

The Demythological Motifs in Emma Donoghue's "The Tale of the Cottage" and Jeanette Winterson's *Hansel and Greta* as the Rewritten Versions of The Grimm Brothers' "Hansel and Gretel"

Çelik EKMEKÇİ^a

Abstract

Classical fairy tales are considered amongst canon literary works written as androtexts whose aims are to give moral messages and traditional dicta. It is within the function of fairy tales to represent patriarchal ideological concerns to shape and form the morality of society. However, the rewritten versions of fairy tales occur as a reaction and rejection of classical norms and taboos against men's authority. The purpose of the rewritten versions of old texts is to demythologize and subvert the intended messages and meanings in which there is either victimization or subjugation. For this reason, the process of demythologization business is mostly carried out by women as a form of gynotexts. Through demythologization, the mythical and even biblical motifs are subverted and new meanings are put into old tales and texts. The purpose of this study is to reflect the new readings and new versions of the monstrous witch image in Emma Donoghue's "The Tale of The Cottage" and Jeanette Winterson's *Hansel and Greta* as rewritten and demythologized forms of the classical fairy tale of The Grimm Brothers' "Hansel and Gretel." This paper scrutinizes how old iconoclasm depicting a woman as devouring and monstrous is re/deconstructed within new presences and qualities as a good-hearted helper and a nurturing mother figure. In this context, it is also within the purpose of this study to scrutinize how the new readings of an old text, which are reformed and reshaped through demythologization, have the tendency of creating new and subversive spaces by subverting old ideals.

Keywords

Classical Fairy Tales
Demythologization
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^a Asst. Prof. Dr., Pamukkale University, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of English Language and Literature, Denizli, e-mail: cekmecci@pau.edu.tr, Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7123-2621>

Introduction

“What makes the old folk tales and the new fairy tales vital is their capacity to harbor unfulfilled wishes in figurative form and project the possibility for their fulfillment.” (Zipes, 2002, p. 157)

Mythology has always been considered a source of inspiration for literature. Biblical contents based on mythological motifs have always been seen as primary sources in shaping the literary works. Amongst the seminal motifs reflected in fairy tales and folk tales, the creation myth can be considered the foundational source in which ‘the original sin’ often symbolized by the apple and the fall of humanity are represented as mythic-religious references. In this context, the ultimate presence of the Old Testament in literary narratives cannot be denied as the everlasting figures in biblical motifs carry the lifelong and timeless reflections which are depicted and reimagined in the rewritten stories. In addition to the mythic-religious motifs, it is also noteworthy to acknowledge the influence of Greco-Roman tradition in literary narratives in which the Western especially Greek myths are used as seminal sources based on the creation of gods and goddesses within their authentic stories carrying the motifs of love, horror, vengeance, fear, and other earthly or divine values and conducts. What is significant is that human nature is tested in mythical and biblical stories as well as the humans. In other words, it is not only humanity but also human nature is put through paces. It is a critical scope in which human feelings are shown as disorders. Among these feelings, the sense of curiosity holds a special place which has caused the fall of humanity since the creation. Curiosity is seen as a rebellious attitude which is forbidden and denied to humanity. However, it is also this very sense of curiosity which is believed to make humans heroes or their actions heroic. Therefore, curiosity has a critical function for humanity in changing, reshaping and re/deconstructing the old values. In this sense, it is within the purpose of this study to mirror how mythical and even biblical motifs are thematically used to shape the rewritten stories in depicting demythologization.

‘Demythologizing business,’ on the other hand, is considered a process of re/deconstruction of old myths and the ideals embedded in them. As Angela Carter contends in her “Notes From Front Line”, she is “in the demythologizing business” and “interested in myths [...] just because they are extraordinary lies designed to make people unfree” (1998, p. 39). The conventional meanings and messages are erased in rewritings of old tales & myths, since these stories carry traditional motifs in which the sense of morality is favored for humans so that they take the intended lesson. However, demythologized rewritings set humans free from the negative effects of old tales & myths since they reject authoritarian values.

