

Grimm's Fairy Tales as Cultural Memory Texts: Preserving Collective Identity through Folklore

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Abstract

Scholars have traditionally approached Grimm's Fairy Tales as a classic collection of children's literature. From the perspective of Jan Assmann's and Aleida Assmann's Cultural Memory Theory, Grimm's Fairy Tales emerge as powerful vehicles for preserving and transmitting the cultural values, beliefs, and historical experiences of nineteenth-century Germany. The theory of cultural memory, articulated by Jan and Aleida Assmann, helps to navigate how these fairy tales play a pivot role in preserving cultural memory among young readers. Using a qualitative textual approach, this study examines tales such as Hansel and Gretel, Snow White, and Cinderella to investigate how their recurring narratives, symbols, and motifs reflect the collective cultural memory of nineteenth-century Germany. In addition, exploring the origins of these fairy tales and the editorial interventions of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm demonstrates that the brothers were active agents in the formation and transmission of folklore-based cultural memory. This study also investigates the interdisciplinary significance of fairy tales, specifically in relation to the fields of memory studies and cultural theory. The application of Cultural Memory Theory to Grimm's Fairy Tales illustrates the enduring role of literature in preserving cultural memory across generations and enriches contemporary discussions in children's literature, folklore, and memory studies.

Keywords: Cultural Memory, Folklore, Collective Memory, Narrative

1. Introduction

Fairy tales are ancient literary works that are effective cultural artefacts that maintain, pass and re-format communal memory across generations. Published in the first half of the nineteenth century, by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, Grimms Fairytale is one of the most influential collections in the Western literary canon. These tales are not just children's stories but are deeply embedded in the socio-cultural, historical and ideological context of the time. The paper entitled 'Grimm's Fairy Tales as Cultural Memory Texts: Preserving Collective Identity through Narrative' aims to explore how fairytales act as storehouses of cultural memory and as origins of fantastic worlds which reflect and reconfigure the realities as experienced.

The Grimm Brothers' collection was not merely a transcription of the oral tradition but a process of editing, refining, and altering to fit the moral and social standards of the time. These stories will therefore be true folk-lore and also the ideology of their editors. Stories like Snow White, Hansel and Gretel, Cinderella are representative of family, survival, morality and transformation, all of

which are strongly tied to socio-cultural realities of their day. Over the years, these stories have crossed their original cultural boundaries and have been translated and adapted into many forms of media and different cultures. The ongoing reinterpretation highlights their applicability and flexibility in transforming them into an effective space in which the preservation, restructuring, and passing of cultural memory by narrative means can be studied.

The Cultural Memory theory, articulated by Jan and Aleida Assmann, exhibits the collective knowledge, values, and experiences that are shared among members of a society and contribute to a common cultural identity. So, cultural memory is not an individual memory, but instead encompasses the memories that are shared by the culture, society, and nation, and are represented in media such as text, ritual, monuments, and other enduring media. According to author Jan Assmann, cultural memory is actually stabilized by the use of text and symbolic forms to represent the shared memory. As a result, these shared memories are able to be passed from one generation to the next, maintained over time, and used to construct the knowledge that each generation possesses regarding those shared memories. Furthermore, fairy tales, as a type of shared memory, may contain symbolic forms of the culture and society, and be shared with the younger generations of those societies.

Aleida Assmann has made significant contributions to the study of cultural memory and its function in shaping and sustaining culture. Along with the emphasis on continuity and stability of cultural memory, Aleida Assmann also suggests that cultural memory is dynamic and adaptable. In the context of fairy tales, continuity and stability are reflected in the preservation of recurring cultural values, moral beliefs, symbolic motifs, and collective traditions that are transmitted from one generation to another through storytelling. As a result, it is constantly reactivated and rewritten by the societies to which it belongs, as is reflected in tales about their characters, their stories, and their motivations. Fairy tales can be understood as examples of this dynamic and adaptive form of cultural memory, continually evolving while preserving elements of the past.

2. Literature Review

The analysis of the Grimm brothers' fairy tales has become an important area of interest among scholars who view these stories as a means of preserving the cultural memory of the communities that share them. The stories of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (1812-1857) remain one of the most prominent works within the European literary-folkloric tradition. Grimm took the tale of the oral traditions of the German people and transformed them into the written word. The tales contain elements of fantasy and reality, as well as elements of entertainment for children and convey of important messages to them. Cultural Memory Theory developed by Jan Assmann and Aleida Assmann, explains how literary works function as carriers of collective memory, preserving and transmitting a society's cultural knowledge across generations. The work of these two scholars, has been helpful in the analysis of the fairy tales of the Grimm brothers. First published in 1812 and later 1858, Grimm's fairy tales have grown to contain 200 different tales that have become one of the most read works in Western literature written for children. Today, the Grimm brothers' fairy tales are listed in the Memory of the World Register by UNESCO.

