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The Importance of Fairy Tales in Children’s Literature: A study in D. M. Larson’s *Beauty Is a Beast*

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Abstract

Children are the future of every nation. They are curious by their nature and enjoy “make-believe”. They have their own imaginary world where they can be other persons by pretending, exploring a variety of imaginative behaviours, and inventing imaginary companions. Such imaginary world may be created either by watching cartoons and movies or by attending plays for children, or listening to stories especially before going to sleep. They even ask to repeat the same story again and again if they like it. Among the adorable kind of stories that children, and even some adults, like are fairy tales. These stories teach them moral lessons, show them the good and evil, help them to be creative, successful, and intelligent. They may create their own stories. Moreover, fairy tales develop children’s imagination, and by this development nations arise.

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أهمية الحكايات الخرافية في أدب الأطفال: دراسة في مسرحية د. م. لارسون "جميلة وحسن"

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المستخلص

الأطفال هم مستقبل الأمم. هم فضوليون بطبيعتهم ويستمتعون بالتخيل. الأطفال لديهم عالمهم الخيالي الخاص حيث يمكنهم ان يتخيلوا أنفسهم كأشخاص آخرين وذلك بالتظاهر واكتشاف تشكيلة من السلوكيات المتخيلة وخلق رفاق خياليون. يمكن خلق مثل هكذا عالم إما عبر مشاهدة الرسوم المتحركة أو الأفلام أو متابعة مسرحيات للأطفال أو الاستماع الى الحكايات خاصة تلك التي تروى قبل النوم. إذا ما أحب الأطفال قصة معينة فانهم يطلبون إعادتها مرة بعد أخرى. من بين الحكايات البديعة التي يحبها الاطفال، وحتى بعض البالغين على حد سواء، الحكايات الخرافية التي تحكي عن الجنيات وقدراتهن الخارقة. هذه القصص تعلمهم دروساً أخلاقية، وتظهر لهم جوانب الخير والشر، وتساعدهم في أن يكونوا خلاقين ومبدعين وناجحين، كما انها تشحن شعلة الذكاء عندهم. هؤلاء الاطفال، الذين يجدون متعتهم في الاستماع لقصص الجنيات، قد يبدعون ويؤلفون قصصهم الخاصة. أضف إلى ذلك أن الحكايات الخرافية تطور ملكة الخيال لديهم وبهذا التطور ترقى الأمم.

Children's Literature

The term children's literature refers to materials like poetry, novel, short story, and drama written to be read, listened to or performed to be watched by children and young adults. Clifton Fadiman¹ defined children's literature as:

The body of written works and accompanying illustrations produced in order to entertain or instruct young people. The genre encompasses a wide range of works, including acknowledged classics of world literature, picture books and easy-to-read stories written exclusively for children, and fairy tales, ... fables, folk songs, and other primarily orally transmitted materials (Fadiman: 1).

There are different views concerning the appearance and development of children's literature. Fadiman mentions that children's literature appeared as an independent form of literature in the second half of the eighteenth century and it has been in a primitive level. Its growth has been so luxurious during the twentieth century and is considered with respect (ibid.).

John Stephens confirms that children's literature is originated by adapting and retelling popular stories of a specific culture – folktales, myths, stories about heroes and heroines, adventurous and fictional individuals. According to him, children's literature appeared in the seventeenth century by publishing fairy tales collections and religious texts. Later, stories that retold are expanded to include mythical and legendary heroes like *Robin Hood*, *King Arthur's Knights*, and oriental tales from *The Arabian Nights* and modern classics from Shakespeare to Kenneth Grahame and L. Frank Baum (2009:91).

Literature written especially for children attempts to show the needs of incomplete and ignorant children by providing religious guidance, moral lessons, and reading instructions that guide them to adulthood. During the seventeenth century the Protestant believes that the soul of a child is equal to an adult one. This assumption leads to adopt children's literature as a particular model that suits young readers (Vollone, 2009: 176).

