



CLASSIC FAIRY TALES: THE COMING OF AGE OF LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD

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The point is that we have not formed that ancient world — it has formed us. We ingested it as children whole, had its values and consciousness imprinted on our minds as cultural absolutes long before we were in fact men and women. We have taken the fairy tales of childhood with us into maturity, chewed but still lying in the stomach, as real identity. Between Snow-White and her heroic prince, our two great fictions, we never did have much of a chance. At some point, the Great Divide took place: they (the boys) dreamed of mounting the Greta Steed and buying Snow-White from the dwarfs; we (the girls) aspired to become that object of every necrophiliac's lust — the innocent, victimised Sleeping Beauty, beauteous lump of ultimate, sleeping good. Despite ourselves, sometimes knowing, unwilling, unable to do otherwise, we act out the roles we were taught.

Andrea Dworkin
Woman Hating (1974)²

This article deals with an aspect of popular culture which has a part to play in the socialization processes of many children both now and in times past. By socialization I broadly mean the integration of young members into society and the reinforcement of norms and values which legitimize the socio-political systems of that society and which guarantee their continuity. The influence of fairy tales is often presumed by its consumers and producers to be harmless or at least 'innocent'. However, when one starts to examine the ideas/attitudes contained in some fairy tales and how these are modified subtly and continually to reflect dominant ideology,³ then one can no longer hold such a view. Rather than being seen as mere escapism or fun, certain fairytales and the concepts that inform them start to take on a far more serious, if not at times sinister, light, and correspondingly require serious study.

Related to this view, one can look at what Gramsci has to say on folklore:

Folklore must not be thought of as an oddity, something strange or picturesque, but as something very serious and to be taken seriously. Only thus will teaching be more efficient and really bring about the birth of a new culture in the popular masses, that is to say, the gap between modern culture and popular culture or folklore will disappear.

Rather than see folklore as being merely "picturesque", Gramsci suggests "One ought to study it instead as a 'concept of the world and of life' to a large extent an implicit one, of a given strata of society (defined in terms of time and space) in opposition (this too, is mostly implicit, mechanical, objective) to the 'official' concepts of the world (or in a wider sense, those of the cultured sectors of a historically determined society), which have followed each other in the course of historical development".⁴ Following from this, a link may be perceived between folklore and Gramsci's 'common sense' which he calls the folklore of philosophy — 'common sense' being half way between folklore proper and philosophy.

Gramsci's observations on folklore are very useful in connection with those fairytales which have their roots in oral folktales. Perhaps one can infer from Gramsci's observations that these fairytales in the original form contained potentially subversive elements 'in opposition to official concepts of the world'; elements which were however tamed or else transformed by those writers who rewrote the tales. Supporting this view Zipes maintains that in pre-capitalist folktales "the main characters and concerns of a monarchistic, patriarchal, and feudal society are presented, and the focus is on class struggle and competition for power among the aristocrats themselves and between the peasantry and aristocracy".⁵ Power and oppression are the main themes of the tales, and peasants became the major carriers of such tales, in which their aspirations are symbolically enacted. What we have therefore is an imaginative portrayal of class conflict. Alternatively one might infer that some oral folktales contained reactionary, conservative elements which were further entrenched by writers such as the Brothers Grimm, and Hans Christian Andersen.



A question some might ask is: so what? What relevance do fairy tales have in South Africa in 1985? Probably not much but where they are still read — and it appears among certain strata of South African society (white middle class and petit bourgeoisie) that the practice of reading fairytales still flourishes — their influence may still be felt or at least work to some extent towards maintaining the status quo: eg. the classical fairytale usually supports upward mobility and the possibility of autonomy; individual effort is rewarded. The plots usually imply that by exercising thrift, obedience and patience one may aspire to a higher position in the hierarchy based on private property, wealth and power. Though bad kings may be dethroned, the basic social structure rarely is altered — benevolent, just rulers take their place and all continues as before. Now if one is correct in assuming that some of these values are internalised through the reading of such fairytales, then there is some significance to be attached to the fact that today in South Africa such tales are being read.