Jan Assmann, in *Memory and Culture*, navigates the concept of collective memory and argues that "the theory of collective memory by Maurice Halbwachs offers one of the most important theoretical bases on the study of cultural memory and serves to explain how societies maintain and pass shared meanings to the next generation" (Assman 21). Halbwachs challenges the idea of memory as an individual or purely personal phenomenon and instead maintains that memory is always formed within social frameworks, meaning that individuals remember through the influence of family, religion, class, community, and other collective structures rather than as isolated consciousnesses. In *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bruno Bettelheim applies a psychoanalytic

approach to fairy tales, arguing that “fairy tales are crucial in assisting children to deal with and comprehend unconscious fears, emotional struggles, and developmental anxieties” (Bettelheim 2). Similar to Jack Zipes, Maria Tatar demonstrates that the Brothers Grimm did not merely hand down oral tales in their purest form. Rather, they changed key aspects of violence, sexuality and family dynamics in various editions so that the stories could be more acceptable to the nineteenth century reader and be more child friendly. Her work emphasizes the role of fairy tales as documents of culture and as emotional storytelling. Tatar indicates that “some form of early versions of many of the Grimm tales were more violent, harsh and sexually suggestive than later versions that came to fame” (Tatar 6). Gradually the Grimms edited these tales, toning down explicit sexual allusions, raising the moral standards and adjusting the family formations to Christian and bourgeois norms. As one example, biological mothers were regularly substituted with evil stepmothers, which enabled keeping the image of the caring mother morally safe yet maintaining the conflict in the family. It was an editorial approach that demonstrated the social value of motherhood and domestic stability in nineteenth-century Europe. She contends that “these recurring tropes, no mothers, mean stepmothers, good daughters, naïve children and marriages where virtue is rewarded, are not coincidental but defining symbolic structures that articulate both narrative tropes, and social fears” (Tatar 12). These characters are indicative of anxieties such as family instability, female authority, inheritance, childhood vulnerability and moral conduct. Emotional experiences of jealousy, abandonment, fear, and hope are given a symbolic expression in fairy tales. Due to the universality of these emotions, the stories can be repeated throughout time and cultures.

3. Textual Analysis

The Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm exhibit deep cultural significance for the societies from which they emerged. Stories such as *Hansel and Gretel*, *Snow White*, and *Cinderella* are some of the most well-known and discussed fairy tales. However, other stories like *Rapunzel*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Twelve Dancing Princesses*, *Rumpelstiltskin*, and *The Fisherman and His Wife* contain the same meanings and narratives as well. These tales act as a preserve of the cultures from which they originated and their memories of those societies. Cultural memory theory, as defined by Jan Assmann, explains that societies remember their histories and their identities through symbolic texts. Assmann writes that cultural memory is “the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity” (Assmann 37). Aleida Assmann explains that “cultural memory is also a dynamic process, continually changing with the culture in which it exists” (Assmann 98). These fairy tales, from the Brothers Grimm, will demonstrate how many of them contain cultural memories and the reasons for their existence.

Rapunzel is one of the most powerful fairy tales concerning the relationship between the tales, the characters within the stories, and the cultural memory of the societies that created those stories. *Rapunzel* exists as a tale that demonstrates the confinement of a female within a tower by her caregivers to conform to the expectations of a female in that culture. Rapunzel was locked within a tower by her mother and her parents after she was given to a herb seller as payment for the herbs that she stole. The story utilizes the use of the tower to represent the confinement of women within traditional cultures and the behaviors of those females. As Maria Tatar writes in her *Rapunzel* commentary, “the use of the tower represents the cultural memory of how women are to be isolated from the outside world and provided for by their caregivers” (Tatar 98). The long golden hair of Rapunzel is another significant element of the story that represents the female aspects of the tale. “Rapunzel is forced to lose her hair by her mother, which is associated with Grimm’s depiction of her existing in a desert and suffering great misery and sorrow” (Grimm 76). Rapunzel’s hair represents the cultural memory that females need to be controlled and provided for by their mothers, their caregivers, and their society. Losing Rapunzel’s hair represents the consequences

of women acting independently of their caregivers and violating the cultural memory of their behaviors.

