

Gönülsüz Bir Dönüşüm: Revizyonist Bir Hikâye Olarak “The Frog Prince”

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Özet

Robert Coover, 2014 yılında *The New Yorker*'da yayınlanan “The Frog Prince” isimli hikayesinde Grimm Kardeşlerin aynı isimli masalını özellikle toplumsal cinsiyet rolleri odağında masal geleneklerini sorgulamak ve dönüştürmek için zemin olarak kullanır. Hikâye, kötücül bir büyü ile kurbağaya dönüşen prens yerine kendi rızası dışında prense dönüştürülen naif bir kurbağa olan ana karakterin deneyimlerine odaklanır. Kurbağanın isimsiz bir kadın tarafından öpülmesi ile açılan hikâye, bireysellik, benlik, kimlik, mutluluk ve aidiyet gibi kavramları çiftin ilişkisi üzerinden irdeler. Bu çalışma, Robert Coover’ın “The Frog Prince” isimli eserini revizyonist bir hikâye olarak okur. Coover’ın hikâyesini, masalları bireyi ve bireysel deneyimleri yansıtmayan, gerçeklikten uzak, idealize edilmiş ve ideolojik anlatılar olarak sorunsallaştıran ve dönüştüren bir metin olarak inceler.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Robert Coover
“The Frog Prince”
Revizyonist Yazım
Grimm Kardeşler

Makale Hakkında

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An Unwilling Transformation: “The Frog Prince” as a Revisionist Story

Abstract

In “The Frog Prince”, published in *The New Yorker* in 2014, Robert Coover uses the Brothers Grimm’s namesake tale as a backdrop to interrogate and subvert fairy tale conventions specifically with a focus on gender roles. The story dwells on the experiences of its eponymous protagonist not as a prince who is transformed into a frog through evil magic but as a naïve frog which is transformed into a human being against his will. Opening with an anonymous woman’s kiss, Coover’s story probes concepts such as individualism, self, identity, happiness, and belonging through the relationship of the couple. This study reads Robert Coover’s “The Frog Prince” as a revisionist story. It explores Coover’s story as a text which problematizes and revises fairy tales as far-fetched, idealized, and ideological narratives that fail to represent the individual and the individual experience.

Keywords

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About Article

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"Nor should one dissect or study fairy tales
in a socio-political context,
for that might ruin their magic power."
(Zipes, 1991, p. 1)

Introduction

Considered to be one of the "most notable practitioners of literary postmodernism and metafiction" in American fiction, Robert Coover writes in a multitude of genres and styles (Evenson, 2003, p. 1). As a writer who constantly interrogates literary history and trespasses boundaries between genres, Coover takes special interest in "pre-novel forms" such as "allegories, saint's lives, myths, epistolary romances, fairy tales, legends" (Bass, 1982, p. 300). Coover's fascination especially with fairy tale tradition becomes manifest in his fiction where he occasionally revises and retells conventional fairy tales from a critical gaze. Published in 1969, his short story collection *Pricksongs and Descants*, for instance, includes "stories that revise fairy tales" (Evenson, 2003, p. 3). One of his retellings in the collection, "The Door: A Prologue of Sorts", displays "several different fairytale figures after they have gone through a myriad of disappointments" (Evenson, 2003, pp. 17-8).

In his novella titled *The Briar Rose* (1996), Coover lays bare sexual implications and violence hidden in the refined version of "The Sleeping Beauty". Likewise, in *Stepmother* (2004), Coover takes flight from stereotypical representations of the evil stepmother, and he "offers a more complex depiction of the character" (Williams, 2010, p. 255). This time, the stepmother tries "to save her stepdaughter's life" (Williams, 2010, p. 255). Similarly, in "The Goldilocks Variations", a short story published in *The American Reader* in 2013, Coover offers numerous variations for the English fairy tale, "The Goldilocks and the Three Bears". Compared to the refined version of the tale, which presents a single perspective, Coover's version brings together different perceptions through which this specific tale and also other fairy tales can be critically looked into in terms of the multiplicity of the perception. Even when Coover does not directly revise conventional fairy tales, his fiction is still characterized by a mixture of "realism with the fantastic" and intertwining of fairy tale elements and settings with contemporary, everyday characters and spaces (Evenson, 2003, p. 2). As his oeuvre reveals, Coover makes use of fairy tale tradition as a backdrop for investigating fairy tales in terms of recurring structural and thematic patterns, which he finds overgeneralizing and thinks require a revisiting and revision.