To turn more particularly to classic fairy tales and their development: it is now generally agreed by most critics (notably August Nitschke) who have studied the emergence of the literary fairy tale in Europe that writers purposely took over the oral folk tale and changed it into a story about values and manners so that children would become civilized according to the social code of that time. Fairy tales came to reproduce and promote the dominant ideology of the period in which they were written, while those with their origins in oral folk tales were adapted to fulfil that purpose. Zipes maintains 'The writers of fairy tales for children acted ideologically by presenting their notions regarding social conditions and conflicts, and they *interacted* with each other and with past writers and storytellers of folklore in a public sphere.'⁶

Though the oral folk tale of the seventeenth century would have been heard by children of all classes, the literary fairy tale as it emerged in that same century recast the oral tales' content to make it suitable for French court society and bourgeois salons. At this stage, French culture was promoting civilité for the rest of Europe; civilité was likewise proposed as a model of behaviour in fairy tales — the aim being to socialize children to meet definite behavioural standards at home and publicly. As has been pointed out by Denise Escarpit, the purpose of the tale from the beginning was to instruct in an amusing fashion, in order to make the lesson more appealing: 'It was a utilitarian moralism which taught how to "act in a proper way", that is, to insert oneself into society docilely, but astutely without disrupting society and also without creating trouble for oneself.'⁷ Bettelheim, viewing fairy stories from a reductive psychoanalytical perspective, agrees on these tales' primarily pedagogical function:



... more can be learned from [fairy tales] about the inner problems of human beings, and of the *right* (my italics) solutions to their predicaments in a society than from any other type of story within a child's comprehension. Since the child at every moment of his life is exposed to the society in which he lives, he will certainly learn to cope with its conditions, provided his inner resources permit him to do so.⁸

The term 'right solutions' is significant: as long as the child behaves 'correctly' ie. according to the dominant social codes within home and school, then all is well.

The social code, when applied to the female hero of a classical fairy story, tends to be particularly repressive — a trend which continued from the seventeenth century through to the nineteenth century, and, where these tales are still read to children, up to this day. Tracing the development of *Little Red Riding Hood* as a fairy tale provides an interesting illustration of this though, of necessity in an article this length, the analysis will be suggestive rather than exhaustive.

The first literary rendition of *Little Red Riding Hood* appeared in Charles Perrault's *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* (published in 1697). Until recently it was thought that Perrault had not based *Little Red Riding Hood* on an oral folk tale but research has shown that in fact he was familiar with such a folk tale widely known in France. It concerns a little peasant girl who goes to visit her grandmother, carrying fresh baked bread and butter. She meets a werewolf who learns where she is going; the werewolf arrives at grandmother's house before the girl, kills the older woman and disguises himself as her. The girl gets into bed with the disguised wolf, remarks on his hairy body and eventually discovers he means to eat her. Resourcefully she insists on first going outside to relieve herself. The werewolf is tricked into letting her do this and the girl runs away after tying her 'leash' round a tree. Perrault, a royal civil servant and significant figure in literary salons, radically altered this cautionary tale to make it palatable to his bourgeois-aristocratic audience and to provide a model of behaviour for well brought up girls. The brave little peasant girl of the oral tale who saves herself through her own resourcefulness and who proves herself capable of replacing her grandmother ie. of maturing, is transformed into a helpless, gullible, if not silly, child. Guilt isn't an issue in the original tale: the peasant girl has a relaxed attitude toward her body and sexuality and more than meets the challenge of a would-be seducer. In Perrault's tale, the little girl is punished because she is guilty of not suppressing her natural sexuality. A specific moral lesson is taught, the wolf is victorious. Red Riding Hood is devoured and no consolation is forthcoming.

Perrault's depiction of a developing adolescent girl overwhelmed by her sexuality perhaps has its roots in a widespread belief of the time that women in particular were linked to potentially uncontrollable natural instincts — a belief which found expression in witch hunts in the centuries prior to Perrault's tale. The necessity to shelter innocent young girls from such forces was obvious to Perrault — he sought to civilize children by inhibiting them, hoping thereby to improve their minds and manners. Zipes suggests '... childhood became identified as a state of natural innocence and potentially corruptible by the end of the seventeenth century, and the civilizing of children — social indoctrination through anxiety provoking effects and positive reinforcement — operated on all levels in manners, speech, sex, literature, and play. Instincts were to be trained and controlled for their socio-political use value. The supervised rearing of children was to lead to the *homme civilisé*⁹ — or, in Little Red Riding Hood's case, the *femme civilisée* of upper class society characterised by her beauty, politeness, gracefulness, industry and, above all, her control. Her instinctual drives were to be thoroughly cloaked. That is the moral — conveyed by negative example — in *Little Red Riding Hood*: young girls who are pretty, well bred and courteous must keep themselves in control or else they will be swallowed up by their desires. A properly groomed girl was to learn to fear sex and find it repulsive, as frightening and repugnant as a wolf.