Children's Literature and Nations

History is important to every new generation. It is the background that children should know to progress and continue what has been started by their ancestors. Literature has a great role in teaching children the history of their nation. Since a child is part of a nation, he/she is the one who will carry out the history of his/her nation and pass it to the following generation. It is like a chain that connects one ring to the other. Zohar Shavit asserts that children's literature has an essential role in the construction of a national past, i.e. "mediator between their readers and history" (2003:124). Understanding the past helps the children to create images of the past itself and grants the model for visualizing the nation's present and future. The goal of retelling national myths, legends, fairy tales, and folk tales subjectively is to make them sources of national pride and identity, "to provide

the underpinnings for children's sense of belonging" (ibid.). Here comes the role of writers – poets, novelists, and dramatists – to choose the suitable style for the present generation in order to retell old stories. These stories join the past with the present.

Kimberley Reynolds believes that:

Because children's literature is one of the earliest ways in which the young encounter stories, it plays a powerful role in shaping how we think about and understand the world. Stories are key sources of the images, vocabularies, attitudes, structures, and explanations we need to contemplate experience; because when directed to children they are often bound up with education of one kind or another, they can be important carriers of information about changes in culture, present and past (2011: 4).

Literature links the present and future to the past at different levels. Children's literature "continues to resonate over time and to be implicated in the way societies are conceived, organized, and managed" (ibid., 4-5). The process is not straightforward; traditional ideas may exist in old texts, or promoted to contemporary works that suit the current society. Simultaneously, many of children's stories today "are retellings of traditional stories in which writers and illustrators set out to expose, critique, and adjust the schemata by which we interpret the world" (ibid.). It is worthy to mention that the dialogue of the retold stories that the authors create is different from the old ones to suit and fit the new way of thinking and to serve the social changes – in a way that children's literature contributes to the development in areas of quality and diversity (ibid., 5).

Fairy Tales

The fairy tale is one of the most loved and influential genres of literature. It is originally a product of oral tradition. It precedes written literature. "... the fairy tale genre has enthralled millions of readers through numerous published collections of folklore – such as these produced by the Grimms² and Andrew Langs,..., Charles Dickens, ... Oscar Wilde, ... and L. Frank Baum" (Jones, 2002:1). Holman and Harmon also defined fairy tale as:

A story relating mysterious pranks and adventures of supernatural spirits who manifested themselves in the form of diminutive human beings. These spirits possessed certain qualities that are constantly drawn on for TALES of their adventures: supernatural wisdom and foresight, a mischievous temperament, the power to regulate the affairs of human beings for good or evil, the capacity to change themselves into any shape at any time (1986: 179).

As far as folklore is concerned, a fairy is a class of supernatural beings of human form that has magical powers, especially a female one, that intervenes in human affairs (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/fairy>).

No one can limit the class of stories that have supernatural and superhuman elements in them. The old fairy-tales have generally combined folk-tales dealing with only natural and human material-beast-tales, for instance. While modern fairy-tales are incorporated, in a complex manner, stories of animals, marvelous experiences, and adventure stories (MacClintock, 1903: 609-610). MacClintock lists the traditional classification of the real folk-tales:

1)-Sagas – stories told of heroes, of supernatural beings, of historical events, of physical phenomena, and intended to be believed. They have passed out of the stage of myth, or are to be differentiated from myth by the fact that they have no religious or symbolic significance. Such a story, to take a familiar example, is Wittington and His Cat. 2)-*Märchen* [fairy tale, fable, myth] – those that are told for amusement, pure imaginative play, exercise of the art instinct. They may be modified sagas, or may be originally invented as *Märchen*. They may or may not include supernatural or preternatural elements. They constitute the large mass of nursery and popular tales. Cinderella, Beauty and the Beast, [and Beauty Is a Beast],... will do as examples. 3)-Drolls – comic or domestic tales, which also may or may not contain the impossible, the marvelous, or the preternatural. Generally, they are stories of funny misadventures, cunning, tricks, horse – play, or of the misfortunes or unexpected good luck of “noodles”. Such are... *Lazy Jack*, ... *Hans in Luck* (ibid.).