The reasons behind Coover's preoccupation with fairy tale tradition are, in fact, multifarious. Coover's high esteem for fairy tales, on the one hand, stems from his perception of these ancient stories as doors opening to the depths of human psyche. In a recent interview, Coover mentions his preference of "sci-fi, detective novels, westerns, pornography, spy stories, horror and romance" over "conventional novel" as these literary genres that are closer to "folk and fairy tales" allow one "to burrow insider the collective psyche" (Coover, 2018). As it can be deduced from his statement, Coover reads fairy tale motifs such as transformation, devouring, sleeping, happy ending, or fairy tale settings such as the wood and immense palaces as symbolic embodiments of un/conscious desires and fears shared by the mankind. On the other hand, as pointed out by Brian K. Evenson (2003), Coover "is

concerned with communities and the way in which communities come together and hold together through a series of shared stories and myths” (p. 10). Fairy tales continue to attract different societies all over the world through ages by inscribing common values or functioning as the most simple and direct sources of moral education. Fairy tales serve as substantial pillars of societies as they help empower social institutions and societal values.

Coover’s revisionist fiction simultaneously reveals and puts into question fairy tales as ideological texts that premeditate especially upper-middle-class values and patriarchy. Moreover, it draws attention to how fairy tales relegate the perspective of the different, the underprivileged and the suppressed hence the other through stereotypes that threaten the order and status quo (i.e. witches, stepmothers, giants, monsters, usurpers). In line with this, Coover argues that fairy tales are unable to keep up with the changing dynamics of the present times. In an interview with Frank Gado (1973), Coover indicates that

our ways of looking at the world and of adjusting to it through fictions are changing ... Our old faith - one might better say our old sense of constructs derived from myths, legends, philosophies, fairy stories, histories, and other fictions which help to explain what happens to us from day to day, why our governments are the way they are, why our institutions have the character they have, why the world turns as it does - has lost its efficacy. Not necessarily is it false; it is just not as efficacious as it was. (pp. 142-3)

Viewed from this angle, Coover’s simultaneous respect for and criticism of fairy tales becomes what characterizes his revisionist fiction, and that is a mixture of the traditional and the modern, the ancient and the contemporary as well as a simultaneous use and abuse of the fairy tale tradition. On the one hand, Coover interrogates the generic characteristics of fairy tales by casting alternative roles on stereotypical characters, subverting fairy tale motifs and revising cliché plots. On the other hand, he utilizes the fairy tale frame as a device by means of which he can contemplate on human nature in terms of not only the shared values but also individual differences, goals and anticipations. As Evenson (2003) sums up, “the larger project of Coover’s stories” is “to break up the tired myths, the conventional ways of putting stories together, so as to revitalize literature, making it relevant to the complexities and difficulties of modern life” (p. 4). As a result, Coover’s fairy tale retellings stimulate further discussions on fairy tale tradition through critical lenses by drawing attention to the richness and the limitations of the genre.

When the Frog Prince Becomes a Prince Frog

Published in *The New Yorker* in 2014, Coover’s “The Frog Prince” juxtaposes fairy tale conventions with contemporary settings and characterization. The story functions subversively on both technical and thematic conventions of fairy tale tradition by offering an alternative and considerably complex version of the original tale by the Brothers Grimm. By reimagining a story that is alternative to the conventional tale, Coover puts into question the oppressive boundaries of fairy tales which stem from an understanding of a static society marked by patriarchal ideals. Coover recasts the iconic spellbound frog prince as a frog, who is transformed into a human being against his will. Likewise, he replaces the beautiful princess with an anonymous middle-aged working-class woman who is already married to a

man with "a nasty habit of talking with his mouth full and a tongue good for nothing but licking stamps" (Coover, 2014).

Coover's story starts where the Grimm's version ends. In the very beginning of the story, the anonymous woman cuddles and kisses the frog, and the frog transforms into a human being. This first intimacy brings the end of the woman's unhappy marriage and marks the beginning of her partnership with the frog prince: "At first, it was great. Sure. It always is. She cuddled a frog, wishing for more, and—*presto!* A handsome prince who doted on her" (Coover, 2014). The beginning of the story becomes an attack on not only the Brothers Grimm's "The Frog-Prince" but the fairy tale tradition itself where the future of the newly-married princes and princesses remains untold by being glossed over with reportedly everlasting happiness. In this regard, the opening lays bare conventional fairy tale endings as being overly unrealistic, generic and affirmative of patriarchal hegemony. The first sentence of the story highlights that things were great only at first, and in so doing it hints at the fact that the rest of the story would focus on the couple's relationship after the frog's transformation. The main story follows the relationship between the frog prince and his new partner in terms of sexual tensions and power relations between them, eventually coming to an ending that is very unconventional for a classical fairy tale.