This is not to suggest that Perrault and his associates had overtly dark and devious plans to pervert the natural growth of children: Perrault's stated aim was to instruct in an amusing and moral manner. He maintained that the tales 'contained a useful moral, and that the playful narrative surrounding them had been chosen only to allow the stories to penetrate the mind more pleasantly and in such a manner to instruct and amuse at the same time'.¹⁰ In a tale such as *Little Red Riding Hood*, Perrault was reproducing, and thereby promoting, the repressive moral and social codes of his time, codes which he apparently believed worthy of approval, and in his tales in general he provided a social manual by which young children were expected to abide.

According to Zipes, the Grimm brothers added to the literary 'bourgeoisification', as he terms it, of oral tales as had Charles Perrault. They sought to incorporate the rich cultural tradition of the common people into the literature of the rising middle classes and to this end they spent their lives researching myths and customs of the German people. They modified the oral tales they researched, however, to suit their conservative, bourgeois audience of adults reading to their correspondingly socialized children. Their collection of *Children and Household Tales* was originally published in 1812 and underwent numerous editions during their own lifetimes — each time with numerous revisions. Their 1819 edition they specifically termed an *Erziehungs-*



buch (educational book) calculated to give pleasure and to instruct the child in a 'pure' and 'truthful' way: an aim aided by careful elimination of those passages deemed harmful to children. The result was a collection of tales which placed great emphasis on passivity, industry and self-sacrifice for girls and on action, dominance and accumulation of property for boys: a socializing programme admirably supporting the nineteenth century German bourgeoisie.

When it came to revising *Little Red Riding Hood*, the Grimms had to review even the earlier French haute bourgeois values for their strictly decent, upright audience. In Perrault's 1697 tale it is a 'little country girl'¹¹ who proves to be silly and gullible but by the 1812 version of the Grimms she is a 'small sweet maid', delicate and the epitome of innocence. The instructions she is given in Perrault's tale are brief and simple: 'Go and see how your grandmother is, because I heard she was not very well, take her a cake and this little pot of butter'. In the Grimm version she is explicitly told what *not* to do: 'Come, Red Riding Hood, take this piece of cake and bottle of wine and bring it to grandmother. She is sick and weak. This will nourish her. Be nice and good and give her my regards. Be orderly on your way and don't veer from the path, otherwise you'll fall and break the glass. Then your sick grandmother will have nothing'. A later version adds to the list of guidelines: 'When you come to Grannie's room, don't forget to say "Good morning", and don't go around looking into every corner before saying so'. 'I will do everything all right,' Little Red Riding Hood assures her mother.¹² Small wonder that the notion of staying from the path to pick flowers appealed to her in preference to her 'duty'! Again, as in Perrault's tale, the message is clear — a girl must learn to fear her sexuality and unless she keeps to the straight and narrow path she will be devoured or overwhelmed by her desire symbolised by the wolf.

What is interesting though is the ending of the Grimms' tale. Instead of the bleak fate meted out to Little Red Riding Hood by Perrault, the little girl and her grandmother are freed by the sexually neutral hunter, possibly a father or brother figure. At a later date, Red Riding Hood again visits her grandmother after having been approached by another wolf in the forest — this time she is 'on her guard'.¹³ Together she and her grandmother trap the wolf, he drowns and 'Little Red Riding Hood went merrily home and no one did her any harm.'¹⁴ This ending is more promising, suggesting that her 'experience has taught her not to tarry there [in the dark forest] but only because, for a girl still struggling with the onset of sexuality, the time is too soon. The last phase of the story looks forward to a future when Red Riding Hood's mother, and the mother of the child hearing the story, will no longer forbid a sojourn in the forest.'¹⁵ Optimistic as the ending may seem, the happy ending is dependent on the absolute obedience and submission of the girl to the strictures of her mother/grandmother. Experimentation or deviation on the child's part of any nature is discouraged.

When one considers the pervasive influence¹⁶ that the Grimms' fairy tales have had on the socialization of generations of children in Germany and other countries, such a limiting approach to the development of children is disturbing. Some recent writers from West Germany are starting to suggest that the norms for children's behaviour advocated by the Grimm brothers — though 'well intentioned'¹⁷ — have served to hinder rather than help children come to terms with their existence in this century. These writers maintain that authoritarian attitudes are conveyed in these tales, and they have begun to provide radical alternative versions of the fairy tales of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially those of the Grimms. Their aim is to question the socialization processes of the older tales by proposing different ways and different alternatives. Instead of repressing children they seek to allow them to make their own choices, or at least to perceive that alternative choices to the traditional ones exist. Standard reading and rearing processes are questioned; a redirected socialization process in opposition to the conventional one is forwarded in the reconceptualized tales.