Sleeping Beauty is another tale that demonstrates the cultural memory of females within Grimm's fairy tale collections. The *Sleeping Beauty* tale shares the memory of the power of female passivity within these tales and the desire of cultures to maintain the behaviors of such female characters. The tale of *Sleeping Beauty* preserves the memory of a girl who, upon being cursed at birth, falls into a deep sleep after pricking her finger on a spindle. As a result, she sleeps for 100 years until she is awakened by a prince. Feminist scholars Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar explain that "this story acts as a representation of the cultural ideal of the feminine and its passivity" (Gilbert 41). The sleeping aspect of the tale is symbolic of the cultural memory of female passivity within their cultures. Sleeping is associated with females being silent, passive, and beautiful as children and throughout their lives by the cultures of Grimm's tales. Thus, *Sleeping Beauty* represents the cultural memory of females remaining passive and asleep to their environments. *Rapunzel's* sleeping aspect represents the cultural memory of females being asleep to their challenges by their caregivers. However, *Sleeping Beauty* acts as a demonstration of cultural memory of female passivity within their stories.

The *Twelve Dancing Princesses* reflects cultural memory related to representations of female behavior within the Grimm fairy tale tradition. The tale of the *Twelve Dancing Princesses* acts as a demonstration of the cultural memory of female secrecy within these tales. Throughout the tale, the princesses are shown as leaving the palace every night to visit some other magical kingdom under the ground. Their father, however, demands to know the place where they go. Any man that does not find their destination is to be executed. The soldier, however, finds their kingdom and the princesses are freed from their imprisonment. The tale includes many symbols that represent the female behaviors of secrecy within their tales. According to Jack Zipes, the author of *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, "the female behaviors exhibited in these tales include their ability to act independently of their male counterparts, their need to hide their true selves from others, and their power to preserve their own individual destinies and outcomes" (Zipes 112). The dancing shoes that the princesses wear are one such symbol that represent their ability to hide their true selves and the actions that they take outside of their homes from society. Furthermore, the inclusion of the underground kingdom that the princesses visit each night is symbolic of their cultural memory of their ability to maintain their own destinies and the power of their individual existences. Thus, *The Twelve Dancing Princesses* acts as a demonstration of the cultural memory of female secrecy within their stories.

Another tale that represents the memories of the female behaviors within Grimm's fairy tales is *Rumpelstiltskin*. In this tale, the woman is required to spin straw into gold, a skill that no one else in the village possessed. This act reflects the cultural memory of female labor as represented within Grimm's fairy tales. As Bruno Bettelheim explains in his discussion of *Rumpelstiltskin*, "the tale represents the cultural memory of females being required to perform certain actions, like caring for the home and the care of their charge, without power or recognition from society" (Bettelheim 187). This act, also represents the power of female labor in the tales. In order to produce the gold for the king, the female is forced to sacrifice her jewelry and even her first-born child. Such actions represent the cultural memory of the power of female labor and their willingness to sacrifice their personal belongings for the extraction of resources for others. *Rumpelstiltskin*, the mysterious man with no name, also represents the power of female labor within the tale. His help comes at a cost, and the woman is required to sacrifice the value of her own time and possessions in order to receive his aid. This aspect of the story, therefore, represents the cultural memory of the power of female labor. *Sleeping Beauty* and *Rumpelstiltskin* share the cultural memory of female labor within Grimm's fairy tale collections.

The final tale to examine in relation to the cultural memories of the females within the Brothers Grimm fairy tale collections is *The Fisherman and His Wife*. In this tale, the fisherman's wife repeatedly becomes frustrated with the fisherman and his lack of care for her. As a result, she

begins to act in opposition to him. She begins to work for the king and even becomes the queen. However, she is required to work extremely hard to obtain this position. Throughout the tale, the wife exhibits submissiveness to her husband. Despite her position as queen, she performs the same tasks of the common fisherman's wife and serves her husband meals. Furthermore, as the wife gains more power and becomes the queen of the kingdom, her submissiveness to her husband remains the same. Thus, *The Fisherman and His Wife* represents the cultural memory of the submissiveness of women within Grimm's tales. In examining each of these tales, it becomes evident that the stories of the Brothers Grimm preserved the memories of the societies in which they lived and the behaviors of their females within those societies. From the preservation of female passivity in *Sleeping Beauty* to the preservation of female labor in *Rumpelstiltskin*, it is clear that Grimm intended for these tales to act as a demonstration of the cultural memories of those female behaviors within Grimm's fairy tales.

