

The Evolution of Fairy Tales

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As children, amongst the first stories we are told are fairy tales. This is a tradition that spans at least 400 years, but owing to their oral origins, we can't know for sure how long we have been passing on these particular stories. What we do know is that while some of these stories have been lost, others have been preserved and will continue to be preserved. What lies in their preservation, however, is another story altogether. Beginning with oral tradition, then the proliferation of books, and now in the form of movies, with each iteration, so much has changed. The questions lie in what has changed and why it has changed.

In the Beginning

It's easy to imagine families sitting around fires and retelling the stories they were told as children. While we may still do this to some extent, we are far less reliant on oral tradition; we have come to understand its pitfalls and its drawbacks. After all, why retell a story which can be watched in movies and read in books. Books and films offer some consistency, while stories retold verbally may lose certain elements and gain others. The very nature of oral tradition is that each time the story is told, it changes. Perhaps that was the beauty of them, however.

The nature of oral tradition is also rooted in who these stories were told by. In Pagan and pre-Christian matriarchal societies, it was the women who told the stories. The stories were far from heart-warming, to say the least. They were riddled with murder, rape and torture, but the intent was the same – to entertain and to teach. There were certain things that children needed to know about the world, and who else would explain those things but those closest to them – their mothers and grandmothers. Their success was rooted in their ability to connect and inspire, and by doing so the stories would continue to be told and passed on from one generation to the next.

As time passed, society changed, though. Cultural norms and expectations shifted as people began to explore the world and with the rise of Christianity. From stories that were violent and complex grew stories that were often watered down and sanitised. Children could still learn life lessons without hearing gory details. Christian morals imbued the underlying messages, and there was a greater emphasis on the fight between good and evil. This fight for what is right remains true of fairy tales today. What's more relevant still is how these stories were adapted to meet the needs of their evolving audience.

A Tale of Technological Advances

Throughout the Western world, education became the norm. No longer were only the upper crust offered the privilege of education, so too were ordinary members of society. The spread of education spurred greater literacy and, ultimately, the industrial age. With the advent of the printing press, the distribution of fairy tales grew. From here, the changes made to the original stories were better documented. Writers would gather these tales to retell them en masse to those who could afford books. Stories morphed to suit the times and offer greater relevance and more valuable lessons with each new edition.

It was the 17th century when Charles Perrault's book, *Mother Goose*, gained popularity; his adaptations were free of violence and certain complexities. Apparently, it took society some time to realise that children didn't need to be scared stiff in order to learn valuable lessons. Perrault's versions of widely told fairy tales became the inspiration for Disney movies at a later stage. While losing many of their culturally specific references and sensibilities, they were popular and more relatable to a larger audience. This evolution doesn't follow a linear trajectory, though. Other writers followed, and their versions of the same tales differed.

When Fairy Tales Became Grimm

More widely known than Charles Perrault are the brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. On a quest to find and preserve the original versions of these tales, they searched for versions passed through German folklore, shared by their friends, and the

versions known by literary critics. These versions, while still subject to the tricky nature of oral tradition, were more in touch with their original intent. Unfortunately, with the inclusion of murder and torture, religious institutions and more sensible souls were less likely to read these stories to their children, especially when there were other options available on the shelves.

These controversial stories were changed in their subsequent iterations, the second edition of the Grimm brother's book of fairy tales changed antagonistic mothers to evil stepmothers and simply removed the sex and violence altogether. The stories, which initially related to the lives of Pagan people, shifted because they were no longer relevant in Christian industrial societies. The lessons became less complex once again and returned to a simple focus on the fight between good and evil.

Then Came Walt

It's impossible to underestimate the way war changes societies. With World War One, aspirations and growing economies were stifled, and books were too expensive for ordinary people. Walt Disney capitalised on new technology and democratised fairy tales through film. Knowing very well that the world at large needed joy and positive messages, his fairy tales retold stories of heroes, heroines, damsels and princes. Good would once again prevail over evil, and the stories were wrapped neatly with romance and musical elements for added measure.

Today, our stories continue to evolve. We don't need hand-drawn technicolour animations; we have 3D animation and a new sense of what is right in the world to breathe fresh life into old stories. Global perspectives have introduced a flurry of different cultures with new stories to be told on our screens - along with damsels who save themselves. The true joy of good fairy tales will never be lost as long as we keep allowing them to evolve and change – as we have over the past 400 (at least) years.