In a book such as *Marchen für tapfere Mädchen (Fairy Tales for Girls with Spunk 1978)* written by O.F. Gmelin and illustrated by Doris Lerche, the conventional male domination in classical fairy tales is challenged by a strongly feminist perspective. Conditioned ideas of sexual roles and socialization are called into question. In their retelling of *Little Red Riding Hood*, entitled *Little Red Cap*, the opening sentence sets the tone: 'There was once a fearless girl...'¹⁸ Her spunkiness is illustrated when, though tricked by the wolf disguised as grandmother and swallowed by him, she cuts an escape hole in his stomach with a knife she had with her, thereby rescuing herself and her grandmother.

The successful dissemination of these tales in West Germany is not at all assured — given the fact that they question dominant values of society, conventional channels of distribution such as schools and libraries are unlikely to promote the stories widely. Nevertheless, the fact that their production has not lessened argues that a need for such radical tales does exist. At the very least, the socialization process suggested by the tales of the brothers Grimm is starting to be questioned.

Similarly, outside West Germany certain writers have considered many of the classical fairy tales to be too sexist and authoritarian, and therefore exerting an inhibiting effect on contemporary children living in the western world. The solutions posed for characters living in the semi-feudal patriarchal societies depicted in the classical fairy tales are limited in view of immediate twentieth century issues. What many writers of children's tales now try to create in these tales are imaginary projections of possibilities for non-alienating living conditions. Various movements of the 1960s were instrumental in fuelling such a hope — the American civil rights movement, anti-war protests, minority groups' struggles, the rise of feminism in America, England and Europe. The struggle towards a better future is important, that way lies liberation: '... the fairy tale cannot be liberating ultimately unless it projects on a conscious, literary, and philosophical level the objectification of home as real democracy under non-alienating conditions. This does not mean that the liberating fairy tale must have a moral, doctrinaire resolution, but that, to be liberating, it must reflect a *process of struggle* against all types of suppression and authoritarianism and posit various possibilities for the concrete realization of utopia.'¹⁹

There seem to be two major alternatives for writers reconceptualizing classical fairy tales. In the case where writers assume their readers are familiar with the old tales, they may retain the original characters and setting but rearrange the action and patterns of symbols in order to compel the reader to consider alternative modes of behaviour and thought. The reader is thereby liberated from the standard reading and guided to consider the negative aspects of the old form through their replacements. A second option is to insert contemporary references into the traditional plotline, a narrative strategy calculated to engage the child's interest and make the tale more obviously immediately relevant to the child's situation. It is hoped that the reader will be jarred out of a complacent attitude to the tales and encouraged to see the issues treated in a more collective and democratic light.²⁰

In response to a need to counter values carried in traditional fairy tales, the Merseyside Women's Liberation Movement in Liverpool, has rewritten several old favourites, among them *Little Red Riding Hood*. They hold that the

original tales encourage aggression in their heroes and a submissive nurturing of this aggression by their female protagonists, and by implication the assumption that domination and submission are the natural bases of human relationships. Their version of *Little Red Riding Hood* has a timbermill town as its setting and the protagonist, shy Nadia, learns to overcome her fear of the woods. She does so sufficiently well to be able to kill the wolf, thereby saving her grandmother. She uses the wolf's fur to line her cloak and daily gains in courage, exploring deeper and deeper into the woods. The happy ending is not a closed one; it marks the beginning of actual development for the child.

A very different, though possibly equally emancipatory, version of *Little Red Riding Hood* is that written by Tomi Ungerer: his tale is anarchistic and a send-up of the well known tale. Now Red Riding Hood is forthright and sassy. She has a nasty grandmother whose reputation is worse than the classy wolf's. The upshot of it all is that the wolf overcomes Red Riding Hood's doubts about his tongue and jowls, they marry and live happily ever after. Sexual taboos are overthrown, a mature sexual relationship free of the super-ego mother and grandmother is shown, the wolf and his wife win autonomy and a disregard for old inhibiting rumours.