Emma Donoghue’s “The Tale of the Cottage” and Jeanette Winterson’s “Hansel and Greta” as rewritten tales of The Grimm Brothers’ “Hansel and Gretel” are considered demythologized versions in which androcentric male authority is challenged by two unique and groundbreaking female discourses¹. These gynocentric writings show how male-oriented literature is partial and monologic². However, female writers’ demythologized versions of old

¹ This thematic concern can be considered to be a direct reference to Hélène Cixous’ seminal essay titled: “The Laugh of The Medusa” (1975) in which she encourages women to produce ‘female writings’ as follows: “I write woman: woman must write woman” (1976, p. 877).

² A Bakhtinesque term, meaning ‘one-voiced expression.’ For further details, see Abrams & Harpham’s *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 2009, p.77.

tales are considered dialogic³ since conventional codes and accepted norms are deconstructed and subverted. Therefore, Donoghue's "The Tale of the Cottage" and Winterson's "Hansel and Greta" as rewritten and demythologized fairy tales of The Grimm Brothers' "Hansel and Gretel," offer alternative endings in which new possibilities and new endings are mirrored.

'Demythologization' in The Rewritten Versions of "Hansel and Gretel"

In demythologization there is subversion. It is the subversion of old ideals through which androcentric writings impose the intended messages and meanings. This subversion sets the tale free from any conventional ideologies that reinforce victimization narratives. Angela Carter's rewritten work named "The Werewolf" can be given as one of the examples to that subversion in which Charles Perrault's traditional folktale of "The Little Red Riding Hood" is demythologized. Therefore, gynocentric writing⁴, the literature produced by women⁵, plays a crucial role, especially in reshaping and demythologizing the old myths and tales. As Carter puts it, "[r]eading is just as creative an activity as writing and most intellectual development depends upon new readings of old texts. I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode" (1998, p. 38). This process, called demythologization, can be defined as 'the rereading of old texts' so that "the mythic quality" (Carter, 1998, p. 39), and the conventional meanings are subverted and deconstructed within an authentic touch.

As a European folktale, "Hansel and Gretel" by the Grimm Brothers, has the same folkloric topos as Russian Baba Yaga tales and Japanese Yamauba myths in which old and evil woman figure is illustrated. The setting of the devouring witch topos is mostly located in a deep and dark forest. The traditional characteristics of the witch are depicted in the original tale as follows:

The old woman, although her behaviour was so kind, was a wicked witch, who lay in wait for children, and had built the little house on purpose to entice them. When they were once inside she used to kill them, cook them, and eat them, and then it was a feast day with her. The witch's eyes were red, and she could not see very far, but she had a keen scent, like the beasts, and knew very well when human creatures were near. When she knew that Hansel and Grethel were coming, she gave a spiteful laugh, and said triumphantly, "I have them, and they shall not escape me!" [...]. (The Grimm Brothers, "Hansel and Grethel," 1979, p. 109)

The evil characteristics of the witch are mirrored in such a way that each trait is common and apparent when compared with other versions, as it includes the anthropophagous⁶ quality of the witch and her wicked intentions against the children. In other words, the witch in the original tale is depicted malignantly enough to make clear that she is an evil witch. In

³ A Bakhtinesque term, meaning 'multi-voiced expression.' It is about Bakhtin's 'Dialogic Criticism' analyzed in his *The Dialogic Imagination* (1975). For further information, see Abrams & Harpham's *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 2009, pp.77-78.

⁴ In her influential work: "Towards a Feminist Poetics" (1978) Elaine Showalter states that the purpose of gynocentric writing is to "construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature [...]" (qtd. in Newton, 1997, p. 217).

