

Brian Radford
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Adventure into the Forest: The Brothers Grimm and Ecocriticism

In Western culture, fairy tales can tantalize a child's imagination due to the creative writers developing stories full of exotic locations, imaginative elements, and menacing creatures. By including natural concepts, these authors demonstrated an ecocritical examination of how nature and society can interact together. One such collection of fairy tales known to transport the reader into landscapes of fantasy and depict nature ominously and enriching is called *Children and Household Tales*, written by the brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. Other ecocritical scholars often argue the Grimm tales represent either a utopian ideal or a perilous place, but I instead intend to focus on the correlation of both representations to defy the easy categorization to focus better on the chaos found in nature. This duality alludes to both the fears of the unknown and the hidden fantastic creatures or magical witchcraft discovered in natural locations. The ecocritical perspective I will analyze focuses on the tales' representation of nature as both a utopian ideal and a perilous environment of death and sorcery. The intersection, or middle ground, of this binary provides an understanding of the concerns dealing with the unknown chaos often found in nature. While my larger paper considers a variety of stories to evaluate their ecocritical spectrum, in this talk I shall explore the stories "Hansel and Gretel" and "Snow White," to demonstrate how in the forest lies both awe and mystery for the characters to explore. The use of these motifs in fairy tales takes the reader from the structure of society into the chaotic world within the forest where magic and turmoil preside.

Scholars providing ecocritical examinations of texts often refer to the environment as an entity for exploring its impact on our culture. One framework used to explore fairy tales explains the link between social apparatuses and the natural world, leading to the reader analyzing the understood cultural norms. Katherine Adler discusses how the Grimm tales “reveal critical cultural implications about the interactions that humans have with the empirical realm of the environment” (Adler 2). A common discourse in literature examines the view of nature and culture as oppositional concepts within Western society. Culture becomes a theme often described as the colonizing force controlling the natural world and its innocence. Though, as the theorist Peter Barry explains, there embodies a “grey area,” or middle ground in Ecocriticism used to examine literary texts, as he states, “to varying degrees, contain large elements of *both* culture and nature” (Barry 256). Barry argues that “for the ecocritic, nature really exists, out there beyond ourselves ... but actually present as an entity which affects us, and which can affect, perhaps fatally, if we mistreat it” (Barry 252). In assessing the middle ground Barry discusses, an illustration of nature emerges as a chaotic entity in its reflection of society and the norms human culture imposes on its citizens.

By examining the natural elements found in the Grimm fairy tales beyond the typical motif, an ecocritical perspective sees nature resembling a chaotic realm where cultural and social norms become tested. The unique origin of the Grimm fairy tales through studying local folktales of this region allowed the brothers to create natural environments filled with life lessons and deviant social ideas. Adler describes the appeal of these stories by how “familiar plotlines and rich nature imagery of fairy tales creates a cozy atmosphere in which one can learn life lessons from a talking tree or magical bean seeds” (Adler 8). Fairy tales for children living around the Black Forest in Baden-Württemberg, Germany connect to the cultural significance of nature and

the parental warnings to never venture too far from society. Gabriel Dürbeck discusses this ecological theme by stating that “there is a strong affinity for the woods in German culture which can also be found in fairy tales—not least because many plots are located there” (Dürbeck 304). The Grimm brothers artistically direct the reader from the civilized world of structure and laws to the chaotic realm of the forest where both freedom and anarchy await the characters. Children discover a new way of viewing nature, seeing the characters interacting with the forest and finding both rewards and perilous trials depending on their behaviors toward natural elements.

For the characters in the Grimm tales, nature becomes the setting where the characters can grapple with the issues presented in the cultural world. In an ecocritical view of the tale “Hänsel and Gretel,” nature proves a mirror to reflect upon the callous essence of society. This tale demonstrates a common struggle amongst the poor in society who are unable to provide food for the entire family. One solution the stepmother presents to the husband describes abandoning their children to venture beyond the safety of society and into the forest, ensuring the adults survive starvation. She states, “we will take the children early in the morning into the forest, where it is thickest; we will make them a fire, and we will give each of them a piece of bread, then we will go to our work and leave them alone; they will never find the way home again, and we shall be quit of them” (“Hansel and Gretel” 101). The deep forest becomes her salvation from the troubles she faces in her social standing, allowing her to escape the suffering she views correlates with her husband’s children and the nuisance they bring in devouring the food from her table. The Grimms explore a callous society through the treatment of the children by the stepmother who chooses to simply abandon them into the chaotic world of nature to die.

Following the children from the perilous society to the chaotic natural environment, an offering of tantalizing treats presents both danger and wonder for Hansel and Gretel, especially

given the starvation they face both wandering the wild and at home. The children succumb to their primal desire of hunger and begin eating the materials of the house. The bizarre house made of sweets represents the values often found in nature through the ability of providing a treat for the children. The old woman tempts them to venture into the house for comfort, further satisfying their hunger, “they found a good meal laid out, of milk and pancakes, with sugar, apples, and nuts ... and Hansel and Gretel ... thought they were in heaven” (“Hansel and Gretel” 105). The perilous environment of nature offers an opposite illustration of society in the abundance of food the children find. Adler states that the “rich nature imagery in these tales in particular not only cements the idea of the interconnectedness of nature and human culture, it also gives the reader a sense of responsibility and moral consciousness in relation to the development of human culture as it necessarily relates to nature” (Adler 9). This illustrates how society struggles at providing enough food for all its citizens, leading to the eviction of the children to become victims in the woods. Nature contains the ability to provide a house built of cake containing even more richness of food and comfort.