Modern fairy tales are imitations of the folk-sagas and *Märchen*; they introduce superhumans as symbols. Since modern fairy tales are imitations, they lack the soul of the original (ibid., 610-110). Shally Duvall's *Fairy Tale Theatre* deals with retelling popular versions of *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Alladin*. In these versions the fairy tales are identified as classics because whether they are oral, literary, dramatic, cinematographic, or audio-visual, audiences have cherished them all (Jones, 2002: 5).

Oral Entertainment and Social Needs

Fairy tales are usually told for entertainment. They are originated orally and anonymously and passed on from one generation to another by word of mouth. These stories depend on their ability to satisfy for survival (Ashliman, 2004: 2). Like myths, legends, and other folk tales, fairy tales survive, grow, and constantly adapt to its changing environment. They start as simple imaginative oral tales with magic and miraculous elements which are shaped by the rites, values, and rules of people and society. They undergo numerous transformations before the invention of printing which leads to almost fixed scripts (Zipes, 2012: 21).

As far as the fairy tale's origin is concerned, it is impossible to trace its history to a particular time and place. The oral transmission of stories has always tied different cultures to one another and this continues to be effective whether on mass media, school, or at home. Fairy tales have privilege in the cultural and civilizing processes of societies all over the world. They unite different classes because fairy tales are transformed by both common illiterate people and upper class literate people (ibid., 2012: xiv-xv).

Fairy tales fulfill some of the personal and social needs. The problems that heroes and heroines face in the fairy tales are real, such as poverty, finding an appropriate mate,

treating others harshly and unjustly, and many others. The solutions of their problems are literally out of this world (Ashliman, 2004: 2). For instance, in *Beauty Is a Beast*³, a fairy decides to make a new born baby the most beautiful girl in the world, princess Beauty, as a reward for the kind and just king and queen. Because of her beauty, princess Beauty becomes arrogant, selfish, unkind, harsh and hurts others. Because of her inappropriate behaviour with everyone around her, Beauty's fairy godmother decides to teach her a moral lesson. She uses magic and turns her into an ugly, unknown girl that no one recognizes her or even believes that she is princess Beauty. A poor peasant finds her and offers his help by affording her a shelter, food, and clothes. She lives among his family, which is a group of orphan kids. In the beginning she could not bear the situation especially when Nick, the young peasant, asks her to serve with the other members of the family. But when she notices how everyone in that lovely small house spreads love and offers help she starts to change. She likes the new life though it makes her tired. She starts to help, to see the beauty inside her and believes that her ugliness is not in her appearance but in her heart. She and Nick fall in love with each other. Her fairy godmother decides to change her to be beautiful again after realizing that she has learned her lesson. They lived happily ever after.

According to Steven Swann Jones, fairy tales are highly functional in tackling serious problems and delivering that to their audiences. He explains three categories of these issues. The first one is the individual's psychology. It deals with young people, since protagonists are young, and portraying their feelings or attitudes toward friends, siblings, and parents. The most important psychological problem dramatized in these tales is the relationship between the child and his/her parents and family members such as separation, jealousy, or fear. The second issue is the sociology of the community. In addition to offering psychological instruction, fairy tales inculcate social standards. They follow the patriarchal family structure to be the dominant institution. They portray and show behaviour patterns that are suitable for each gender and age group. The third and last issue is the cosmology of the universe. Fairy tales "indicate the presence of supernatural powers or forces in the world that are reflections of a higher law" (2002: 19-20). This shows that

fairy tales can tell the audience about their feelings and instruct them how to behave socially, and offer spiritual guidance about how to see their place in the universe.

Fairy Tales between Children and Adults

Garry C. Myers sheds light on the assumption that only children like fairy tales. He confirms that adults as well like to read and listen to fairy tales if they do not think that these tales are childish (1922: 504).