⁵ As Jack Zipes contends, since fairy tales became influential in literature, "women played an active role in disseminating, challenging, and appropriating the tales. They were never passive even if they accepted the sexist stereotypes in the canonical tales. [...] Women writers became more aware of the patriarchal implications and prejudices of the canon and thus began a more conscious revision of the classical tales [...]" (2009, p. 126).

⁶ The same thematic concern related to 'the evil woman figure' is scrutinized by Reyhan Özer Taniyan in her article titled "White is For Witching: A Postcolonial Gothic" (2023) in that she discusses Helen Oyeyemi's style on "the ethnic story of soucouyant with Western vampire narratives" (p. 327) in the creation of an evil woman in Oyeyemi's *White is For Witching*.

the tale, the cunning and evil plan of the witch for the children is seen; however, she becomes the one who is consumed and victimized ironically, which aligns with folkloric and mythic elements. In accordance with the mythic quality, the sense of divine justice in the tale is expressed through the dead-end of the witch, as follows:

[...] the old woman pushed poor Gretel towards the oven, out of which the flames were already shining. "Creep in," said the witch, "and see if it is properly hot, so that the bread may be baked." And Gretel once in, she meant to shut the door upon her and let her be baked, and then she would have eaten her. But Gretel perceived her intention, and said, "I don't know how to do it: how shall I get in?" "Stupid goose," said the old woman, "the opening is big enough, do you see? I could get in myself!" and she stooped down and put her head in the oven's mouth. Then Gretel gave her a push, so that she went in farther, and she shut the iron door upon her, and put up the bar. Oh how frightfully she howled! but Gretel ran away, and left the wicked witch to burn miserably. [...] (p. 110)

This time it is the evil witch who is trapped cunningly. However, in the demythologized rewritings, the evil witch image is subverted and re/deconstructed by replacing the monstrous old woman with the great mother figure. Additionally, the good and evil dichotomy is reflected through the nurturing mother figure as opposed to the monstrous and anthropophagous witch.

In Emma Donoghue's "The Tale of The Cottage," the great mother⁷ figure appears surprisingly in a peaceful atmosphere, especially for the little girl. The theme of mother-daughter relationship is addressed in the rewritten story. In Donoghue's story, when the siblings are lost, they come across the cottage in the deep forest. The little girl describes her true feelings when she sees the young woman for the very first time as follows: "When door open I think mother then no. Young. Woman say, What brought you here? No words from brother no words from me. Woman say, Stop here with me tonight and no harm will touch you"[sic] (p. 138). Even in the opening scene, it is seen that the house is not a threat to the siblings, but rather a safe shelter for them. The woman in the house welcomes the siblings wholeheartedly and peacefully much like a real mother. Hence, the evil and old witch of the original version of "Hansel and Gretel," is demythologized here in Donoghue's rewritten version with the figure of a young woman who is in the form of a nurturing mother. The little girl, who is called "the little nut" (p. 135) by her brother, describes the woman's nurturing and benevolent qualities as follows: "[s]he wake me blowing on nose. I tell her walls gingerbread. She say, And the door is toffee and the chimney is licorice and the beds are chocolate. I not know words. Laugh anyway. She make pancakes two each me her and brother. Her eyes red like crying. Face smooth like girl"[sic] (p. 138). The little nut, who is called "bonny red cheeks" by the young woman, resembles the young woman to a mother with angelic beauty whom she longs for (p. 139). Contrary to the traditional depiction in "Hansel and Gretel" tale, the young woman does not have anthropophagous qualities for the siblings, especially for the little nut. In other words, she does not have wicked intentions of eating them, but rather she offers them a home. What she wants purely is to make the siblings feel at home comfortably and peacefully. However, the young woman here in this rewritten tale acts like she is a great

⁷ Marie Louise von Franz puts it that "the Great Mother who encompasses both the light and dark sides can be seen in many mytho-religious figures such as the Egyptian mother Goddess, Isis, and the Hindu's Kali" (1974, p. 195).

mother only for the little nut by caring, protecting, and nurturing her. She does not have the same maternal feelings for the brother (Hansel) since she puts him into a cage like a rabbit.