Gender roles, especially female sexuality and female roles have actually been an issue of fairy tale scholarship and revisionist fiction for too long. Joyce Carol Oates (1997), who is preoccupied with rewriting conventional fairy tales herself, points at the close relationship between women and fairy tales since the emergence of the genre as part of oral tradition (p. 98). As Oates (1997) points out, fairy tale content was provided by women in the first place and fairy tale calls to mind "female sensibility" (p. 97). Nevertheless, the relationship between fairy tales and women "has long been an ambiguous one, not altogether flattering to women, and frequently disturbing" (Oates, 1997, p. 98). Oates (1997) writes that in fairy tales

[g]irls and women are the uncontested property of men, to be handed over by their fathers to virtually anyone the father favors. [...] Simply to be female is to be without volition, identity. In the great majority of the tales, to be a heroine, in even a limited sense requires extreme youth and extreme physical beauty. (p. 99)

Therefore, fairy tale heroines are expected to be not only physically beautiful but also submissive and subservient firstly to the father and secondly to the handsome, courageous and mighty heroes. Contemporary revisionist fiction is marked by its objection to the subjugation of women in the patriarchal society and aims to give voice to the silenced heroines. Nevertheless, it fails at large to provide an insight into the male perspective. As a matter of fact, weaved with normative gender roles, fairy tales prove rather oppressive towards to men, as well. As Seda Pekşen (2012) argues, fairy tales impose fixed roles on male characters and expect them to be "the breadwinners, the heroes who never cry, who are never frightened and who should always take the first step" (p. 156). As a result, they offer an image of an ideal masculinity which is associated with power, authority, endurance, as well as physical perfection.

Specifically, with a reference to the Grimms' "The Frog-Prince", Jack Zipes (2007) points out that fairy tales "underline morals in keeping with the Protestant ethic and a patriarchal

notion of sex roles" (p. 78). By the end of the conventional tale, the Grimms' spoiled princess learns her lessons. First and foremost, she is taught to be honest and keep her promises by the king. Her full evolution into an ideal woman yet occurs when the "nasty" and "silly" frog, as she calls him, retransforms into a handsome and wealthy prince with whom she can now be more than friends (Brothers Grimm, 2013, p. 51). Therefore, the original tale inculcates in young women the importance of being trustworthy, gentle and subservient with the assurance that they will be awarded in the end most probably with a handsome and wealthy prince.

In the meantime, the Grimms' "The Frog-Prince" also celebrates and dictates ideal masculinity to its male readers. The emphasis is on the frog prince's regaining his former physical, social, aristocratic, and economic status as much as it is on the moral education of the young immature princess. The conventional tale shows that ideal masculinity includes being authoritative and instructive like the king, or handsome and wealthy as well as possessive like the transformed prince. The frog prince's reacquisition of his economic, physical and social status renders him desirable and acceptable by the princess. After the transformation of the frog prince, the princess is no longer in the savior position. She voluntarily forsakes her initial stubbornness and assertive voice as she is handed over to the now-handsome-prince by his father. Physical metamorphoses are accompanied by symbolic transformations in the conventional tale. The frog prince's physical transformation marks a transition to ideal masculinity, whereas the princess' transformation marks a transition from a mischievous child to a submissive and domestic lady. As a result, the Grimms' tale draws on the idealized femininity and masculinity at the same time as requisites for an ordered and ideal social and familial structure.

In his revisionist retelling of the Grimms' "The Frog-Prince", Coover does not reinforce or criticize male hegemony. Neither does he simply privilege female experience and female voice that is silenced in classical fairy tales. As Brenda Wineapple (1979) contends, "[s]torytelling" for Coover "does not lead to a confrontation with any fixed or singular point of view, and it provides no message" (p. 67). Dwelling on the multiplicity of perception, storytelling in Coover's fiction "opens the door [...] onto a horizon of possibilities" (p. 67). The narrator indeed empathizes with both the frog prince and the woman, and he gives them a new voice. Coover's story provides the reader with a projection of how the prince and his new wife experience this relationship in different ways by putting a greater emphasis on their individual responses, psychologies, desires, fears, and expectations.

