Fairy Tales As Cultural Barometers

Fairy tales are useful cultural barometers. Do you agree? Answer with reference to three or four tales. You may use different versions of the same tale or different tales.

Throughout the years since fairy-tales have been considered not just an oral tradition but a form of literature as well, they have contained morals and insights that writers and collectors have tried to reflect within the stories they are reiterating. This can clearly be seen through the many versions of Little Red Riding Hood that have been written down. These stories have been altered so much from their origins due to the changing societies and countries that they're told in. Another reason that there are so many different versions of the same story, is that they all started being told by women orally when the household was doing the evening chores, around the campfire as such. Once a story had a more solid structure, men then wrote them down and edited them where they saw fit to enable their agenda, as Lissa Paul states that "fairy tales are cultural barometers; stories without authors, always with us, always reshaping themselves within the times" (Paul, 23). This is obvious in the ever changing adaptations of Little Red Riding Hood, from Charles Perrault to The Grimm Brothers to Roald Dahl's.

Charles Perrault's Little Red Riding Hood is what many people today in the Western World would consider the quintessential version of the tale. The tale begins with the classic, "Once upon a time…" which then became the standard start for most fairy tales regardless of the narrative, for example fairy-tales such as Beauty and the Beast by Jeanne-Marie LePrince de Beaumont and Snow White by the Brothers Grimm. The entire narrative then continues to conform to the societal norms of the 1600's, from the first sentence Little Red Riding Hood's attributes are attributed to her appearance as she is "the prettiest" girl "you can imagine" in the village (Perrault, Tartar, 16). The use of her appearance being the sole reason the reader is given as to why her mother and grandmother adore her, shows during this time period when Perrault was writing the culture within that European society and time period put a heavy emphasis on a woman and girl's appearance being the equivalent to their worth as a member of society, and what becomes of that girl should be fall victim to her own basic desires. Maria Tatar furthers the point that this tale centres on the idea of morality and "the consequences of desires, sinister and benign, in their most vivid and extreme form", if the protagonist of the story should fall short of these moral expectations. Perrault's version enforces ideologies of sexuality, gender roles and social norms that are specific to how a girl should act and think. If it wasn't clear enough just from the tale itself, Perrault even thought it necessary to include a 'Moral' at the end of the tale for "children, especially young girls" that "are wrong to listen to just anyone" as all different sorts of 'wolves' will follow "young ladies right into their homes, into their chambers" (Perrault, Tartar,18), reiterating the fact that Perrault is trying to instil the idea in children, girls, that if you believe, and get into bed with a wolf (man) it is your own fault when you get "gobbled" up. This tale, therefore, is not only for the nursery but also for women of all ages as it is essentially a story of repression telling girls how to behave. They shouldn't stray from the path, they shouldn't wear red and attract the wolves to begin with and they most importantly shouldn't climb into bed with wolves. The use of the colour red and the act of telling girls not to climb into bed with wolves immediately turns the story into one that is deeply sexual as it is, "a story about appetite in all shadings of the term, from primal hunger to sexual desire, both tainted by the threat of desire turning dark and deadly" (Tartar, 5). The importance placed

on fairy tales to act as a teacher to impart these strict moral codes shows the weight that they carry throughout different cultures and societies and what is expected of the readers, at that particular juncture.