According to Mayako Murai, “[t]he younger woman can be seen as an alter ego of the older woman, the part of herself that is beautiful and benevolent and capable of loving the other [...]” (2013, p. 248). The young woman depicted as the antithesis of the monstrous old witch, subverts the old iconoclasm of fairy tales by demythologizing the wicked presence of evil-doer. What the young woman does is considered to be one of the characteristics of a caring mother figure, especially for ‘the little nut.’ As ‘the little nut’ contends, “night I cold so woman let me in with her. Make like she not hear brother shouting. I say, He cold. She say, Not for long. I sleep warm between arms. Wake up understanding she go to skin him like rabbit”[sic] (Donoghue 140). The young woman, who owns the cottage deep in the wood and who is also believed to be a witch, is, in fact, a provider of shelter only for the little nut. That is why the little nut feels herself belonged to ‘the home.’ ‘The idea of home’ makes her feel nice and warm. The idealization of home and having home image is the antithesis of homelessness or the uncanny. As Freud puts it, the uncanny, “corresponds to unhomely” (2003, p. 124). The little nut’s idealization of home is also about her idealization of mother figure. Then the little nut saves her brother; however, she still wants to stay with the young woman rather than going with him to find their own house. Thus, she stays and refuses to leave the house of the young woman in the deep forest.

[...] Come on, he whisper. You’re safe with me little nut.
Not safe anywhere.
He shake my head to wake it. Don’t you understand? Now the snow is gone
I can find our way home to mother.
No, I crying quiet. Home not home if mother not mother.
But you can’t stay here, she’s mad, she’s got a knife.
Take my chances, I say.
He look for long while then nod. I give him fresh bake loaf shape like me.
Tell him no come back with huntman gun. No come back ever.
I watch him run through trees. Snow begin falling cover tracks. I lean head
in door wait for woman to wake...[sic] (Donoghue, 1997, p. 141)

The young woman in Donoghue’s version is loving and caring, especially for the little nut. She is not considered to be a cannibalistic witch, but rather a nurturing mother figure whose tenderness and sense of love solves the issues of traumatic relationships and the sense of belonging problems of the little nut. As a result, the young woman in Donoghue’s rewritten tale subverts and demythologizes the wicked characteristics of the old woman figure in the classical tales.

In the 2020 version of Winterson’s version of *Hansel and Greta*, on the other hand, very striking and groundbreaking contents have been used to subvert and demythologize the traditional fairy tale of “Hansel and Gretel.” The motifs and references used in the tale, on which Winterson writes the front page of her rewritten book as “a fairy tale revolution,” are not only based upon mythic-religious sources but also on intertextual and true-to-life events. These mythic-religious sources and intertextual references subvert and question the old depictions and descriptions by targeting the characters and the plot. Like “Hansel and Gretel,” the same exposition part has been used in Winterson’s version. However, this time, with the help of modern and colloquial references, it occurs in a more subversive yet unexpectedly

abnormal way, which captures the attention of the readers. Winterson's tale also has the same thematic character of 'a good mother figure' who has perished just as in "Hansel and Gretel;" however, this time, the monstrous ogress appears as the sister of a ruined mother figure. In Winterson's *Hansel and Greta*, Greta is a narrator who is aware of everything since she is a conscious storyteller. The story begins as follows:

Deep in the wood.
Deep in the wood.
Deep in the wood.
Are we there yet?
Not yet. (Winterson, 2020, p. 1)

