

Angela Mayer

Mike Hughes

ENG-L384

4 August 2015

Analyzing Mythology in Comics

One of the most fascinating aspects of fairy tales, fables, and mythology in general is the flexibility that comes with the territory of story-telling. For instance, Snow White may be portrayed as the fair maiden from the woods or a member of the government of a town that is a sanctuary for Fables in the real world. Literature gives the opportunity for reformatting what is widely known and generally accepted as commonplace into intensely unique and eye-opening alternatives for tradition. In literature, it is possible to bring back a story to its original glory, as well as entirely changing a concept or idea, though still maintaining the expectations that the readers have.

When analyzing the representation of traditional literature in modern-day translations, the possibilities are endless. From graphic novel illustrations to total rewrites that serve as modern-day retellings of the fables, countless new age evolutions spanning across all types of genre and reading levels have taken the literary world by storm. From childlike retellings such as "Ozma from Oz" to intense stories with complex plots such as "Fables", the literary world is seeing a whole new side of fairy tales. In "Fables", Bill Willingham does something even more interesting by combining various fairy tale characters into one concise character. For instance, Bigby Wolf is a culmination of multiple "big bad wolf" figures from stories such as the "Three Little Pigs" and "Red Riding Hood", while Jack in "Fables" is a culmination of multiple Jack characters, such as "Jack and the Beanstalk" and "Jack Be Nimble". This

twist on classic characters allows for the reader to develop a closer relationship by taking an in-depth look at each character and figuring out who they are meant to represent.

Over the course of the last few centuries since the Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Anderson, Aesop, and dozens of other authors of classic fairy tales published the original manuscripts, readers have seen a myriad of versions of the well-known and lesser-known stories that both diverge from the initial storyline, as well as haphazardly following it. A common phrase associated with the tampering of fairy tales from their original morals and story in modern society is what that of the great Walt Disney can be held accountable for, ordinarily referred to as “disneyfication”.

“Fairy tales and folklore have long taught children to cope with things they are afraid of. These days, the fairy tales kids are familiar with are not the Brothers Grimm or Hans Christian Anderson, but Disney. The problem is, Disney has taken the archetypes represented in the fairy tales and gone Hollywood...” (Friedmeyer).

As Friedmeyer explained, the intended use of fairy tales and folklore was to teach children to cope with their fears and anxieties, as well as a means of warning and enforcement of lessons and morals. From staying away from the deep dark woods to not “crying wolf”, fairy tales and stories were meant to educate their readers and give them something to walk away with. Disney hasn’t completely tainted the concept of fairy tales, however it’s no secret to any reader who has dabbled in the original texts to realize that the Disneyfication of the fairy tales and folklore has undoubtedly drastically changed the public perception of fairy tales. Disney is laden with happy endings and minimal violence, highly uncharacteristic of its original source materials. Because of this and the sheer popularity of Disney princesses and movies in general, many fans are not aware of the more gruesome original tale that Cinderella’s sisters chopped off their toes and heels in a vain attempt to make the shoe fit. Though Disney wasn’t the first to begin “taming” fairy tales. Wilhelm Grimm had actually rewritten many fairy

tales in a vain attempt to make them more child-friendly, which may have been the case for children in the 1800's, despite the massive amounts of violence, sex, and less than stellar role modeling for the young audience, however Disney has definitely raised the bar when it comes to child-proofing scary stories (Meslow).

"Fables" is bringing fairy tales, folklore, and fables back to its roots in a unique and often blatant manner. As mentioned above, Willingham takes an interesting twist in combining multiple fairy tales and characters and combining them into one. Willingham introduces his story and concludes in the final paragraph of that introduction:

"You're about to meet some old friends that you haven't seen in a while. You already know their first stories—their adventurous tales from long ago. Now you get to find out what they've been up to lately..." (Willingham 8).

Willingham inserts time and time again small nods to the origins of the character in question. Bigby's first panel shows him greeting Jack with the jab "You look out of breath, Jack. Been climbing beanstalks again?" to which Jack replies "Blown down any piggies' homes lately?" (Willingham 13). The rest of the story is full of little quips and visual cues to the reclaiming of the original fairy tale values. In the two page spread between pages 16 and 17 boasts a plethora of nods to "Peter Pan", "Aladdin", "Excalibur", "The Wizard of Oz", and countless other gods, goddesses, fairy tales and fables (Willingham).

