

Growing Pains: The Dysfunctional Family's Power Struggle in the Grimm Brothers' "Hansel and Gretel" Coming of Age Story

The Grimm brothers' fairy tale "Hansel and Gretel" opens with a quaint family of four—a father, a stepmother, and two children—living in a small country house during difficult times. As the land experiences fatigue from a famine, the family of four become even more restless. Although their life before the famine is unknown, one cannot deny its heavy influence as their worries pile up. The famine does more than increase their burdens: It brings to light the unhealthy family dynamics, centering around a manipulative stepmother. Affected by its influence, characters emerge anew, tested by the toils of hunger and poverty. On top of the environmental conflicts, the family experiences the conflict that arises from the shifting of roles that occurs as children mature and begin to test the boundaries of their emerging adulthood. The tale provides a metaphor for the children's power struggle against parental control in the face of family dysfunction as they come of age.

Famine and poverty bring out the conflict between the family members, highlighting who has the power. Maria Tatar places "Hansel and Gretel" in her collection of trickster fairy tales, and in her introduction to the collection, she recognizes how "Food—its presence and its absence—shapes the world of fairy tales in profound ways" (229). Deprivation of this vital part of life can induce one to do the unthinkable. When survival is at the forefront of one's mind, selfish behavior consequently follows. Extreme lack of resources probes one to wonder, as the father does, "How can we provide for our poor children when we don't even have enough for ourselves?" (Grimm 236). This seemingly innocent question opens the door to possibilities that lie in the depths of one's mind. Perhaps, as is the case with "Hansel and Gretel," parents may suddenly wish to lessen their responsibilities by ridding themselves of children.

Ultimately, the decision for how to provide lies with the head of the household, which, in this tale, is the stepmother. The stepmother decides the fate of the family and whom she thinks deserves the most to live. While the father is the first to voice his concern for the family's well-being, the stepmother determines their course of action. Often, as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out in their essay "[Snow White and Her Wicked Stepmother]," the reverse is true, where the male is the authoritative voice of the household and the female is the passive bystander. Their essay voices a concern for the relentless patriarchal power found in the Grimm brothers' "Little Snow White," but, in the brothers' tale "Hansel and Gretel," the patriarchy, oddly enough, poses little threat. In fact, the father is passive, holding minimal say in the familial decisions, while the stepmother is in control. She is a persuader, urging her husband to "Listen to me" (Grimm 236), and a schemer, plotting the fate of her family. Additionally, she manipulates her husband by taking what power he does have. After she convinces him to give in to her one time, his say is practically all hers for times to come: "In for a penny, in for a pound, and since he had given in the first time, he had to give in a second time" (Grimm 238). She comes to dominate the household.

The stepmother is far from a wholesome woman at this point, but the drastic living conditions bring out the worst in her, and she becomes more of a witch. Her devolvement is so drastic that her character begins to take a new form when she reencounters her abandoned children in the woods: "a woman, old as the hills, hobbled out, leaning on a crutch" (Grimm 239). She takes on the classic witch persona. As a stepmother, her transformation into a witch is foreseeable. Throughout fairy tales, the stepmother is not only evil but often a witch. In her article "Archetypes and Family Models," Alessandra Cordiano agrees that "in fairy tales the stepmother is always immoral; sometimes she is a witch" (259). She points to the infamous evil

stepmother in “Little Snow White” as one example where the identity of stepmother and witch merge. Likewise, in “Hansel and Gretel,” a similar merging occurs.

While “Hansel and Gretel” never explicitly identifies the stepmother as the witch, the unity of the two is evident through their parallel characters. The witch, who literally locks her food away—in this case, Hansel—reveals her “scrawny” hand (Grimm 240), resembling selfish individuals as the starving stepmother. Apart from their similar motivations and vices, the witch and the stepmother share a common dialect. The witch proves herself to be just as persuasive as the stepmother: Through the witch’s soothing pretense, Hansel and Gretel become prey to a false sense of safety and “felt as if they were in heaven” (Grimm 239). However, she can flip the switch to exude the same maliciousness of the stepmother as when she “fiendishly” laughs and ensnares the children (Grimm 240). She even uses the same degrading and original address for the children—“lazybones” (Grimm 240)—as the stepmother does. The most striking similarity, though, might have to be the connectivity of the two women’s lives. After Gretel kills the witch, the reader soon finds out that the stepmother also “had died” (Grimm 241) by an unknown cause. Indeed, the stepmother and the witch appear to share the same lifeline.