Unlike the Grimms' chivalric frog prince, Coover's frog prince does not seek the help of the woman to become a human. Contrarily, the anonymous woman disturbs the frog prince's serene life in the pond and takes advantage of him to be freed from her miserable life that has been spent with her not-so-ideal human husband. In both cases, Coover transgresses normative gender roles. The heroine of Coover's story is no longer a mischievous girl who needs to be disciplined and the frog prince is no longer in the position of an aristocratic, protective and authoritative man. In line with this, Coover also subverts assumptions regarding ideal beauty and appearance. The Grimms' frog prince transforms from a nasty frog into "a handsome prince [...] with the most beautiful eyes" (Brothers Grimm, 2013, pp. 53-4). By contrast, Coover's frog prince does not fully complete his transformation, but he

remains partly frog as one can "still see the effects [of] his previous residence" on him (Coover, 2014). In the story, the amphibian prince is depicted as follows:

He had heavy-lidded eyes and a wide mouth like a hand puppet's, his complexion was a bit off, and his loose-fitting skin was thin and clammy. His semen had a muddy taste, like the pond he came from, and his little apparatus was disappointing, but his tongue was amazing. [...] His crown was not worn like a hat—it grew out of his head like horns and sometimes got in the way. (Coover, 2014)

The frog prince's froggy appearance and manners become a symbol of his unwilling transformation as well as his forceful abandonment of his real identity. The Grimms' frog prince, first of all, recovers his aristocratic title and wealth, and then he easily gains the hand of the princess. However, Coover's frog prince turns out to be an inert man who barely speaks or acts. He does not display any sign of ambition or desire for any social status, and instead he puts all of his energy and effort in making his female partner happy and satisfied even when it becomes a weary toil for him. Therefore, the frog prince's transformation may bring salvation for the woman from her "suburban life", but it comes to mean a psychological and physical entrapment for the frog prince (Coover, 2014). Coover's frog prince thus becomes an antidote to fairy tale heroism and masculinity. His melancholy, learned helplessness and silence serve to highlight fairy tales as texts that dismiss such essential notions as identity and individualism.

The woman's expectations also disrupt the idealized romantic fairy tale relationships and they simultaneously destroy the magical and fairy atmosphere set by the original tale. Coover's story presents the details of the couple's sexual experience, transgressing the generic boundaries of refined fairy tales. The frog prince and the woman have no proper conversation or any interaction except the times when they come together to satisfy the woman's sexual needs. Even though the frog prince does not look attractive to the woman, his froggy qualities provide the woman with ultimate sexual satisfaction. The intensity of her sexual satisfaction is compared to the luxuries granted to the queens and princesses in fairy tales. As such, Coover's tale contains fairy tale effect in its explicit depictions of sexuality not in the rescue, friendship, romanticism, or happy union of the couple:

She was transported to another realm, a kind of fairy kingdom where she could have anything she desired: wealth, beauty, a spectacular wardrobe, a winning bridge hand, cream filled chocolates with zero calories, and a love whenever she wanted it, which was most of the time, even when she was doing other things, like presiding over a royal banquet or reviewing the palace guard. Just wham, bam, grand slam! *Glorious!* It all tended to vanish when the high wore off, but another lick and she was back again. (Coover, 2014)

While sexuality often remains as a latent reference in classical fairy tales, the surrealistic and grotesque depictions of sexuality in Coover's story disrupt the sterilized and refined nature of Grimms' version of the tale. Combined with representations of sexuality, the lack of palaces, luxurious balls and wedding ceremonies also reinforces such disruption, destroying the magical atmosphere, thereby making the story closer to real life.

Sexuality which prioritizes the woman's expectations subverts conventional power relations between genders in the story. The latent representations of sexuality in classical fairy tales become a symbolic rendition of patriarchal suppression directed at female characters. However, in Coover's story, sexual relationship of the couple disregards the frog prince's expectations. Viewed from this angle, the frog prince forsakes his psychological and bodily integrity at the same time. Not only does he renounce his identity as a frog and become a human prince out of his will, but he also turns into a sex object.