The story of Little Red Riding Hood is so prolific that it has been changed and adapted by multiple authors, creating a different version every time to be acceptable for that certain culture, and to be a success for the author. The Brothers Grimm were also among those who collected the story, then altered it to be fit for children in the nursery and not have the deeply sexualised elements that Perrault's contained. Perrault's version was very morally centred, so much so that it came with an explicit moral written at the end, however, it was still very plot driven without much sanitation for a particular purpose. The Grimm's took out most of the meat from the plot and changed the tale into a family friendly story, which uses the plot to continuously barrage the reader with what is supposedly the correct moral compass aimed at showing children the difference between right and wrong. The Grimm Brothers were collecting and editing stories throughout the nineteenth century, where the aim was to bring families together through wholesome tales due to the difficult times people were facing because of the growing nuclear powers. Although the story does resonate as a classic tale as it retains some of the core elements that people had come to expect from such tales, starting with "once upon a time…" like Perrault's version. Not only does the Brothers Grimm use a phrase well-known to the fairy tale genre as their starting point, they also use the call and response phrases, for example, "Grandmother, what big ears you have!" and the reply ever so slightly altered from Perrault's response of, "the better to hear with, my child!" (Perrault, Tartar, 17) to, "the better to hear you with" (Grimm, Tartar, 18). The culture when the Grimm's were collecting had changed enough for the demographic to go from adults to children, however, the correlation between a girl's beauty and her value were still very much present in society. Again within the first couple of sentences of the tale the reader is told that, "if you set eyes on her you could not but love her" because she was so "dear" (Grimm, Tartar, 18). Therefore, even though the Grimm Brothers are publishing their works years after Perrault, there is somewhat of a sense of going backwards as a woman's beauty is prized above all her other qualities and the tales themselves have become a lot milder for a younger audience. Apart from keeping the loose structure of plot this is where the similarities finish as the Grimm's have "placed the action in the service of teaching lessons to the child inside and outside the story" (Tartar, 8). The mother gives the little girl very strict instructions to, "walk properly and don't stray from the path…don't forget to say good morning, and don't go peeping in all the corners of the room" (Grimm, Tartar, 18). The disobedience of the girl as she leaves the path and runs, "off into the woods looking for flowers" (Grimm, Tartar, 19) is further proof that beauty was integral to how women were viewed, it is the girl's beauty which makes everyone love her but it is also beauty that is the reason for her transgression, as reiterated by Bettelheim as he states that Little Red Cap's downfall was due to her "pleasure-seeking id" (Bettelheim, Tartar, 9). The change in cultures is clear to see from the differing versions from Perrault and the Grimm Brothers, especially in the conclusion of the tales where Little Red Cap is saved by a 'huntsman', then chastises and tells herself that, "never again will you stray from the path and go into the woods, when your mother has forbidden it" (Grimm, Tartar, 20). Although, it is also clear to see that though some things have changed, some have also stayed consistently the same. The girl in both tales is naïve and easily fooled by the wolf and experiences the severe repercussions because of this. This tale, again, like Perrault's shows the culture of oppression that women were facing during this time, not only was the girl rescued by a man but she also then has to condemn herself for her own natural curiosity.

Both of these tales are in stark contrast to the later versions that have been produced such as, Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf by Roald Dahl written in the 1980's. Dahl wrote a collection of poems called 'Revolting Rhymes', the tales were all a parody on the classic versions that were most recognisable to readers. The first major difference is that not only is it a poem but it is also constructed in rhyming couplets such as, "feel" and "meal", "curled his hair" and "Grandma's chair" (Dahl, Tartar, 23). The beginning of fairy tales started as part of an oral culture with no known author, they were subsequently turned into part of literary culture with the invention of the printing press, when they were being made to be read and not heard. This in turn allowed the tales to be accessed by the majority of people leading to constant adaptations to resonate with ever changing cultures, giving the reader an insight into how people were living at the time and their attitudes to things, for example, marriage, love, death etc. Readers can see from Dahl's take on the Red Riding Hood story that in the 1980's consumers weren't looking for a tale full of moral dictations and a damsel in distress type of titular character. Red Riding Hood has gone from predator to prey in this entertaining and somewhat crass version as, "she whips a pistol from her knickers, she aims it at the creature's head and bang bang bang, she shoots him dead" (Dahl, Tartar, 24). The story had taken on a life of its own and entered a world where Red Riding Hood "and a metaphorical wolf dance a tango of innocence and seduction" where she is "perfectly capable, over time, of playing the wolf" (Tartar, 6). Dahl, however, retained the essence of the tale and used some linguistic anchors which make it recognisable to contemporary readers. For example, the ever so slightly adapted phrase, "what great big ears you have, Grandma' with the wolf replying, 'all the better to hear you with" (Dahl, Tartar, 23) is in-keeping with the other tales by Perrault and the Grimm Brothers even though they are all from different countries and time periods. Therefore, it is easy to see that there are many continuous elements that show how the fairy tales have kept true to their roots with the generic framing and key language to make the story easier to remember and pass on.

Having looked at and compared the above fairy tales it is clear to see how they can be used as cultural barometers. From the beginning of when tales were turned into literature they have focused on what is prevalent in the reader's society and reflect back at them the values they deem important. In today's culture all different versions of these stories are being told, not only the ones written closer to our time. Therefore, there is a constant mix of messages being given to the reader, which only adds to the idea of fairy tales as cultural barometers. The wide variety of tales in circulation today displays how cultures have expanded and combined, as Jack Zipes states how fairy tales have, "contributed more to the creation of our present day social norms that we realise" (Zipes, 11). Fairy tales come from the people creating stories around the campfire at night, taking inspiration from their cultures and society. Therefore, it is no surprise that these stories are a reflection of their environment.

Bibliography

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