

Stepmothers as a motif in fairy tales, specifically hansen and gretel research paper...

[Family](#), [Parents](#)



Wondrous, magical, fantastic, wonderful, fascinating – those are the indications of fairy tales, narratives unusual and frequently irrational. Their world is grasped by one's intuition, a world flourishing in liveliness, spirit and possibilities of role play, due to the fact that it brandishes a different kind of reality, a less arduous one, with an utterly positive outlook on life, in which life is reminiscent of a wonderful dream, but still not without its troubles and obstacles. Through imagery and potent symbolism, fairy tales express human life experiences and the potentiality of solutions to human troubles. According to Annette R. Federico, "fairy tale maidens were patterns of confinement, starvation, monstrosity and rebellion." ¹ Consequently, the following several pages will attempt to portray and divulge similarities and differences between varied versions of the classic story Hansel and Gretel, especially in terms of their stepmother and the power she exudes.

As it is the case with the prevalent part of the stories of folklore, initially they were passed on from generation to generation by word of mouth. These stories, commonly referred to as children's tales, originated in times when poverty, abandoning one's children and starvation were an everyday sight. Still, their role was not only to amuse, but also to educate, which is why the stories portrayed events and characters as allegories for everyday hardships. For instance, in its harsh portrayal of famine and the deprivation of basic nourishment, the story of Hansel and Gretel was representative of numerous peasant households in Germany during the first half of the nineteenth century, thus making the stories brothers Grimm true narratives of social realities of the times, which numerous other didactic and so-called realistic tales of that period concealed. ² The Grimm brothers purposefully included

this kind of information, in their effort to elude the dividing line between the fictional narrative of fairy tales and the verity of everyday life.

They took it upon themselves to collect stories of the German folklore, and to publish the collection in 1812. The manuscript, dating from 1810 and the first printed edition in 1812 differed from the final, seventh version, in 1857, and so did the stories the collection contained. One of the most widely-read stories from the collection, Hansel and Gretel possesses some of the most beloved features of a traditional fairy tale: two courageous little souls as heroes, the evil mother, who in later editions becomes the stepmother, the motif of the small journey the protagonists have to venture upon in order to defeat the evil, which is in their case personified not only in the cannibalistic witch living in the gingerbread house, but also their own (step)mother.

Taking the first and last edition of the story into account, it appears that the most substantial amendment of the text was the conversion of the mother into the stepmother. And additionally, not only does the female influence over the children become a stranger to them, instead of their own flesh and blood, but she seems to grow more and more ruthless as the editions pour, while the father seems only to be shrinking under her harsh words and metamorphoses into an even more spineless, introspective and milder excuse for the head of the household, because this lack of willingness and inability to stand up to his domineering wife only become more and more prominent in the subsequent editions. For instance, in the earlier editions, on telling her husband about the inhumane plan she has conceived, she refutes his rejection with the words: "" If you don't do it... all of us will starve together," and she gave him no peace until he said yes," 3 to which the

husband says nothing. While in the later edition, her voice is more stern and resolute not to give up: "' Oh, you fool," she said, " then all four of us will starve. All you can do is to plane the boards for our coffins." And she gave him no peace until he agreed." 4 In this version, the husband is already losing the little fortitude and authority he might have exercised in the previous editions or in the oral versions of the story, and can now only utter a futile lamentation: " But I do feel sorry for the poor children." 5 And, throughout the story and the editions, lamentation is the only thing that the old man seems to develop, which is what most patriarchal societies would be harshly condoning. As the breadwinner of the family, it is his responsibility and obligation to put food on the table. Seeing that he is not able to provide for his family, his weak will and mind are shaken to the core by his wife's utterly immoral and cruel decision about the children. Yet, he condescends, most probably out of lack of belief in his own self and his parenting skills; because, there is no other explanation why a father would willingly abandon his children in the middle of the forest to perish just because his wife said that would be the best course of action for the two of them.

