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September 29, 2014
GR 101/121
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Ambiguous Messages and Contemporary Morals in Tales by the Brothers Grimm

Most of us can remember the stories we grew up with as children, whether they were folklore, fables, or fairy tales. While we may not remember the exact wording of the stories as they were told to us, we certainly remember their morals. Consciously or unconsciously, our own values are shaped by the principles we are taught as children, which reflect the dominant values of our particular time and culture. Storytellers likewise do not memorize their tales verbatim, but “combine stock phrases, formulas, and narrative segments in patterns improvised according to the response of their audience” so that they can tailor the stories to “their own milieu” (Darnton in Tatar 288, 286). As audiences and values change, the fairy tales themselves must adapt in order to continue addressing relevant cultural concerns, while at the same time maintaining recognizable plot lines. Every new incarnation of a story is shaped by the values and morals of its author or raconteur as he endeavors to find and share relevance in the tale, which can result in stories like the Grimm Brothers’ “The White Snake” and “The Brave Little Tailor,” whose meanings appear ambiguous to a modern audience because they represent values different from those we hold today.

The Grimm Brothers modified their fairy tales to fit their own values, drawn from their personal experiences and the historical context in which they lived. Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, the eldest sons of a successful lawyer, were raised to believe in moral integrity and honesty, as well as a strict Calvinist religious code (Zipes, *Complete Fairy Tales* xxiii-iv). After their father’s death, the brothers “had to struggle against social slights and financial deprivation” throughout their time at school, where they faced discrimination based on their socio-economic

status (Zipes, *Complete Fairy Tales* xxiv). They could certainly empathize with the protagonists of what Ruth Bottigheimer calls the “rise fairy tale, in which a poor boy or girl suffers tasks and trials, and then through magic, marries royalty and becomes wealthy” (107). Their attitudes towards royalty and monarchy were influenced by the historical context in which they found themselves in addition to their personal experiences. Following the Napoleonic Wars, both Grimms were “dedicated to the notion of German unification,” although “neither wanted to see the restoration of oppressive German princes” (Zipes, *Complete Fairy Tales* xxvi). They wanted to provide the German people with a sense of cultural identity and importance, but their lack of “proper conservative politics” prevented them from supporting an absolutist on the throne (Zipes, *Complete Fairy Tales* xxvii). Instead, their tales support the hope of a benevolent ruler rising from humble origins, unlike the “restoration” tales that would have seen the return of the oppressive German monarchs after the French occupation (Bottigheimer 107).

Influenced by their culture and times, the Brothers Grimm modified the tales that came into their possession in order to perpetuate their own values and to appeal to contemporary audiences. One such story in which it is possible to see the evolution of values before, as, and after it passed through the hands of the Grimms is “Little Red Riding Hood.” “The Story of Grandmother” is thought to be the most faithful representation of the original oral tradition, filled with taboo subjects like bestiality and cannibalism. Charles Perrault’s adaptation, written for the *salons* of Paris, softened “those elements that would have shocked the society of his epoch” (Tatar 4). Little Red Riding Hood’s ultimate death at the hands of the wolf serves to enforce the moral of his story: “young girls... are wrong to listen to just anyone, and it’s not at all strange, if a wolf ends up eating them” (cited in Tatar 4). In this way, he blames Hood for her own downfall and cautions women to be on their guard. While Perrault leaves certain mildly erotic and violent

elements to excite his adult audience without shocking them, the Brothers Grimm completely remove all traces of eroticism in accordance with their own strict religious morals (Tatar 5). They also add on to the end of the story, inserting a huntsman to rescue Little Red Cap and her grandmother. The Grimms give Cap the opportunity to learn the lesson they hope to teach: do not “stray from the path and go into the woods, when your mother has forbidden it” (Grimm and Grimm in Tatar 16). This addition comes with the rise of children’s stories as a distinct literary genre around the time of the Grimms’ publication, and a new didactic approach to teaching morals (Zipes, *Spells of Enchantment* xxiv). Later versions continue to demonstrate the changing societal values and morals, such as James Thurber’s adaptation, which ends with the moral, “it is not so easy to fool little girls nowadays as it used to be” (Tatar 17). Feminist incarnations attempt to empower Little Red Riding Hood, making her far cleverer than the wolf, but regardless of changing values, the purpose of the story remains constant. It serves to tell little girls how to behave, whether that behavior is obedience or independence.