Aside from the obvious nods to the origins of stories, the overall atmosphere of "Fables" is full of very adult-oriented situations and spares no details in the representation of multiple murders, beheadings, and scandalous affairs. Outside of what is known amongst the characters within the story, the reader is also privileged to pick up on the aspects that allude to modern culture's understanding of characters as well. For instance, Snow White is the Director of Operations in Fabletown, while her lesser

known, often neglected and forgotten sister, Rose Red, boasts the grudging “no one loves me” attitude throughout the story. Similar to the lying and conniving Jack from “Jack and the Beanstalk”, Willingham’s Jack is a questionable character with underlying motives and a sociopathic tendency. Willingham also alludes to the Big Bad Wolf on pages 72 and 73 where Bigby transforms into a Big Bad Wolf and yells, “I’ll rip your fucking throat out”, potentially referencing to the “I’ll blow your house down” mantra from previous fairy tales (Willingham 72-73). Willingham utilizes elements of dramatic irony as well as working off of what is already a popular opinion or knowledge of a character or story to enhance his unique retelling of fairy tales, fables, and folklore from around the world.

Popular opinion and general consensus on universally known characters and stories is one thing, but what about supernatural concepts? Neil Gaiman grabs this concept and creates a mystical and mesmerizing idea of the supernatural world. In the prologue to “Season of Mists”, the reader meets a dysfunctional family that is being called to a meeting for the first time in centuries. The reader is allowed a nod to the true identity of the spunky little sister when she proclaims after being told to dress more appropriately, “...NEXT thing you’re going to be moaning that I ought to get a scythe...” (Gaiman). It becomes apparent soon after that this is a meeting for the family of immortals, not gods, older than even those tales. They are known as the Endless. The family is the personified embodiment of Desire, Despair, Destiny, Delirium, Dream, and Death.

While most of the family members follow what would be considered a societal norm in that Desire is seen as a beautiful temptress, Despair is a solemn and patient living statue, Destiny is as old as time itself, Delirium is portrayed as confusion and sporadic convulsions, Dream is an interesting figure full of knowledge and wonder, having been able to know every idea, every dream ever dreamt. Then there is Death. Death who should, as per the general consensus and idea of the dark and depressing concept of the ending of life, be seen as a dreary, all-hope-is-lost, there’s-nothing-to-live-for character,

is portrayed as a wondrous character, ironically full of life, with bright eyes and the compassion and concern for her brother Dream's wellbeing.

Though this sweet demeanor does not make her off-limits for the overwhelming supernatural power she possesses to not occasionally show through. When Desire was taunting Dream at the family meeting, Death was the one who was able to shame her and embarrass her, arguably instilling a note of fear or respect, by stating, "Shut up, Desire. If you ever want to speak again...shut up." (Gaiman).

For centuries, death has been perceived as a "bony, dark figure with a skull", thanks in part to the artwork in the medieval times that communicated the harsh times and the tragedy of painful deaths from plagues and even simple things like the common cold (Encyclopedia of Death and Dying). Art gives the world the clearest concept of the personification of death. This personification is typically resulting in a skeleton or reaper or a man with a large hood over his face (Encyclopedia of Death and Dying). Much like Willingham's mission in "Fables" to change the way fairy tales, fables, and folklore are seen today, Gaiman was out to change the way that people saw death. By making Death a more or less bubbly, compassionate, and beautiful being, Gaiman challenges the idea that death is painful and sorrowful.

Gaiman and Willingham are in the same boat together, each challenging the societal views and norms of popular fairy tales, fables, folklore, and mythology such as death. While others may argue that Willingham is only polluting the fairy tale world more by combining them all in one setting and mashing together characters, and that Gaiman was seeking to point out the positive aspects of death, such as ending a painful misery which would show through in Death's compassion for others, the true fact is that they are each breaking barriers and challenging what readers think they know when it comes to classic characters and natural events.

Fairy tales, fables, folklore, science-fiction, and fantasy have no boundaries. There is nothing too big or too small to matter in the realm of literature. Because of this it is possible to revolutionize the relationships that readers had with stories from their youth. Because of the flexibility of literature, authors can represent such broad and unknown concepts such as death in the image that it may have not been seen before. Regardless of the motives behind the writing, at the end of the day, stories based on or including well-known concepts and ideas have potential for great tales and a wide expanse of modification. In literature, it is possible to bring back a story to its original glory, as well as entirely changing a concept or idea, though still maintaining the expectations that the readers have.

Works Cited

Encyclopedia of Death and Dying. *Personifications of Death*. 2015.

<<http://www.deathreference.com/Nu-Pu/Personifications-of-Death.html>>.

Friedmeyer, Wendy. *The Disneyfication of Folklore: Adolescence and Archetypes*. 19 May 2003.

<http://www.teachingliterature.org/teachingliterature/pdf/story/disneyfication_friedmeyer.pdf>.

Gaiman, Neil. *The Sandman Omnibus*. New York: DC Comics, 2013.

Meslow, Scott. *Fairy Tales Started Dark, Got Cute, and Are Now Getting Dark Again*. 31 May 2012. 27

April 2015. <<http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/05/fairy-tales-started-dark-got-cute-and-are-now-getting-dark-again/257934/>>.

Willingham, Bil. *Fables The Deluxe Edition Book One*. New York: DC Comics, 2009.