On the whole, the post-1945 versions of *Little Red Riding Hood* criticize the traditional view of the girl as being sweet, innocent and helpless, and the wolf as a frightening predator. Further examples of such tales are Catherine Storr's *Little Polly Riding Hood* in which the bumbling wolf uses the old tale as a manual to catch the girl but he is outwitted by the far smarter child; Iring Fetscher's *Little Redhead and the Wolf* which gives a mock-psychological account of the story and Philippe Dumas and Boris Moissard's *Little Acqua Riding Hood* set in Paris and which involves the wolf's grandnephew being freed from the Jardin des Plantes by Little Red Riding Hood's granddaughter!

These experimental fairy tales shift the perspective and meaning of socialization through reading.²¹ Through the change in social relations which they show, a matching change in social relations in the real world is eagerly anticipated. Some might ask: when faced with radical revisions of fairy tales, do children like new tales? Do they read them, and if so what effect do they have on them? This is difficult to assess but Zipes suggests that children seem to dislike changes made to the old tales; they find alternatives to the familiar pattern disturbing. Yet it is this very disturbance that is desirable for with it comes questioning of undesirable social relations and restrictive values promoted in certain tales. And with this questioning comes development of ideas and a liberating exploration of options. It seems though that at the moment the experimental tales are only really circulated in the forward looking circles which generate them. What is required in order for the liberating potential of these tales to be felt more widely is a progressive shift in society itself.

Notes and References

- 1 The term 'classic' as in 'classical' or 'classic' fairy tales is one that is used by Zipes and others to denote those fairy tales which have their roots in oral folktales, and still survive, though perhaps altered, to be read in contemporary times.
- 2 Dworkin, A. 1974: *Woman Hating*, Dutton, New York.
- 3 For the purposes of this article, I am using Terry Eagleton's definition of dominant ideology as being "constituted by a relatively coherent set of 'discourses' of values, representations and beliefs which, realised in certain material apparatuses and related to the structures of material production, so reflect the experiential relations of individual subjects to their social conditions as to guarantee these misperceptions of the 'real' which contribute to the reproduction of the dominant social relations". *Criticism and Ideology*, Verso, London, 1982, p54.
- 4 Gramsci, A. 1983: "National-Popular Literature, The Popular Novel, and Observations on Folklore" in Mattelart, A and Siegelau, S. (eds.): *Communication and Class Struggle*. 2. Liberation, Socialism. IMMRC, Bagnolet, pp74-75.
- 5 Zipes, J. 1983: *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*. Heinemann, London, p8.
- 6 Ibid, p3.
- 7 Ibid, p9.
- 8 Bettelheim, B. 1976: *The Uses of Enchantment: the Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. Thames and Hudson, London, p5.
- 9 Zipes, op cit p23.
- 10 Contes de Perrault, edited by G Rougier. Quotes by Zipes, op cit p16.
- 11 Perrault's Fairy Tales. Translated by A Carter, Jonathan Cape, London, 1973, p34.
- 12 Grimm's Fairy tales. Translated by V Varechá, Cathay Books, London, 1982, p52.
- 13 Ibid, p57.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Rabkin, E. 1976: *The Fantastic in Literature*. Princeton University Press, New Jersey, pp58-59.
- 16 The Grimms' collection of fairy tales has been the second most popular and widely distributed book in Germany for over a century.
- 17 The ostensible intention of the Grimms in collecting folktales was the preservation of German culture: an endeavour to produce an integrated national culture and to foster a strong national bourgeoisie.
- 18 Lerche and Gmelin. 1978: *Märchen für Tapfere Mädchen*. Giesson, Schlot, p16.
- 19 Zipes op cit. p178.
- 20 Two problems to raise about the 'liberating' potential of radical fairy tales:
 - i) These stories are more likely to be read to white Western bourgeois, petit bourgeois or upper class children than to working class children — the very ones perhaps that need to be conscientized and, if one is to use the term at all 'liberated'. Here, the takeover of some fairytales from their peasant origins by bourgeois writers is interesting. In their revised form, the stories put forward models of bourgeois behaviour with a possible hegemonic function in mind, directed towards both middle class and working class children — presuming the latter were told these tales.
 - ii) the writers of experimental versions of the old fairytales, such as *Little Red Riding Hood*, by suggesting that these new tales may have a liberating effect on their young readers, should perhaps stress more strongly the fact that there is no ideology-free zone or site of struggle that is ideologically uninformed into which these children may emerge. By reading for example, a radical version of *Little Red Riding Hood* which challenges dominant moral and social values of a particular period, certain white middle class children may be stimulated to perceive the tale's issues rather differently. However, that is only one small part of their larger environment of school, home, church.
- 21 Zipes, op cit. p190.