“The White Snake” and “The Brave Little Tailor” belong to a different class of fairy tale, whose instructions have undergone a dramatic shift in the two centuries since the Grimms’ publication. While the moral of “Little Red Cap” has been turned completely on its head in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, modern audiences at least still have use for instructions on how to behave. “The White Snake” and “The Brave Little Tailor,” however, deal with a rise through the social hierarchy, from rags to riches, from peasant or servant to king. While our modern democratic state recognizes this archetype in our story of the American Dream, it values rise by honest labor and a Protestant work ethic, rather than by cleverness and deception. Although the Grimm family held the motto “honesty is the best policy in life,” these two stories feature protagonists who are rewarded for what a modern audience might read as deceit (Zipes,

Complete Fairy Tales xxiv). The Grimms' strong commitment to morality and integrity, however, serves as evidence that the concepts of those values have actually changed over time due to a changing historical context.

As a modern audience would read it, "The White Snake" features a disobedient servant who gives in to temptation and cheats his master by eating of the forbidden fruit. One would expect the servant to receive his comeuppance at the end of the tale, perhaps meeting a grisly end or seeing his newfound powers snatched away from him once more. Instead, he marries a beautiful princess with whom he reaches "a ripe old age in peace and happiness" (Grimm and Grimm in Zipes, *Complete Fairy Tales* 64). The story sees him use his power benevolently and selflessly to help those in need, who will eventually repay him in kind. The modern reader finds himself facing quite a conundrum when trying to interpret the moral of this tale: is he really meant to give in to "curiosity" and "irresistible desire" against the word of authority, just like Pandora when she opens the forbidden box (Grimm and Grimm in Zipes, *Complete Fairy Tales* 62)? Such a moral seems contrary to everything the reader has been taught by modern culture, so how can it result in such reward? Although a modern audience may condemn the servant for his apparent disloyalty and marvel how he can be the same compassionate man who goes out of his way to save the lives of three little fish, examining the story through a different cultural lens reveals an alternative interpretation. Now the reader can see the hardworking common man, condemned by the ruler he so faithfully served, take power from the greedy monarch and use it benevolently, rather than for his own good alone. The servant acts as an incarnation of the king's karma; the ruler neglects to utilize his mighty power for the benefit of the kingdom, using it instead only to "obtain news of the most secret things," and so the power passes on to one more fit to wield it (Grimm and Grimm in Zipes, *Complete Fairy Tales* 61). It is not difficult to discern

the Grimms' own liberal political agenda in the story of the servant's rise to power, especially when one considers the brothers' participation in the German Revolution of 1848 (Zipes, *Complete Fairy Tales* xxviii). The man who can take power from the monarchy and use it to become a kind and compassionate ruler is, to the morals of a nineteenth century German liberal, a hero.

One can find a similar ambiguity apparent in the story of the brave little tailor, a braggart who is unsatisfied with his lot and pursues his ambition almost to his ruin, yet succeeds in winning the hand of a beautiful princess through his cleverness and escapes any consequences of his deception. It is tempting to condemn the little tailor as an arrogant egotist who deserved to have been killed by the king's men, but one must again consider the cultural differences between twenty-first-century America and nineteenth-century Germany. While many today are quick to judge and dismiss others as social climbers who seek only their own advancement at the expense of genuine friendships, in the strictly hierarchical society of the Brothers Grimm, improving one's social status was quite a worthy goal. The Grimms themselves understood the heavy social pressures felt by the middle and lower classes and endeavored for many years to prove their own worth through their intelligence (Zipes, *Complete Fairy Tales* xxiv). Likewise, the "nimble hero" of this tale succeeds in attaining a higher social rank through his clever exaggerations until he "reign[s] as king and remain[s] king for the rest of his life (Grimm and Grimm in Zipes, *Complete Fairy Tales* 78, 79). To a modern society obsessed with (often false) modesty, the message of "The Brave Little Tailor" seems hopelessly ambiguous, and yet when understood in the cultural and historical context in which it was written, the moral suddenly becomes clear.