As the duality of nature shifts from a perilous place to a utopian salvation for the main character, the spectrum of the ecocritical role viewing nature and culture as equal instead of opposite emerges clearer. In exploring “Snow White,” nature becomes the salvation needed for the heroine of the tale. The vanity of the Queen forces her to instruct a huntsman to “Take the child out into the woods, so that I may set eyes on her no more. You must put her to death, and bring me her heart for a token” (“Snow White” 331). For Snow White, the woods become her sanctuary from the cruelty of society and the evil Queen wanting her dead. Dragging her out deep into nature presents Snow White as an animal for the huntsman to kill. Upon a sudden sympathetic change of heart, the huntsman abandons his charge and leaves her alone in the forest

to be devoured by the beasts. Her pleading for her safety by demonstrating respect toward her captor relates to an anthropocentric view often found in fairy tales on respecting others. Dürbeck states that “those who value nature and care for other beings will be rewarded” (Dürbeck 303). The huntsman’s heart finds hope in letting her go and demonstrates this respect by merely killing a passing animal to take Snow White’s place in death. In this vein, nature sacrifices itself to allow the innocent girl to survive and seek refuge from the cultural dangers. Nature’s role shifts from threatening to rewarding when she stumbles upon a cabin, not of cake but one of salvation in the form of shelter and hospitality. Dürbeck discusses how in “many Grimms’ fairy tales...it is mostly girls who behave in modest, gentle, and upright ways and are helpful toward others, be it animals, flowers, or humans” (Dürbeck 303). Similar to Gretel, the heroine of her story, Snow White’s gentle and honest characteristics allow her to find safety from the perilous environment found in society and a haven in the forests.

Fear drives Snow White to aimlessly run from the society abandoning her for death, the dangers in the forest push her to seek shelter. This fear overcomes her during escape, forcing her deeper into the woods in hopes of surviving the dangers lurking just beyond her vision, “she felt full of terror, even of the very leaves on the trees, and she did not know what to do for fright. Then she began to run over the sharp stones and through the thorn bushes, and the wild beasts after her, but they did her no harm” (“Snow White” 331). The animals never harm her, merely escort her to the sanctuary nature provides deep in the forest where the hospitality of dwarves provide safety. In discussing this imagery in the Disney version, Murray and Heumann stated that her “escape to the forest highlights her connection with her natural world, a world safe from the evil intentions of the queen, a wicked and jealous stepmother” (Murray and Heumann 68). The forest becomes the sanctuary for Snow White from the corrupt society which facilitates the

twisting of a natural protective relationship into a dangerous element threatening her life. However, the Queen discovers her location deep in the forest, resembling an old woman, and continuously struggles to kill Snow White until the final attempt succeeds with an apple. The Queen manipulates nature for her own evil intentions. Even though in the original tale, the forest crawls with carnivorous animals merely moments away from killing her, the society for Snow White remains the true villain and contains far more dangerous entities. As Murray and Heumann describe, “the forest is safe and secure, and the human world means danger” (Murray and Heumann 69). The dangerous element in this fairy tale represents the societal constructs which allow an evil Queen to succumb to her vanity and repeatedly attempt to murder an innocent girl until Snow White succumbs to her temptations. In the forest lies the only hope for Snow White to escape death but nature fails to save her when the Queen uses it to her own advantage.

The often-held view in Ecocriticism explores how the view of nature and culture are in opposition, with nature’s characteristics seen as chaotic and uncontrollable. Focusing on the intersection rather than the binary explores the chaotic elements of nature as reflective of the structure of society. Nature’s elements fluctuate between nightmarish to a utopian foliage from one fairy tale to the other, demonstrating a response to the human society represented, often as dark or deadlier than the animals the characters interact with. As Glen Love describes, “it is one of the great mistaken ideas of anthropocentric thinking, and thus one of the cosmic ironies, that society is complex while nature is simple” (Love 206). The human-built society illustrated in literature appears as both complex and sophisticated while nature simply embodies a chaotic role which needs our attention to find balance. Nature simply represents either a location for the characters to engage in or an environment in need of control. Love commentates on this fallacy

by stating “Nature reveals adaptive strategies far more complex than any human mind could devise” (Love 206). In this examination of the binary held within Nature, the Grimm tales demonstrate its complexities by providing examples of its adaptability in either punishing or rewarding the characters.

Examining these fairy tales through an ecocritical perspective presents a unique view on both cultural influences on nature and natural importance in societal norms. The binary of the natural imagery found in the Grimm tales of “Hansel and Gretel” and “Snow White” demonstrates this unique discourse of the fluidity nature’s role plays in children’s tales and the chaotic world found in forests. The siblings in one tale venture deep into the forest to find a dangerous witch attempting to devour them for dinner while Snow White is taken into the forest to die only to find a sanctuary deep within amongst the dwarves and animals. For children reading these tales, the chaotic nature of forests fluctuates depending on the individual and their interactions with the natural world. Further examinations of nature in other Grimm tales illuminate a “grey area,” as Peter Barry discusses, where nature contains the capacity to act as a warning to not venture too far from the safety of society and an enticing foray from the debilitating class structures and laws. Fairy tales reflect the chaotic environment of nature and the uncontrollable aspects found just beyond the safety of cultural norms. For children, the enticing elements of fairy tales containing magical creatures and a discovery of sweets remains too strong to resist, pulling them in with “Once upon a time.”

Works Cited

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