There are differences in opinion about whether it is necessary to include fairy-tales in the child's education or not. Of course, many believe that stories of fairies contribute to the child's introduction to imaginative art. As a result, they achieve the educational importance. Hence, fairy-tales are used either for educational purposes or as art (MacClintock, 1903: 609). Yet, some parents believe that not all fairy tales are suitable for their kids. Some of them are scary to their children like *Rumplestiltskin* as the themes of the tales are kidnapping and execution. Maria Tatar, a professor at Harvard College who writes about and teaches classes on fairy tales, says "Fairy tales have a real role in liberating the imagination of children. No matter how violent they are, the protagonist always survives" (Tatar, cited in Hannah Boyd, 2009:Np).

Some fairy tales' themes like violence, sexuality, kidnapping, dark magic, and abandoning a child in a dark forest, ...etc. are rejected by parents. Therefore, it is necessary to divide fairy tales into three subcategories: "tales for young children; tales for developing adolescents; and tales for relatively mature adults" (Jones, 2002: 22). These subdivisions are based on the age of the hero/heroine in the tale, the nature of problem, and the achieved end (ibid.). Meg Moseley emphasizes that parents must pay attention and have the ability to use common sense to decide the suitable fairy tale for their children, because some fairy tales are inappropriate. Moreover, the child has to be introduced to a story-world of good and evil, happy and sad endings, heroes and villains because a child cannot be raised up in a world clean of evil (Moseley, Nd: 2-3).

The general observation is that children are different from adults physiologically, and in awareness or acknowledgement of the presence of everything. Children look, sound, and behave in a way that is childlike even if they engage in adults activities like reading,

playing sports, or watching television. Although it is easy to distinguish a child from an adult, it is difficult to draw boundaries of childhood since adolescence is part of children's lives (Vollone, 2009: 174-5). Thus, "the literature proper to manhood is not proper to childhood, though the reverse is not... true" (Hawthorne, 1884: 384).

J. R. R. Tolkien rejects that children are the only and natural appropriate audience of fairy-stories. He confirms that the association between fairy-stories and children is an accident of a domestic history. He explains his opinion by saying that children did not decide their likeness of fairy tales, but some adults do not want such kind of stories and children, on the contrary, have a special taste for them. Although modern writers adapt fairy stories for children to be movies or plays; yet, they are not to be found for children only (Tolkien, Nd: 11-12).

Common Elements of Fairy Tales

1-Circular Structure: It is one of the typical features where the end of a story returns to its beginning, e.g. lost children find their way home (Havířová, 2005: 14). After turning her into an ugly girl, Princess Beauty becomes homeless. But at the end she comes back to her family. This time, being away from her family and fancy life, is an essential aspect that leads to a positive change in her personality and her relationship with others.

2-Language: Fairy tales have simple language. A fairy tale starts with "Once upon a time" and ends with " They all lived happily ever after".

3-Setting: Generally, a fairy tale takes place in a castle, forest, or a town. Princess Beauty is used to live in a castle, then moves to a nearby town, then returns to her castle.

4-Characters: All fairy tales need good, bad, and sometimes supporting characters. A good character does not need to be perfect or rich. Typically a good character should be humble, kind and helpful to others. A bad character, on the other hand, "acts as an antagonist to the good character and he/she usually has evil powers which are used to cause the good character pain" (George A. Spiva Library, 2016:5) , like a witch, a goblin, a

dragon or other humans. The supporting character may be a friend, or a guide that helps the hero or heroine to pass the difficulties.

5-Magic and magical objects: Magic is an element used by fairies to help others as in *Cinderella* and *Beauty Is a Beast*. This magic needs special kind of words to cast spells or prepare a magic potion. For example in *Beauty Is a Beast* :

Fairy: (*She waves her wand*) Zippidy , wippidy , mippidy do. You pick on servants and now they will pick on you!