Additionally, in the revisions, the stepmother does not only become more cruel in her conduct towards the husband, such as calling him a fool, but she also grows to dislike the children more and more. In the earlier edition, on the fateful morning of their initial abandonment in the forest, the stepmother wakes the children up with the words: " Get up, you children." 6 While, the later edition shows her growing impatient and angrier with their hungry presence: " Get up, you lazybones." 7

Moreover, it is not only the attitudes that change throughout the revisions of

the story, but the identification of the mother changes as well. For instance, in the first four editions, the wife is unmistakably categorized as “ the mother” on several occasions. Conversely, with the publication of the fourth edition in 1840, the Grimm brothers applied the word “ stepmother,” preserving the word “ mother” in some passages. Finally, the determinative version of the seventh edition puts three identifications in use: the stepmother, the mother and the woman. One can easily assume that in this relentless rewriting of the woman’s true identity, the Grimm brothers inclined towards a more humane touch; because they may not have wanted to depict a biological mother abandoning her own children.

Jack David Zipes claims that this ancient world of fairy tales was not formed by us, but that it in fact, has formed us, and we, as children, ingested these values and consciousness as cultural absolutes and have taken them into our maturity as real identity. 8 The catalytic discourse of the early feminist research has touched upon nascent questions and critical issues of the canonization of the obviously male-dominated fairy tale world. Thus, the identification of the female voice and its subsequent message have always been the epicenter of the debate in the complex and diverse fairy tale corpus. Zipes claims that the originally stamped matriarchal mythology, which circulated in the Middle Ages, has been transformed in different ways as it underwent the successive stages of patriarchalization: the goddess became a witch, evil fairy, or stepmother; the active, young princess was changed into an active hero; matrilineal marriage and family ties became patrilineal; the essence of the matriarchal symbols was depleted and made benign, while the pattern of action which concerned maturation and

integration was gradually recast to stress domination and wealth. 9 Thus, as the stories progressed through time, the matriarchate gave way to patriarchy, while women were continually losing the power of speech and action; eventually becoming the painfully passive protagonist, who is a heroine only in name. She does nothing to divert her destiny or to attempt to find a way out of her predicament. On the contrary, she is taught that she is too weak, fragile and ignorant to take upon herself any life-altering decisions or actions. Therefore, the most positive female protagonists just sit in one place, waiting for the magical protection of the universe they are surrounded by, which will send a handsome savior of royal descent who will right all wrongs and take the submissive heroine to her “ happily ever after.” In the case of Hansel and Gretel the female voice is oppressive and dangerous, even life-threatening, not only in the guise of the barbarous witch, but also the fiendish stepmother.

Maria Tartar distinguishes between three types of villains in Grimm’s Nursery and Household Tales: the first one comprises of beasts and monsters, the second social deviants and the third group, consisting of women in the guise of various cooks, stepmothers, witches and mothers-in-law with voracious appetites for human ware, sometimes even for the flesh and blood of their own relatives. 10 The fantastical world offers numerous instances of wicked stepmother, one of the most popular being the wicked queen of Snow White. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar claim that this is a paradigmatic feminine plot, where the one sententious action in the tale arises from the relationship between the evil Queen, “ a plotter, a plot-maker, a schemer, a witch, an artist, an impersonator, a woman of almost infinite creative energy, witty,

wily, and self-absorbed as all artists traditionally are” 11 and the “ sweet, ignorant, passive” 12 subservient and saintly Snow White.

This stigma of the stepmothers, originating from the fairy tales, partly owes its sustenance to the derivation of its name. The word “ step” comes from the Old English word “ steop,” which means someone related by marriage, rather than blood; meaning, it is associated with the terms of bereavement and loss, which in reference to stepmothers takes on various different denotations, such as one step removed, second best or stepping into someone else’s shoes. 13 Fundamentally, the stepmother has been awarded this position literally due to the fact that a parent has been devoid of a partner. Given the fact that in the eighteenth and the nineteenth century many women died due to complications during and after childbirth, many men were forced to remarry and bring a stepmother into the house, if for nothing else, then for the sake of their children. It is to be expected that many women expected to create their own family, instead of being taken into a house as a new bride only to take care of an already existing family. But naturally, not all stepmothers were considered cruel monsters. In some, the motherly instinct overcame the desire for one’s own offspring and they accepted their husband’s children as their own, loving them and caring for them without reserve.

