes, the gap between the poor and the rich, the generation gap, the origin of poverty and wealth, the hero's struggle of becoming, and many others, to clothes, architecture and landscape.

Highly authentic, the fairy tales presented in this collection dramatize the same major themes we find in other fairy tales, from all other areas inhabited by Romanians. Next to supernatural beings, objects, happenings, metamorphoses structured by the good/evil binary, with the latter imaged by Satan – as destructive, disruptive of a given order, of tradition, of moral values, of religion – one gets hints at the Soviet Union of the real world, which imposed its programme of denationalisation upon the Romanians living in Bessarabia, oppressing and depriving them of their tradition, religion, moral values, language, identity. Despite the perpetrated atrocities, Romanians managed, at the highest cost, to preserve their Romanianness, their identity, as stated at a symbolic level in fairy tales, where the Good always prevails.

Fairy tales have always been one of culture's mechanisms for instilling roles and behaviour patterns. On the basis of projections, memories, expectations contained in a narrative, people are guided to act in certain ways, and discouraged to do otherwise. People act according to a set of fundamental principles and values which Charles Taylor calls "hypergoods". Fairy tales will assimilate elements of the social world, put them in some order and normatively evaluate these arrangements which define people, offer an identity and precondition action. People identify, act or refrain from acting, as they perceive and understand their place in certain narratives (fairy tales being our case in point here) no matter how enchanted, fragmented or contradictory these might be. Nothing is immune to change. Identity or the Self are neither a priori, nor fixed. People adjust fairy tales to fit their own identity, becoming, thus, a mark of identity and the other way around: they also adjust reality to fit their stories. By way of consequence, fairy tales are constantly being "tailored" in the course of history, for, time, space, place, power, processes and interactions are constantly in flux; identity is neither fixed nor universal.

The concept of identity changed by being confronted with a set of extraordinary challenges arising from external political and social transformations which led to inner shifts of perspective, and to theoretical attempts to make sense of those social developments.

The external political, social and cultural transformations which led to the shift in identity poetics are best seen in the outer changes that have shaped and reshaped the world: the collapse of the Great Empires, of the communist regimes, the "failure" of the working classes to fulfill their desired revolutionary interest, women's rights, various ethnic conflicts and all the social movements which responded to these changes. Limiting ourselves to the last three decades or so, the list includes: postcolonial and diasporic search for identity, ecological

movements, gay and lesbians movements, etc. All these movements are various facets of the “politics of identity”.

From a closed, well defined identity, people are progressing towards an open concept of identity in a multicultural, present world which valorizes difference as well as its own core and which defines itself in relation to alterity. We can even speak of the priority of the other over the self. Keeping pace with a more flexible theory of identity, let us go back to fairy tales seen as a “tool” in shaping identity. It is identity narratives that account for the way people act out their social roles or scripts, writing them into existence as “markers” of identity. In postmodernity, keeping up with the changes they attempt, positively speaking, to shift the balance, to restore, previously devalued differences in domestic and public life from a feminist perspective.

In postmodernism, fairy tales invite a theoretical approach to alternative role models which transform these devalued features of “female” and “racial” other into a new set of normatized social action breaking such stereotypes.

Leading examples of such stereotype–breakings narratives are Angela Carter’s fairy tales collected in *The Bloody Chamber*. (1979).

The fairy tales she refurbishes are no longer innocent lessons for children, but richly fantastical, often satirical, comments on sexual power and psychology, a shifter of the mind, stories about fairy stories.

Her *Bloody Chamber* fairy tales are narratives which express multiple subjectivities in a deliberate way so as to reject the appearance of objectivity and neutrality embedded in master narratives. Her fairy tales viewed as identity counter-narratives, present alternative values which are not contained in the traditional fairy tales. Postmodern re-writings of fairy tales, from a feminist agenda, such as those replotted by Angela Carter, break away from past traditions, well-defined and well-established patterns, deconstructing identity and re-constructing it according to the new order of things, drifting away from a local, national identity towards a transnational, global one, brought about by the globalization process.

We recognize in Carter’s fairy tales the marks of postmodernist writings: intertextuality, reinscription, metafiction, allusions, irony, multiple-worlds physics (the overlapping of possible worlds or a mixture of fictional worlds and reality), displacement, hybridity, the lack of a common denominator, to name just a few. In conclusion, fairy tales of postmodernist inscription suppose autopoiesis, the emergence of a counter-order where old and new ideologies come to grips, get confused in order to make room for other, new values of the changing world.

Angela Carter contributed not only to a new construction of female identity in her fairy tales, but also to a theoretical revaluation of the genre. In a famous article of 1983, entitled “Notes from the Front Line”, Angela Carter defined her own rewriting of fairy tales as “putting new wine in old bottles until the pressure of new wine makes the old bottle explode”.

Wars over identity will apparently never cease, for, to move forward, one needs new discourses. Most worrisome still, as long as identity and self-realization are viewed as fixed categories, there will always be walls to climb or break down.

Fairy tales, in light of the new identity theories of today, give expression and form to the “fractured identities” of what Rosi Braidotti calls “nomadic subjects”. For nowadays identity is perceived as being embedded within and constructed by a whole network of relationships and relationality. It can no longer be conceived a priori (“I think, therefore I am”) but rather explored empirically and historically.

With all the shatters of this world that impinge on our lives, we alone are left responsible to build and shape our own identity in the making.

Fairy tales have been adapted, retold across cultures and time. The adaptability and evolution of fairy tales have ensured their survival. With the introduction of movies, fairy tales are morphing rapidly into stories that are ever-changing. If the stories continue to evolve to fit people’s wants, they will last forever.

Fairy tales....ever changing, but....ever lasting.

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