(Princess collapses and blackout) (Scene 2: 23)⁴

The use of magical objects distinguish fairy tales from other genres. They are used to fulfill the desires that human beings are eager to achieve like invisibility, eternity, flying, super power, ... etc. (Haviřová, 2005: 36). Some of these elements cause troubles as in *Beauty Is a Beast* when the fairy godmother turns Beauty into an invisible person.

Princess: Hey! What did you just do?

Fairy: I made you invisible.

...

Fairy: You must stay invisible until you learn!

Princess: Invisible huh? This could be fun.

(She kicks a servant who thinks it's another one. They get in a fight as a result)

Oh, how lovely.

(She pulls another servant's hair)

Fairy: Oh, dear.

(Princess picks up something and makes it float around)

Molly: It's a ghost.

(SERVANTS scream and run out) (scene 2: 21-22)

It is worthy to mention that not all fairy tales have magic or magical objects. Some fairy tales do not use magic as in *Little Red Riding Hood*.

6-Problems and solutions: Among the important things in a fairy tale is that there should be a problem that needs a solution.

7-Moral Lesson: Fairy tales show the good and bad side of life, deal with problems and find out solutions, and teach bad people to be good. Thus, they deliver moral messages to their audiences.

8-Happy Ending: Nearly all fairy tales have happy endings. People in fairy stories, after solving their problems, live happily ever after.

The Importance of Fairy Tales

There are necessary ethical and educational lessons to be learned by children and adults from fairy tales. Among them are the following:

1-Develop Imagination.

Children, by their nature, are able to imagine a world which is totally different from the real one. Yet, when they grow up, for some of them, things start to change according to reality, i.e. some of them lose the ability to imagine. In order to challenge readers' or audiences' minds and make them imagine a magical world that is different from theirs, tell or show them a play or a movie about fairies.

In the real world everything is law-based and happens for a reason. Thus, audiences or listeners must suspend their disbelief to be able to enjoy and imagine a world with extra-potentiality – a magical world where things are wild, unexplainable, surprising, and unpredictable. If audiences, listeners and readers free their minds, they will see worlds full with magic and wonder that make the impossible comes true.

2-Cross Cultural Boundaries.

Each culture has its own folk-tales. Those tales help children and young adults to learn about that culture. Sometimes more than one culture share the same tale but each culture tells it in a different way. Being able to read or watch or listen to them will teach cultural differences by experiencing new places and learn new things about their traditions. They will also expand children's vocabulary to enjoy deeper meanings and stories.

3-Teach Right from Wrong.

Fairy tales teach moral lessons and values. They always show what is right and what is wrong. Fairies reward the good and punish the evil. They convey deep truths no matter what.

4-Develop Critical Thinking.

Fairy tales emphasize that each choice has its consequences. In *Beauty Is a Beast*, princess Beauty chooses to be harsh, arrogant and selfish. She hates to be nice and kind. As a result of her choice, her fairy godmother turns her into an ugly poor girl. On the other hand, her sister Honor is the opposite of her. She is so kind, loving and humble in dealing with everyone. Therefore, she is rewarded by marrying prince Andres and the love of her people.

Princess (Beauty): Are you really that nice or are you just pretending?

Honor: What ever do you mean good sister?

Princess (Beauty): You're always so sweet. Don't you ever get sick of being sweet?

Honor: (Laughs) Oh, sister, you always speak in such strange riddles. You always make me laugh.

Princess (Beauty): And you always make me sick. (scene 1: 7-8)

5-Help to Deal with Problems and Emotions.

Since fairy tales teach critical thinking and develop imagination, it teaches children and young people to be independent in solving their own problems especially the easy ones. Bruno Bettelheim (1989: 7-8), psychologist who is specialized in the importance of fairy tales in childhood, explains that some cultures try to pretend that dark side does not exist in man. Also, some believe that psychoanalysis is found to make life easy. Indeed “psychoanalysis was created to enable man to accept the problematic nature of life without being defeated by it, or giving in to escapism” (1989: 8). Fairy tale has a message to every child that struggle in life is unavoidable, inevitable, and part of human existence. The one who will master all obstacles can achieve victory.