Thus, the stepmother is supposed to substitute the mother figure and provide all the nurturing love and affection the children are in dire need of. But, fairy tales created countless faces of maternal evil, which inverts all the positive characteristics attributed to mothers. So, instead of them being nurturers of the young, these vile cannibalistic female villains not only

withhold food from the children in dire times of need, but also threaten to make children their own source of nourishment by “reincorporating them into the bodies that gave birth to them,” 14 thus taking the Jungian magna mater possessiveness to a stomach-turning extreme.

Evil in fairy tales is always reciprocal to power. Those that emanate power, usually tend to have oppressive and cruel tendencies. This oppression and power preceding it are at the very core of folk tales, and its results, such as merciless exploitation, starvation, neglect, mutilation and murder, were usually too pain-evoking to portray without resorting to narrative symbolism. The ending of fairy tales is always a felicitous one, and it is exactly because of them, that the perspective of the world in fairy tales is teeming with hope and faith in justice. The ridiculed, humiliated and wronged characters always get rewarded for their humility, integrity and kindness, while the villains get the most imaginative and terrifying tortures ending in their death. Despite their kind and loving nature, fairy tales do not forgive injustice. The mutilation of the villain is always physical: in Cinderella, the wicked stepsisters get their eyes poked out by doves; in Snow White, the wicked stepmother is made to wear heated iron shoes and dance to the death; in Hansel and Gretel, the evil witch is pushed into the oven and cooked alive. The instances of these artful mythical deaths are numerous. Yet, despite the fairness of the ending the fairy tales provide, many of these tortures can by no means be justified by the necessity of the existential defense, because in many cases, the threat of the villain is no longer present, but he or she is still ruthlessly punished. Now, the question arises: if the protagonist is so good a person, how can he stand by and watch silently while a fellow human being,

no matter how evil, undergoes such an inhumane death sentence? The answer is connected to the issue of power. While the hero, or more frequently the heroine, is powerless, he is kind, good and wishes harm on no one. Simultaneously, the person they are dependent on and who holds them in their power is wickedly conjuring up ways of doing them harm. That person has the power and thus, it exploits it by practicing its authority and cruelty over others. But, once justice prevails and the subdued and the oppressed get the power, the evil person loses it and the kind-hearted protagonists almost become wicked themselves in their attempt to incite the most devious and devilish punishment for the one who caused them hurt and suffering, at the same time, not losing one shred of their original goodness, beauty of heart and appeal. The fairy tale dogma states that the wrong doer must be punished, because only that way, justice becomes truly victorious. It appears that evil is immersed with power: whoever possesses it necessarily becomes wicked and ruthless himself.

As it was previously mentioned, one of the major changes of the original story was the inversion of the biological mother with the stepmother. It also seems that all the female characters have been inversed: the stepmother becomes the witch and vice versa, while Gretel takes upon herself the role of the savior and the subsequent role of the mother. Her quick thinking manages to trick the witch into showing the “stupid goose”¹⁵ how she needs to check whether the oven is ready to put the bread inside, when Gretel cunningly “gave [the witch] a shove, causing her to fall in. Then she closed the iron door and secured it with a bar.”¹⁶ This way, she saves Hansel, “her child,” and herself, proving to possess far greater motherly

qualities than the stepmother. Her ability to cook the witch symbolizes her utilizing of the mother role through the control of food supply and the guarantee of survival for both Hansel and herself, the survival which has been menaced twice by both the stepmother and the witch, trying to assume power and control over the helpless children. Even at the very end, the reader learns that the wicked stepmother is dead, just like the witch and the threat no longer exists: not in the guise of the oppressive females trying to exert dominance, nor as famine, because Gretel was clever enough to take pearls and precious stones hidden in the chests of the witch's house, thus saving her entire family and becoming the supervisory body of their domestic household.

Throughout the text, the authors offer numerous symbolic correlations between the stepmother and the witch, constantly interchanging these two characters, thus creating what Zipes referred to as "a demonization of women in the tale." ¹⁷ Both the stepmother and the witch act the same, and they even refer to the children using the same term "lazybones." The stepmother wakes the children up with the words: "Get up, you lazybones," ¹⁸ while the witch calls to them with the exact same words.