The Fisherman and His Wife reflects the cultural memory of the society regarding the concepts of greed, ambition, and dissatisfaction with the life that one has. The poor fisherman is able to catch a magical fish that grants wishes to the fisherman and his wife. The wife continuously asks for more possessions and status from the magical fish, eventually leading to the complete loss of their wealth and status. The tale of *The Fisherman and His Wife* reflects a society that is often wary of the ambitions of those within the lower classes of society. Such a society maintains a social order in which individuals are relatively stable within their social classes, and with certain limitations as to how high individuals may rise within that society. The wife's insatiable desire for more leads to imbalances within nature and within their society. The sea in this tale is the most important of the story's symbols. The calm waters of the sea represent the balance that should exist in the lives of individuals, and the storms that rage within the sea represent the greed and dissatisfaction that exists in those who wish for more than they already possess. The magical fish within the story represents the opportunities that exist for individuals within society. Although there are no consequences to the wife's requirements of the fisherman, the wife's insatiable greed is punished at the end of the tale.

A recurring concern in fairy tales is the representation of unchecked desire and its consequences for individuals and communities. Fairy tales, as noted by Maria Tatar, "often include elements of the dangers of desire for more than individuals already possess" (Tatar 201). This particular tale is especially true in this manner. The wife, as a female character, is often the one that is more heavily criticized within the tale. Such a desire for power within a female in a patriarchal society was considered unnatural. Thus, this tale also includes elements of acceptable gender behavior within that historical period. All these tales are interconnected with one another in relation to the concept of cultural memory. Tales such as *Rapunzel* and *Sleeping Beauty* focus upon the passivity of women. The *Twelve Dancing Princesses* works to reveal the secrecy of women. *Rumpelstiltskin* reflects the exploitation of labor. Finally, *The Fisherman and His Wife* work to reveal themes of ambition within the story.

Despite the differences between each of these tales, many of the symbols associated with these stories reflect various elements of cultural memory inherent to the society from which they originated. For example, the symbolism of towers in tales like *Rapunzel* and *Sleeping Beauty* represent the control of women within those societies. Furthermore, the symbolism of sleep in *Sleeping Beauty* reflects the passivity expected of women in those historical periods. Furthermore, the symbolism of the underground kingdom in *The Twelve Dancing Princesses* relates to the hidden power of women within those societies. Even the symbolism behind the spinning of straw into gold in *Rumpelstiltskin* reflects the inability of the poor to gain the same wealth as the upper classes of that society. Finally, the symbolism of the sea within *The Fisherman and His Wife* reflects the greed and ambitions of individuals within their culture. Overall, these tales prove that the fairy tales by Grimm are some of the best forms of cultural memory preservation. The tales seek to preserve the feelings of the individuals within these cultures, rather than their facts about their society.

Furthermore, the use of symbolism within these tales is one of the Grimm's greatest strengths. Each of the stories contains elements of symbolism that allow for readers of any culture and historical period to relate to the tales. For example, *Rapunzel's* tower can represent the control of women within nineteenth century society, but it can also relate to the feelings of isolation of women in the modern world today. Similarly, *Sleeping Beauty's* sleep can relate to the passivity of women within those historical periods, but it can also relate to the desires of women within the modern world today to exhibit strength in their interactions with others. In conclusion, the symbolism of the bargain between *Rumpelstiltskin* and the girl in *The Twelve Dancing Princesses* can relate to the exploitation of labor within the nineteenth century, but it can relate to economic issues between the poor and rich in the modern world today. However, these tales also preserve aspects of society that should be rejected. Many of these tales contain descriptions of the preservation of patriarchal society, class-based societies, and restrictions upon the behaviors of certain groups within those societies. These aspects of society that are preserved within the fairy tales should be critically analyzed and rejected by readers of all generations.