Princess Beauty in the beginning defeats her problem being ugly from outside and broken from inside because she loses her position and beauty. But later, she accepts her

outside ugliness since she finds the light and the beauty inside herself. By reaching to this fact, it becomes normal for her to stay as she is.

6-Give Hope.

Fairy tales indicate hope – good beats evil, hope of redemption, and hope that enemies will vanquish (Taylor, Np). The goodness of Beauty’s heart defeats her ugliness. Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874-1936), English writer, poet, dramatist, literary and art critic affirms that “Fairy tales do not tell children the dragons exist. Children already know that dragons exist. Fairy tales tell children the dragons can be killed” (Chesterton, Np).

7-Scary in a Safe Way.

Some modern writers avoid such existential problems like death, aging, loss, though they are essential issues in life. On the other hand, some fairy tales contain scary situations implied symbolically in the story to give them clues and to teach children how to deal with these situations. Indeed, children see how characters face their fears and learn (Taylor, Np). Though they are scary, they remain on papers and children can see how the characters behave to face their fears. From such experience children learn. Princess Beauty rejects the new poor way of living after turning her into an ugly girl. But after she learns the lesson, that her fairy godmother teaches to her, she faces the world and like the new one she becomes.

8-Develop Child’s Personality.

Gathering the previous points, one can conclude that the child who listens to fairy tales or watch them performed on a stage or TV. will have a personality that is different from those who never experience those tales. Though the moral lesson helps to distinguish good from evil, right from wrong, how to deal with self-conflict and life’s struggle,...etc., the child will have his own beliefs that he/she is going to use to develop his/her personality.

Conclusion

Fairy tale is a literary genre which can be classified into two types: harmful for young children and should be rejected or beautiful and must be concentrated on because it elevates thinking ability, exercise and cultivate imagination. Since fairy tales are transformed orally in the first place, one should tell a fairy story to children before asking them to read it. Children and even adults get benefit by hearing the stories because the narrator and characters in these stories are the ancient voice and echo from the past.

Fairy tales evoke imagination, make dreams and imaginary worlds come true. They clarify the cultures of different nations and make them distinguishable. One can travel to different countries, old centuries while hearing, reading, or watching fairy tales.

Fairy tales teach children that bad people never win even if they have power. At the end, good always wins. They help young children to find solutions to their small problems because it elaborates their way of thinking. These stories open the gate of the impossible to make everything possible.

Notes

1-Clifton Fadiman: writer and editor. Member of Editors, Encyclopaedia Britannica. Chief Editorial Adviser, Book-of-the-Month Club. Advisory Editor, Cricket: *The Children's Magazine*. Author of *The Lifetime Reading Plan* and many others.

2-The **Brothers Grimm**, Jacob (1785–1863) and Wilhelm Grimm (1786–1859), were German academics, linguists, cultural researchers, lexicographers and authors who together specialized in collecting and publishing folklore during the 19th century. They were among the best-known storytellers of folk tales, and popularized stories such as *Cinderella*, *The Frog Prince*, *The Goose-Girl*, *Hansel and Gretel*, *Rapunzel*, *Rumpelstiltskin*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Snow White*.

3-*Beauty Is a Beast: A Stage Play Script for Children* is written by D. M. Larson (1971-), American playwright and the founder and an author at “Freedrama.net”. He is a two time Emmy winner for his film projects in 2009, 2011 both for documentaries.

4- D. M. Larson, *Beauty Is a Beast: A Stage Play Script for Children*. All other quotations of Larson's *Beauty Is a Beast* are from this edition and henceforth are parenthetically cited within the text by scene, and page number. In <https://freedramaplays.blogspot.com/2016/06/beauty-is-beast-free-stage-play-script.html>

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