In the beginning, both personas are perceived by the children to be good and kind. Only later do they find out how mistaken they were in this impression. The stepmother whom the father has brought to be the new mother should instill in the children a motherly devotion and a feeling of safety and being provided for. But, it turns out that this new mother is the opposite of what the children expected. Her egotism and self-serving need for survival at the cost of two little children are horrendous. Both of them share these

negatives traits and are all too eager to destroy the children. The stepmother leaves them out in the forest to starve or be eaten by wild animals; whichever fate befalls them, she does not care one bit. All she is intent on is removing them from her life forever. In the same manner, the witch is also intent on murdering the children, for again selfish reasons of her own survival and nourishment. Both women see the living children as their death. It is a question of eat or die, and both of them greedily choose the first one. The witch's house and offer of food also serves as a potent symbol of her identification with the stepmother image. She procures a tasty house to lure hungry children into her evil lair: " the little house was built entirely from bread with a roof made of cake, and the windows were made of clear sugar." 19 She urges the children not to be afraid: " Oh, you dear children, who brought you here? Just come in and stay with me. No harm will come to you." 20 In this version she appears even more harmless and dear than in the earlier one: " Oh, you dear children, where did you come from? Come inside with me, and you will be just fine." 21 It is as if the Grimm brothers wanted to portray her even more contradictorily than in the first version. She reassures the children more forcibly not to fear her, while in fact they should. Upon entering the house, the children are treated to " milk and pancakes with sugar, apples, and nuts." 22 By offering food to the children, the witch has overtaken the role of the stepmother, the nurture giver and food provider.

Both the stepmother and the witch function in the same manner: first, they earn the trust of their victims with seemingly magnanimous maternal behavior and then they reveal themselves as cannibalistic monsters. 23 The

reader does not bear witness to the stepmother's earlier behavior, but it is easy to guess that the stepmother, just like the witch "only pretended to be friendly." 24 Thus, both of them take on the primeval fairy tale function of villainy and it does not come as a surprise that upon Hansel and Gretel's return home, they find out the wicked stepmother has vanished. By destroying the witch, they have destroyed the stepmother as well. It seems that this litany of gruesome crimes leads the reader to the erroneous opinion that women are the recurrent agents of evil in German folk tales. One must also remember that in the narratives closely scrutinized by the patriarchal command, this was the only means of expressing the female voice and female power, because the apparent heroines of fairy tales are nothing more than automatons programmed to total submission. In some, this dissatisfaction awoke the demon-mother side of their personality which led to the stepmother villains as we know them today.

Works cited:

Federico, Annette R. Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic After Thirty Years*. Columbia: University Of Missouri Press, 2009. Print.

Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979. Print.

Grimm, Brothers and Walter Crane. *Household Stories by The Brothers Grimm*. New York: Dover Publications Inc., 2010. Print.

Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. *Grimm's Fairy Stories*. New York: Bantam Books, 2003. Print.

Tartar, Maria. *The Hard Facts of the Grimm's Fairy Tales*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987. Print.

Watson, Patricia A. *Ancient Stepmothers: Myth, Misogyny, and Reality*. New York: E. J. Brill, 1995. Print.

Zipes, Jack David. *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilization*. New York: Routledge, 1991. Print.

Zipes, Jack David. *Happily Ever After: Fairy Tales, Children and the Culture Industry*. New York: Routledge, 1997. Print.

Bibliography:

Federico, Annette R. Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* After Thirty Years. Columbia: University Of Missouri Press, 2009. Print.

Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979. Print.

Grimm, Brothers and Walter Crane. *Household Stories by The Brothers Grimm*. New York: Dover Publications Inc., 2010. Print.

Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. *Grimm's Fairy Stories*. New York: Bantam Books, 2003. Print.

Haase, Donald. *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches*. Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2004. Print.

Joosen, Vanessa. *Critical and Creative Perspectives on Fairy Tales: An Intertextual Dialogue Between Fairy-Tale Scholarship and Postmodern Retellings*. Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2011. Print.

Purkiss, Diane. *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-century Representations*. New York: Routledge, 1996. Print.

Tartar, Maria. *The Hard Facts of the Grimm's Fairy Tales*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987. Print.

Watson, Patricia A. *Ancient Stepmothers: Myth, Misogyny, and Reality*. New York: E. J. Brill, 1995. Print.

Zipes, Jack David. *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilization*. New York: Routledge, 1991. Print.

Zipes, Jack David. *Happily Ever After: Fairy Tales, Children and the Culture Industry*. New York: Routledge, 1997. Print.