

A Grimm Evolution

Kylee Sullivan
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From the time we are young we are introduced to fairytales; stories about princesses and princes, of magic and talking animals, and cautionary tales saying to always do the right thing and to know better than to trust a stranger. Many children are introduced to the concept of fairytales from bedtime stories or from the film adaptations made by Disney. However, if you look closer at fairytales, namely those collected by the Brothers Grimm, you will see just how dark they truly are. How could it be possible that the stories we grew up with as children have such a dark background when we ourselves are so used to them being about all things good and happily ever after? And, if they were so dark to begin with, why have these stories been adapted again and again over the years?

To start off, we need to clarify that the Brothers Grimm did not *create* the fairytales everyone has come to attribute them to; they were told these stories by their peers and decided to record them. Even so, it's hard to say whether or not the stories were ever recorded prior to the Brothers Grimm or had even existed prior to being told to Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm. Despite the lack of evidence that these stories *had* been around for years "the Grimms firmly believed and actively asserted that they had existed...reasoning that their absence from written records proved their presence in an...oral tradition" (Joosen 199). Because of the Brothers Grimm's written adaptation of these oral tales, we were given most of the fairytales we know and love today.

These tales, though, started off much more graphic and terrifying than the stories we know and love today. So much so that those who read the Grimm versions are often "hardly prepared for the graphic descriptions of murder, mutilation, cannibalism, infanticide, and incest that fill the pages of these bedtime stories for children" (Tatar 3). This, of course, can be explained by the fact that there have been so *many* adaptations and retellings of these classic stories that it can be easy to confuse which were the ones recorded by the Brothers Grimm and which were the ones censored with the intention to be told to children in later years.

We of course know about the Disney film adaptations of various Grimm fairytales through the years. With a new movie focusing on a new fairytale coming out almost every year, it's nearly impossible not to take these adaptations into account. However, when you consider who the target audience of these films are, it's easy to see why they were re-imagined in a certain way. Disney movies are primarily aimed toward young children, so it does of course make sense to censor the source material. No child would walk away from a movie based on Little Red Riding Hood without nightmares if the movie chose to include the graphic scene where the

Huntsman cuts open the Wolf's stomach to save Little Red and her grandmother and throws it in the river full of stones while the Wolf is still alive. This does not mean, however, that there have never been adaptations of various fairytales that aren't darker than their Disney counterparts.

One adaptation in particular that does fall on the slightly darker scale is a book series that is *aimed* at older children. Michael Buckley's series *The Sisters Grimm* tells the story of 11-year-old Sabrina Grimm and her 8-year-old sister Daphne. The books begin with letting us know that Sabrina and Daphne's parents went missing and the only clue to their disappearance was a blood red handprint left on their car window. After escaping from every horrible foster home they were sent to (descriptions are made of the young girls being cuffed to radiators and kept in dog cages in some instances) the girls are put in the custody of an elderly woman named Relda Grimm and her companion Mr. Canis in a town called Ferryport Landing, New York. The woman claims to be the girls' grandmother despite Sabrina and Daphne being told by their father that he did not have any living relatives.

Granny Relda then tells the girls the truth behind their family: they are the last living descendants of Wilhelm Grimm, one of the Brothers Grimm, and act as fairytale detectives for the citizens of Ferryport Landing. These citizens, called Everafters, are actually fairytale characters who have been alive for hundreds of years and who live alongside the unknowing human population that also make up the town of Ferryport Landing. However, the Everafters have a well-known distaste for the Grimm family. This is explained in Buckley's *A Very Grimm Guide* in the following tale:

To protect the Everafters and keep peace, Wilhelm (Grimm) turned to a powerful witch named Baba Yaga. Together the two cast a spell that confined the fairy-tale characters within the town's borders. But, Baba Yaga made Wilhelm pay a price for his prison. If the Grimm family dies out or abandons the town, the Everafters will regain their freedom. (Buckley 14)

This, of course, makes Granny Relda and the girls public enemy number one among most of the community. At first, Sabrina refuses to believe Relda and tries to escape with Daphne but, upon being attacked by pixies and nearly being crushed by giants, decides it would be safer to stay with Granny Relda and Mr. Canis.

What makes *The Sisters Grimm* unique is that the series doesn't just focus on fairytales from the Grimm stories, but also characters from William Shakespeare's plays, which is made evident with Sabrina and Daphne's closest ally Puck the Trickster King from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It also introduces characters previously believed to be evil as good guys and good guys play the antagonist role. Their grandmother's companion, Mr. Canis, turns out to be the Big Bad Wolf who has sworn

his loyalty to the family while Mayor William Charming (Prince Charming) is one of the biggest advocates to kill or drive out the Grimm family for a good portion of the series.

It's also interesting to note that, despite being aimed for older children, the book still deals with a lot of surprisingly dark topics such as kidnapping, a form of addiction, death, and war near the end of the series. And, while the death scenes may not be graphic by any means, the readers are still stunned at times when characters we previously knew and adored are killed off without warning in a tragic way. Does this mean the books are bad? Not by any means. It may just shock the reader upon reading the series for the first time who are expecting a light hearted tale of two sisters and their grandmother.