Despite certain limitations, Grimm's fairy tales clearly embody elements of cultural memory and continue to preserve and transmit significant aspects of the past across generations. Therefore, these fairy tales can be understood as a means of preserving the memories of the culture from which they originate. Aleida Assmann's concept of cultural memory includes the idea that modern readers of these tales may approach them differently from the audiences of the past. However, the adaptations of the tales by modern audiences only demonstrates the flexibility of cultural memory. For instance, *Rapunzel's* tower may represent the control of women within the nineteenth century, but it may also relate to the feelings of isolation of women within the modern world. *Sleeping Beauty's* sleep represents the passivity of women within historical periods, but it also relates to the feminine ideals of the present world. Finally, the bargain between the girl and *Rumpelstiltskin* represents the exploitation of labor of the poor within nineteenth century society, but it also relates to economic issues within the modern world today. Therefore, such flexibility of fairy tales to relate to the modern world and incorporate modern issues into those of the past indicates that these tales are able to stand the test of time. Therefore, the symbolism within the tales ensures the survival of those tales within the literary world.

Similarly, as Grimm's fairy tales reflect the preservation of cultural memory, they also retain and convey certain emotions and affective experiences of those cultures. These feelings are among the reasons that they have survived throughout time. For these reasons, these tales continue to remain among the most important tales of Grimm's collected fairy tales. It is clear, then, that Grimm's fairy tales do contain elements of cultural memory, preserved through the use of symbolism within the stories. *Rapunzel's* fairy tale preserves cultural memories of the confinement of women within their homes through the symbolism of the tower. *Sleeping Beauty* preserves the historical idealizations of the passivity of women through the symbolism of sleep. *The Twelve Dancing Princesses* preserves the cultural memories of the hidden power of women through the symbolism of the underground kingdom. *Rumpelstiltskin* preserves cultural memory regarding the exploitation of labor by the poor within society. Finally, *The Fisherman and His Wife* preserves cultural memories of the greed, ambition, and maintained social order within society.

Furthermore, the ability of Grimm's tales to evolve in context according to modern audiences and readers is another aspect that indicates their importance and their survival in the literary world. For example, while *Rapunzel* may be understood as a tale that preserves the cultural memory of nineteenth century views of women within the home, the same tale may also relate to the feelings of isolation of women within the modern world today. Also, *Sleeping Beauty's* sleep can relate to the historical view of passivity for women in those periods, but also to the acceptance of specific feminine ideals within the modern world today. Finally, *Rumpelstiltskin* can relate to the nineteenth century view of exploitation of labor, but also continues to relate to similar viewpoints regarding labor within the modern world today. For these reasons, each of these fairy tales are important in preserving cultural memory. Each of these tales contain certain elements of

symbolism that allow for readers to relate to the tales of Grimm as modern readers. Through the lens of Jan Assmann's Cultural Memory Theory, each of these tales can be understood as a means of preserving the cultural memories of Grimm's society and its people through the use of symbolism throughout the tales.

Moreover, the continuing reinterpretation of these tales by modern audiences underscores their enduring significance and cultural relevance. Modern audiences may approach tales such as *Rapunzel*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Twelve Dancing Princesses*, *Rumpelstiltskin*, and *The Fisherman and His Wife* differently from those original audiences. Still, such reinterpretation of Grimm's fairy tales is another indication of their importance and survival within the literary world. In conclusion, each of these tales contain elements of cultural memory preserved through symbolism within the tales. Furthermore, the flexibility of those symbols to relate to modern society and modern concerns is yet another sign of Grimm's importance and survival in the literary world. As a result, each of these tales can be clearly understood to be Grimm's means of preserving the cultural memories of his society and its people through the use of symbolism within their tales.

4. Conclusion

Overall, the inclusion of elements from the fields of literature, folklore, cultural studies, and memory studies permitted Grimms' Fairytales to be understood in relation to a variety of different concepts and analyses. By applying the principles of Cultural Memory Theory to Grimms' Fairytales, it becomes clear that these stories have endured into the present day as a result of their inherent ability to preserve the memories of their culture and its people. Furthermore, the continued use of these tales within literature, film, education, and various forms of pop culture indicates that Grimms and his collaborators were successful in creating stories that continue to function as sites of cultural memory into the present day, and likely for the foreseeable future.

In conclusion, Grimm's fairy tales can be understood as narratives that carry cultural memory and help individuals within those societies to preserve their sense of identity. Through the use of these tales to engage with cultural memories of the past, the Grimm brothers created a form of fantasy that is also closely connected to the realities of their cultural existence and identity. Thus, fantasy and cultural memory are deeply interconnected in the Grimm brothers' fairy tales, enabling them to endure as narratives that reflect human experience, cultural identity, and the collective remembrance of those experiences.

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