There is no such thing as a “pure” or “complete” fairytale; the stories by nature are dynamic and change with their audiences. Every incarnation of a fairytale is rooted in its historical and cultural context, making them difficult to interpret without fully understanding the contemporary values and disassociating completely with our current beliefs. The story of *Hoodwinked* (2005) would make as little sense to a contemporary of Perrault as “The Brave Little Tailor” does to us today, for the cultural values each promulgates are unique to the context of its telling. As Zipes explains in his essay, the message of any fairytale is translated twice in the telling: once when the teller puts the tale into his own words, and once when the listener draws his own lesson or moral from the story (Zipes, *Repulsive Frog* 109). In both translations, the story is shaped by the contemporary cultural values and belief systems of both participants. The translation is quite straightforward when the teller and the listener share a common culture, but when each has his own unique set of values, it can become quite confused. The ambiguous messages we read in “The White Snake” and “The Brave Little Tailor” do not come through any fault in the Grimms’ storytelling, but rather through our inability to grasp the differences between our culture and theirs. The brothers “regarded their work as part of a social effort to foster a sense of justice among the German people,” a task they did not take lightly (Zipes, *Complete Fairy Tales* xxviii). Every one of their tales contained a specific moral, intentionally woven into the fabric of the story, and perfectly relevant to the cultural concerns and values of their time.

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| Grade | Conceptualization | Thesis | Development and Support | Structuring | Language & Style |
|-------|---|--|--|--|--|
| A | has cogent analysis, shows command of interpretive and conceptual tasks required by assignment and course materials; ideas original, often insightful, going beyond ideas discussed in lecture and class 19 18-20 | essay controlled by clear, precise, well-defined thesis; is sophisticated in both statement and insight 19 18-20 | well-chosen examples; uses persuasive reasoning to develop and support thesis consistently; uses specific quotations, statistics, aesthetic details, or citations of scholarly sources effectively; logical connections between ideas are evident 19 18-20 | well-constructed paragraphs; appropriate, clear, and smooth transitions; arrangement of organizational elements seems particularly apt 18 18-20 | uses sophisticated sentences effectively; usually chooses words aptly; observes professional conventions of written English and manuscript format; makes few minor or technical errors 19 18-20 |
| B | shows a good understanding of the texts, ideas and methods of the assignment; goes beyond the obvious; may have one minor factual or conceptual inconsistency 16-18 | clear, specific, arguable thesis central to the essay; may have left minor terms undefined 16-18 | pursues explanation and proof of thesis consistently; develops a main argument with explicit major points with appropriate textual evidence and supporting detail 16-18 | distinct units of thought in paragraphs controlled by specific, detailed, and arguable topic sentences; clear transitions between developed, cohering, and logically arranged paragraphs 16-18 | a few mechanical difficulties or stylistic problems (split infinitives, dangling modifiers, etc.); may make occasional problematic word choices or syntax errors; a few spelling or punctuation errors or a cliché; usually presents quotations effectively, using appropriate format 16-18 |
| C | shows an understanding of the basic ideas and information involved in the assignment; may have some factual, interpretive, or conceptual errors 14-16 | general thesis or controlling idea; may not define several central terms 14-16 | only partially develops the argument; shallow analysis; some ideas and generalizations undeveloped or unsupported; makes limited use of textual evidence; fails to integrate quotations appropriately; warrants missing 14-16 | some awkward transitions; some brief, weakly unified or undeveloped paragraphs; arrangement may not appear entirely natural; contains extraneous information 14-16 | more frequent wordiness; unclear or awkward sentences; imprecise use of words or over-reliance on passive voice; some distracting grammatical errors (wrong verb tense, pronoun agreement, apostrophe errors, singular/plural errors, article use, preposition use, comma splice, etc.); makes effort to present quotations accurately 14-16 |
| D | shows inadequate command of course materials or has significant factual and conceptual errors; confuses some significant ideas 12-14 | thesis vague or not central to argument; central terms not defined 12-14 | frequently only narrates; digresses from one topic to another without developing ideas or terms; makes insufficient or awkward use of textual evidence; relies on too few or the wrong type of sources. 12-14 | simplistic, tends to narrate or merely summarize; wanders from one topic to another; illogical arrangement of ideas 12-14 | some major grammatical or proofreading errors (subject-verb agreement, sentence fragments, word form errors, etc.); language frequently weakened by clichés, colloquialisms, repeated inexact word choices; incorrect quotation or citation format 12-14 |
| NC | writer lacks critical understanding of lectures, readings, discussions, or assignments 0-12 | no discernible thesis 0-12 | little or no development; may list disjointed facts or misinformation; uses no quotations or fails to cite sources or plagiarizes 0-12 | no transitions; incoherent paragraphs; suggests poor planning or no serious revision 0-12 | numerous grammatical errors and stylistic problems seriously detract from the argument; does not meet Standard Written English requirement 0-12 |

Grade: 94 = A

Rebecca, you've provided nice evidence in situating the expectations of both a modern audience and one during the Grimm's time.