Another re-imagining of Grimm fairytales that follows in a similar vein of The Sisters Grimm, but is not aimed for children, is a video game. Near the end of 2013, Telltale Games created a game called The Wolf Among Us; in it, you play the role of Sheriff Bigby Wolf (the Big Bad Wolf), a man who is in charge of keeping the living fairytale characters, called Fables, in line and out of trouble. The game begins with getting a call from Mr. Toad about a domestic disturbance in his building and you break up a fight between the Woodsman and a Fable prostitute with a ribbon around her neck. Bigby later tries to help this girl who is clearly in trouble, but when asked about what exactly is going on responds with the words "these lips are sealed." The game progresses peacefully for the first half hour of gameplay until Bigby is awoken by Miss Snow White saying there's an emergency. You, as Bigby, then find the Fable girl's decapitated head on your doorstep. After identifying the girl as Allerleirauh, going by the name Faith, the rest of the game is spent with Bigby trying to solve her murder.

You, as the player, have many choices throughout the game that will either benefit you or hinder you later, such as, whether or not you choose to harm certain characters and which form of dialogue you choose when speaking to the other characters. The entire game is spent as a slight run around with many false leads with only one thing that keeps you on track: every girl who worked with Faith has the same ribbon around their neck and when asked questions they can usually only reply with the words "these lips are sealed." The game, unlike The Sisters Grimm is very graphic when it comes to violence, death, and gore almost to the point of being cruel. However, it is to be noted that because it is a game that is designed to be similar to a "choose your own adventure" game, you do have a choice on whether or not you want to make Bigby do any of these violent acts.

What do these two adaptations have in common? They both feature fairytale characters previously believed to be villains (namely the Big Bad Wolf) as the heroes of these stories; something we are actually starting to see a copious amount of in media.

We are starting to see stories that tell the villain's, such as, the Broadway play Wicked and the film Maleficent, becoming more popular as the years progress. Why is it we are now starting to want to have the "villain's" side of the story?

My theory is this: as we have begun to progress in technology and have gained open access to just about every form of information at the touch of our fingertips, it is getting harder to see things as purely black and white as they used to be. Before, we were more willing to believe what our media told us and designated as a clear "bad guy." Now, however, we have more access to not only people in our own country but outside of it. In relation to my theory, we are starting to see the people who were formerly considered our "enemies" as potential friends who have been dehumanized by the media so much to the point that we believed that whatever it is we were doing to these other people was justified. Thanks to social media in particular, such as, Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr, people are getting a chance to see beyond the propaganda and into the lives of actual people being affected by whatever controversial event is happening at the time. Therefore, the line between "good" and "evil" created over the years by society has been getting crossed and blurred more. It would make sense for us to want to know the "villain's" side of the story, because what we previously believed could be false. To some, this is very alarming. While there does tend to be a lot of leeway when readapting a classic fairytale, there are some who do not like it *because* it doesn't follow the "traditional" classic. Zipes explains this in his book The Brothers Grimm in this way:

Newly written fairy tales, especially those that are innovative and radical, are unusual, exceptional, strange, and artificial because they do not conform to the patterns set by the classical fairy tale...We are safe with the familiar. We shun the new, the real innovations. (Zipes, "The Brothers Grimm," 208)

There is also something to be said about how much the Grimm stories have changed over the years as far as being retold so that *female* villains have started having their side of the story told. These women were previously demonized in their stories for being independent and ambitious. Even legends outside of fairytales had similar themes to it; the legend of Adam's first wife, Lilith, being a good example. After being created by God from the same earth as Adam, "fighting ensued between the couple because (Lilith) would not 'lie below' Adam during intercourse" (Carvalho 26). Once Adam denounces her equality to him, Lilith fled from Eden never to return. Lilith literally becomes a demon for refusing to submit or be anything less than equal to Adam; something that nowadays seems like it would be a completely understandable grievance to have against your husband. Zipes explains this by writing "if Lilith's story summarizes the genesis of the female monster..."

the Grimm tale of 'Little Snow White' dramatizes the essential but equivocal relationship between the angel-woman and the monster-woman" (Zipes, "Don't Bet on the Prince", 201). This, in a way, conditioned readers to believe that a woman who was strong-willed was evil while the shy and docile women were preferable to men and encouraged young girls to be like the princesses they would read about and watch.

Furthermore, we have been seeing additional encouragement from various retellings of fairytales for young girls to be independent and strong-willed, thus making her the hero. Movies like Tim Burton's adaptation of Alice in Wonderland and the Disney film Snow White and the Huntsman are two great examples of this; even The Sisters Grimm focuses more on Sabrina Grimm's story more than any other character and is quick to point out her bravery and flaws at the same time. As Bacchilega says "the choice to contrast fairytale and realist elements with each other in the telling of a story...necessarily involves taking a position about make-believe and reality" (Bacchilega 118); meaning that young girls can look at these characters and truly believe that they could be the heroes of their own stories for once.

Fairytales are truly interesting in that they show what morals were held close to home depending on when the story was adapted. In a way, fairytales are important historical documentations that take the reader back in time to provide them with a peek into how people used to think. While we don't necessarily use fairytales for cautionary purposes anymore, we do still use them to teach our children about how the world used to be, for better and for worse. Zipes summarizes this nicely by writing that "we have used and continue to use the fairy tale as a metaphorical mode of communication. It is a socially symbolic act of representation and communication" (Zipes, "Why Fairy Tales Stick", 95). As we progress further into the future, it will be interesting to see how fairytales are readapted and broadened over time.

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