In an exposition part of the story, Greta starts by describing the major characters, from her brother Hansel to 'GreedyGuts' as their mother's big sister. The same thematic concern is also provided by the narrator Greta as in a typical "Hansel and Gretel" tale. Greta describes GreedyNuts as "an ogre" (p. 3). This thematic motif is about the Yamauba⁸ topos; in other words, this type of description, concerning woman as 'a mountain ogress' or 'a mountain witch,' is about the portrayal of an old devouring witch in traditional Japanese creation myth. When the story evolves, Greta, as the narrator of the rewritten version, tells the dramatic change in the sense of happiness among the family members upon the arrival of GreedyGuts. She contends that, "Dad wasn't sad anymore. Everything was going well. Then GreedyGuts came home" (p. 9). As an evil stepmother habit, GreedyGuts sends the children away to the forest, and the known parts of a known tale start in an unexpected and demythologized way. In the deep forest, they come across the abandoned cottage and a well-known mythic-religious motif appears as a companion to siblings.

[...] 'What is this place?' I said as we looked around. This desolate place?
There was nothing alive. Not a bird, not a fox, not a squirrel, not a blade of grass. A few burned-out trees shivered sadly in the wind. [...]
'No, wait,' said Hansel. 'The tree is talking to me.'
Hansel went over to the tree and put his hand on its bark. Suddenly the tree jumped forward like a pogo stick.
'Greetings and salutations!' said the Little Tree.
'Trees don't talk!' I said.
'Yes, they do,' said Hansel [...].
The Little Tree said, 'It is a matter of listening.'
'Is this your house?' said Hansel.
'My friend the Witch in the Wood used to live here,' said the Little Tree [...]. (p. 14-15)

The mythic religious motif, the apple tree,⁹ is used here in Winterson's rewritten story of "Hansel and Gretel" as a biblical reference. In this sense, it is also related to the dismissal of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. However, the apple tree in Winterson's tale is introduced as a friend of the witch who owns the abandoned cottage. It joins the group

⁸ As Marc Sebastian-Jones contends, "[i]n traditional Japanese folktales the monster-woman has a counterpart in the figure of the *yamauba* (or *yamamba*), a mountain witch who, ostracized from society, lives a bleak, marginalized life in the mountains" (2013, p. 175).

⁹ The apple tree is traditionally considered to represent wisdom and knowledge, as seen in the creation myth in the Old Testament.

members, Hansel and Greta, and talks about the good-hearted witch who is the owner of the deserted cottage in the deep forest. The apple tree says that the deserted house, “used to be a beautiful place where we lived. The witch was so kind” (p. 16). Later, Hansel, Greta and the others are abandoned all alone in the city center by BogFace “who looks like a snake¹⁰” (p.19) when they want to get their Dad’s house back. They are aware that they are lost, and they hear a voice which says: “‘we are all lost, looking for the way home.’ Sitting on a bench underneath an enormous umbrella was a very strange lady. She had a pointy nose, lots of black hair, only two teeth and her eyes were red” (p. 22). It is revealed that Hansel, Greta and the others accidentally meet “the witch in the wood” (p. 22).

‘You had better come home with me tonight,’ she said. ‘But a word of warning: don’t eat my house.’ Hansel pulled a face at me, meaning, she’s a weirdo, but what can you do, when you’re lost and alone at night? [...] And the Little Tree waved its branches, [...] the weirdo-woman saw the Little Tree, and the Little Tree saw her, and in a minute, and in a second, they were dancing in each other’s arms and then we knew that this had to be the Witch in the Wood. (p. 22)

The witch who is traditionally considered evil is again depicted as a good woman and a benevolent helper for the children here, similar to the one depicted in Donoghue’s. It is evident that classical mythical and religious motifs are subverted intentionally. As opposed to the traditional tale of “Hansel and Gretel,” the house of the witch is not a trap for the children. It is rather a safe place which protects them; however, the materials used in the house are evil. The witch,

reached inside a little fridge and gave us both a banana. I was a bit disappointed. She said, ‘What you see here - this isn’t normal sugar and normal chocolate and normal cake. It’s a special recipe - and when you eat it, all you want is to eat more and more and more!’ Hansel and I looked at each other. Should we trust her? Or was she crazy? She seemed to read our thoughts. ‘What am I? I’m just a straightforward, old-fashioned witch. I used to live in the wood where you found my dear friend the Little Tree. [...]’ (p. 24)