In reaction to this witch of a stepmother, the children must grow up, fend for themselves, and deal with their family’s dysfunction. The fairy tale is the ideal context for the children to sort through their dilemmas, according to Bruno Bettelheim, a psychoanalyst most notable for his book *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. Jack Zipes, in “Use and Abuse of Folk and Fairy Tales with Children: Bruno Bettelheim’s Moralistic Magic Wand,” summarizes part of Bettelheim’s argument, as he describes how a child’s subconscious is free to “work through conflicts and experiences which would otherwise be repressed and perhaps cause psychological disturbances” (182). Fairy tales function as a world apart from

reality where a child can sort through the complexities of reality. In Zipes' essay "Once There Were Two Brothers Named Grimm," he remarks how many psychoanalytic approaches—not just Bettelheim's—reveal that "violence and conflict in the tales derive from profound instinctual developments in the human psyche" (xxxiv). Almost like an allusion to the psychological process taking place, the tale takes on dreamlike qualities. The children move "deeper and deeper into the woods" (Grimm 239) as if drifting into a deep sleep. The events that follow reflect the previous day, as a dream often does. For example, a "beautiful bird, white as snow" appears and leads them to the house in the woods, similarly to how the "white pebbles" (Grimm 236) lead the way back to the father's house and a "white kitten" (Grimm 237) and a white dove mark the house. The close but not exact repetition, along with the other dreamlike language, seems to suggest a parallel, other world. Through the safety of a world outside of reality, the children may test their power and feel free to confront their stepmother.

Hansel and Gretel mature from fearful little children into agency-wielding adults. In the beginning of the story, they fall under parental control. They live in a state of worry, hunger, and fear, and the children must depend on their parents' actions and authority to provide for their needs. Their fate lies in the hands of their parents—really just their conniving stepmother—and they can do little to deflect the pronouncements, for, as Bettelheim believes, the story is one about "dependence" (*The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales* 225). However, the acts they do in defiance of their parent's decisions show their growing maturity. They are no longer unknowing and unsuspecting children. Their consciences begin to dictate the direction of their lives more than their parents. Hansel is the first of the two to indicate maturity from the get-go. He realizes that he must "figure out something" (Grimm 236) to counteract his parents' decision to abandon them. Further than that, he deceives his parents by telling them a lie, turning their attention away

from his “taking the shiny pebbles from his pocket and dropping them on the ground” (Grimm 237). Hansel displays maturation signs similar to those Tatar mentions when she notes that “spying, eavesdropping, mimicking, telling lies, and challenging property boundaries can not only enable survival but also move them along the path toward acquiring adult agency” (232). In the course of the story, both children learn to follow their individual wills. They choose to move even after the direct order from their stepmother, “Don’t move” (Grimm 238). These small steps of agency lead them closer towards independence as adults.

Ultimately, though, their independence springs from overpowering the source of parental authority: the stepmother. To commence their battle with her, the children must directly confront her. The battleground waits in the form of a “little house” (Grimm 239) deep within the woods, and the stepmother leads the children into the scene to battle for control. Once inside the house, the children test how their power compares to the witch. The witch flaunts her confidence in her abilities as she claims, “They’re mine!” (Grimm 240) even before she dominates them. She assumes she has sustained the same control over the children as she had originally. Because of her falsely construed assumption, she underestimates the children’s capabilities as maturing persons. The children are able to play on her ignorance to their advantage, pretending to be naïve—Gretel asks about the mechanics of getting in the oven: “I don’t know how to get in there. How do I do it?” (Grimm 240)—in order to surprise and overpower the witch. This triumphant act of agency paves the way for adulthood. As a result of killing the witch, Hansel and Gretel reap the benefits of “chests filled with pearls and jewels” (Grimm 241). Through this profit, they exhibit the telltale sign of an adult: earning provisions for one’s family.

While all seems right in the world again—for Hansel and Gretel at least—does the story have a happy ending? The children have defeated their wicked witch of a stepmother. Now that

she is out of the picture, they can live “together in perfect happiness” (Grimm 241) with their father. Now that Hansel and Gretel have a coequal relationship with their father, they should be able to live harmoniously. Who can say how long that perfect picture will last, though? The tale may end with this happy image, but underlying the family’s sense of unity is the children’s increasing power. The children are quickly gaining power as they come to replace their parents as the heads of the household. The pearls and jewels are just the first step in reversing the roles. Having now established their authority as providers, Hansel and Gretel inadvertently gain authority over their father. What, then, is stopping them from abusing their power the same the stepmother has done? They have already shown some of the same mannerisms of their parents: They are fluent in lying and deception, and they are willing to put their lives above the life of another, as seen in their killing of the witch, their killing of the stepmother. As for the father, he is coming to show vulnerabilities, putting him in a similar position that the children have been in. For all his hunger, worries, and fears, he must rely on his children to care for his needs. The tale hints that instead of the everlasting, perfect happy ending, the cycle of abusive power could possibly persist in the household.

Upon first glance, fairy tales seem to suggest a perfect ending of eternal harmony for the protagonists; yet, the tales’ explicit portrayal of harsh realities of life and the helplessness of characters to truly escape them implies otherwise. Although fairy tales take place in far off, unknown lands—usually fantastic and enchanted—they draw from real life experiences. Taking the example of “Hansel and Gretel,” the tale depicts some of the cruelties of the real world—famine, dysfunctional families, and survival of the fittest. Despite the distant and fantastical worlds of fairytales, perhaps they are more realistic than we give them credit for.

Works Cited

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