The unwilling transformation of Coover's frog prince also evokes the idea of home and the sense of belonging as dominant themes of the story. Classical fairy tales ignore such emotive concepts through indefinite temporal and spatial depictions and by freely transferring their characters between different places. In the Grimms' "The Frog-Prince", the princess is transmitted from her fathers' kingdom to the prince's kingdom, and the rest is silence. Similarly, the transformed frog prince shows no emotional reaction and his primary aim is to restore his social and economic status. Contrarily, Coover's story gives a glimpse of how both the frog prince and the woman approach the idea of home during their partnership. The woman enjoys the advantages of his new life chitchatting with her fancy friends at the bridge club. Even her female friends are jealous of her seemingly perfect and fairy-tale-like relationship with the frog prince. The frog prince, however, yearns for his old days in the pond. Therefore, not only does he move back and forth between the muddy pond and his new house but he also occasionally takes his new wife to the pond, which is "his real kingdom" (Coover, 2014):

whenever she asked the prince to transport her to his real kingdom he always took her back to the pond where she'd found him. He was very happy there. He'd crawl into the mud, digging in until only his protruding eyes peered out, his crown seeming to float on the surface. (Coover, 2014)

The meaning of the word "kingdom" is subjective and changes according to the personal expectations and experiences of the characters. For the woman, sexual satisfaction is associated with fairy kingdom whereas the frog prince's real kingdom is his muddy pond, namely his home. Viewed from this perspective, Coover's story highlights the relativity of perception and the individuals' varied relationships with spaces through not only the fluctuating associations of the word kingdom but also the dichotomic relationship between the words, the fairy and the real. Therefore, Coover's focus on different perceptions and the psychologies of the characters draws attention to the limited nature of classical fairy tales in representing the individual experience.

The frog prince's unending desire to return home and become a frog in its fullest sense then becomes a critique of classical fairy tales' failure to embrace such concepts as identity, self and belonging. Coover's story voices the frog prince and the woman's thoughts and needs, thereby revealing how classical fairy tales lack social, psychological and economic authenticity but serve a set of values. Finally, Coover's story fulfills its transformative power when the frog prince leaves the woman and returns to the pond never to come back. Coover's frog prince refuses physical and psychological entrapment and in doing so, he refutes gender roles, stereotypes and socio-economic statuses promoted in fairy tales. In the absence of his frog prince, the woman desperately searches for him by "kissing and licking

any frogs she manage[s] to catch" (Coover, 2014). Yet, she finally acknowledges the fact that the frog prince has never been hers. Most importantly, she comes to understand that the frog prince has never been a prince at all. Therefore, the woman returns to her mundane life with her ex-husband:

[...] but eventually she resigned herself to the futility of her quest and sorrowfully abandoned it. She recalled then the prince's own sorrow and disappointment. [...] but she understood now, as she should have understood then, that he had been not an enchanted prince turned into a frog but a frog turned into a prince, and all he'd wanted was to be a frog again. (Coover, 2014)

Just like its beginning, the ending of Coover's story also startles the reader with the woman's desperate homecoming. As Kathryn Hume (2003) puts it, Coover's fiction engages exceedingly with "bleak portrayal of human nature" (p. 128). One may be shocked by his characters' "contemptible weakness" and "acute and helpless vulnerability" (Hume, 2003, p. 128). Nevertheless, the sense of bleakness and helplessness is what makes Coover's "The Frog Prince" a powerful expostulation of and attack at classical fairy tales. Coover's "The Frog Prince" points at human condition from a more realistic perspective while simultaneously underlining the stereotypical characterization, overt idealization and synthetic impeccability in fairy tales. In connection with this kind of confrontation, the story ends with final remarks on the woman and her nasty husband's relationship: "they found a certain contentment, living more or less happily ever after, which is what now is while one's in it" (Coover, 2014). No matter how much pessimistic it is, the ending mocks everlasting happiness and trouble-free life offered in classical fairy tales. Most importantly, the ending makes the story much more relatable to life. In this regard, as Evenson (2003) writes, Coover "pokes holes in the original fairy tales by pushing them past their end" (p. 18). He reimagines beginnings and endings that are alternative to the polished and overly far-fetched representations.

Conclusion

Coover's "The Frog Prince" subverts mainstays of fairy tale tradition such as happy endings, conventional and idealized representations of romance, archetypal settings as well as refined use of language. As an amalgamation of fairy tale conventions and contemporary elements, the story cuts the strings between fairy tales and the concept of fairy. Coover's focus is on the human condition and the individuals' relationship with social and cultural patterns that have come to become normative. Coover's story brings to the fore happiness, free-will, sexuality, individuality, as well as the sense of belonging as ideas and emotions that are surpassed in classical fairy tales to preserve existing power relations specifically between genders. The story thus draws attention to fairy tales as texts interwoven with cultural codes, which can/should be reconsidered and reworked. As a result, Coover's experimental and radical rewriting of fairy tale conventions may indeed ruin the magic power of the original tale as once argued by Jack Zipes, but it surely serves to highlight the limited and suppressive nature of the genre, driving the reader into reconsideration of a literary heritage which shapes societies and their assumptions.

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