The witch explains ‘the evil plan’ behind her house, and she, too, is trapped by those who have trapped Hansel, Greta and her father. Therefore, the witch says she is neither evil nor wicked, “but the house is wicked. It’s made of Evil Gingerbread” (p. 24). This evil plan is hosted by GuzzleGuts who “is best friends with GreedyGuts” (p. 25). The ‘good-hearted helper’ witch devises a plan with the children, first to pick the father up then to save their own house that has been taken by GreedyGuts. They achieve their goal successfully.

As a groundbreaking ending, Winterson’s finale is again very unexpected and surprisingly peaceful, as in Donoghue’s version. The witch says, “‘All good. One last thing..?’” (p. 29) Then, she introduces herself to Hansel and Greta: “My name is Ruby and you have freed me from a spell” (p. 29). The Little Tree is also promised to be planted in their garden by Hansel. Greta says she will water it as soon as The Little Tree is planted again. Then Greta expresses the surprising ending of the story as follows:

¹⁰ There is a direct biblical reference to “Snake” whose reputation comes as ‘deceitful and plotting’ in the Genesis story.

Dad couldn't stop looking at Ruby. She was shining like a star, but that was the light inside her. Dad said, 'Ruby, you saved my children. That place called Gretna Green is a place where anybody can get married straight away. We could get on the Hoover and go there right now!' "You're not so bad, Mr Dad, but we have to get to know each other first,' said Ruby. 'And see how the children feel about it all. So for now, shall we settle for a mug of hot chocolate?' (p. 30)

It is seen that the demythologized happy ending in Winterson's rewritten version is yet to come between the 'Dad' of the siblings and Ruby the benevolent witch as the last statement: "they all – yes, they all -lived HAP HAPP HAPPILY. Ever. After" (p. 30). Contrary to the traditional fairy tale endings, Winterson surprises the audience by not ending the tale with a moral message but illustrating it as an ongoing process for alternative endings.

Conclusion

The sense of authority and the power structured relationship between the sexes exist in the old tales; whereas, authenticity and the sense of objectivity are formed mostly in the rewritten versions. What is significant is the reflection and representation of demythologization. This is mostly preserved by women writers who reject partial representations of women. In other words, women writers take up their pen which is seen as a symbol of men's power and, use it against the one-sided expression of men's depiction of women. In this respect, the rewritten tales are mostly seen as provocative writings challenging classical and traditional tales and stories. In the rewritten versions of "Hansel and Gretel:" "The Tale of The Cottage" and *Hansel and Greta*, the siblings are more conscious, they know how to act and react. Most importantly, they know who and what evil is. Moreover, in the traditional fairy-tale of "Hansel and Gretel," the mountain woman figure as an evil force is demythologized in "The Tale of The Cottage" and *Hansel and Greta* with a nurturing mother, and a concomitant and supportive guide figure. The devouring witch image which is consciously used to describe women is subverted and demythologized. Through these rewritings and rereadings, the monologic concepts of mythical and even biblical values are subverted. The issue is not whether they are untouchable or not; rather, it is the subversion of conscious representations of mythical and biblical values, which have been tools of hegemonic relations in old ideals. Thusly, the new representations of "Hansel and Gretel" which demythologize and subvert the classical norms, mirror how they create new meanings and new concerns from old representations by challenging the authority and power of established facts. Consequently, it is reflected how traditionally and conventionally depicted mythical and religious motifs are demythologized and subverted by creating groundbreaking structures, subversive forms and challenging motifs in the rewritten gyno-myths of Donoghue's "The Tale of the Cottage" and Jeanette Winterson's "Hansel and Greta" by demolishing and re/deconstructing an andro-myth of The Grimm Brothers' "Hansel and Gretel."

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