Where Light Greets Night: A Modern Retelling of "The Sea-Hare"

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WHERE LIGHT GREETS NIGHT: A MODERN RETELLING OF “THE SEA-HARE”

by

Kelsie Peterson

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

English

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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
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2021
ABSTRACT

Where Light Greets Night: A Modern Retelling of “The Sea-Hare”

by

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Utah State University, 2021

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Set in the Pacific Northwest, this contemporary retelling of the Brothers Grimm’s traditional tale sees a tower as a lighthouse, a princess as a keeper, and suitors as candidates for her replacement. The critical introduction of this thesis discusses the idea of “telephoning the narrative” and establishes the importance of modern fairy retellings. With an in-depth examination of binaries within the traditional tale and how they are handled within the retelling, the introduction sets the stage for the way “Where Light Greets Night” works to blur such black and white ideas. This tale also seeks to question judgment and bias based on a single perspective. Critical theorists include Jack Zipes, Max Lüthi, and Vanessa Joosen; the creative talents of Neil Gaiman, Helen Oyeyemi, Kate Bernheimer, Chimamanda Adichie, and Maia McPherson are also considered.

(81 pages)
PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Where Light Greets Night

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Kelsie Peterson

Set in the Pacific Northwest, this contemporary retelling of the Brothers Grimm’s traditional tale, “The Sea-Hare,” sees a tower as a lighthouse, a princess as a keeper, and suitors as candidates for her replacement. This retelling seeks to question the ideas of black and white, judgment and bias, and the effect human actions have on the natural world.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to Natalie Rogers, my thesis chair, for her supervision throughout this process. My thanks also go to Jennifer Sinor for her pearls of wisdom, encouragement, and high expectations; to Benjamin Gunsberg for kindly agreeing to be on this committee; and to Christine Cooper-Rompato, who continually goes above and beyond for her students.

Finally, I could not have done this without the support of my family, friends, and peers. A special thanks go out to my sister, Megan Tolentino, for being my sounding board; my brother-in-law Aser Tolentino for illuminating my path when I had none; and Andrew Romriell for helping me understand the literary world.

Kelsie Peterson
## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PUBLIC ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRITICAL INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHERE LIGHT GREETS NIGHT</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Summary of Grimms’ Fairy Tale No. 191: “The Sea-Hare”

ONCE UPON A TIME, there was a princess who had a tower with twelve windows. Each window revealed a deeper level of detail. When she looked from the last window, there was nothing she could not see. The princess, not keen on the idea of marriage, had vowed that she would not marry unless the suitor could hide from her. However, were the princess to discover the suitor, the penalty was decapitation. Ninety-seven suitors had tried and failed to win the princess’ hand.

Then, three brothers came to the princess, each vowing that they could remain hidden from her. The first two she found with ease. The third brother asked for a day to plan how he would hide. After unsuccessfully contemplating how to hide from the princess, he decided to go out hunting. Spying a raven, he aimed. The raven, however, pled with him, “Spare me, and you’ll be rewarded!” Lowering his gun, the suitor moved on. After a while, he came to a lake. In it, a large fish was swimming. Once more, he aimed. The fish pled, “Spare me, and you’ll be rewarded!” He removed his finger from the trigger and watched as the fish swam back into the depths. The suitor continued along the path and came upon a lame fox. Taking aim, he fired. His aim, however, was not true, and his shot went wide. The fox chastised him, “You’d do better to come remove the thorn in my foot.” Complying, the suitor pulled the thorn from the fox’s foot, but knowing the man was still thinking of killing him, the fox said, “Spare me, and you’ll be rewarded.” The man allowed the fox to leave and headed home.

Arising the following day, the suitor knew he must hide but could think of no place safe from the princess’s windows. Not knowing what else to do, he went to the
bird. “I spared your life. Hide me from the princess,” he pled. The bird retrieved an egg from its nest, opened it, and hid the suitor inside. It was not good enough, however, and the princess found him from the eleventh window. When the suitor was revealed, he was pardoned, but the bird was killed. The next day, the suitor returned to the lake. Having allowed the fish to live, he said, “I spared your life. Hide me from the princess.” The fish leapt from the lake and swallowed the suitor. Nevertheless, the princess’s windows’ keen sight prevailed, and the princess saw him through the twelfth window. The fish was caught and filleted, but the suitor was forgiven once again. The morning of the third day, the suitor sought out the fox.

“I have spared your life,” he told the creature. “The princess must not find me.”

“That is a large ask, for the princess’s eyesight is very keen indeed,” replied the fox. However, at last, the fox said, “Ah-ha!” and led the man to a spring. He dipped himself in the water and emerged a street merchant motioning for the suitor to do the same. The suitor dunked himself in the water and emerged a sea-hare. The merchant gathered the sea-hare in a pail of seawater and headed to the market. There, he displayed his catch to a growing audience. Finally, the princess came, and liking the creature, bought it. As the merchant prepared his ware for travel, he said, “While the princess climbs the steps of the tower, crawl into the hair at the base of her neck.”

The princess returned to the tower and looked through her windows. Through the first she gazed, the second, third, the fourth. Spying nothing from the eleventh fear began to grip her. Desperate, she turned to the twelfth. When her eyes did not gain their purchase, she became violent and threw the sea-hare to the floor. It returned to the
merchant, and they both regained their original forms. Thanking the fox, the suitor returned to the palace and claimed the princess’s hand.

**Introduction**

Stories like “The Sea-Hare” and other fairy tales are the stories societies return to again and again. Adaptations of these tales—for children and adults alike—are prevalent in many cultures. Perhaps they were our original form of “notice and wonder”: providing us with something to learn, leaving us with some pearl of wisdom to glean, or asking a question we must then sit with and ponder. I have always loved fairy tales and the escape that they provide, the journey and the lesson that lie within. I am not alone. The scholarship on how fairy tales have changed and adapted through the years is extensive, and the tropes are deeply rooted in our culture. From Rumpelstiltskin in George Elliot’s Victorian classic *Middlemarch* to the more contemporary writings of authors like Neil Gaiman, Kate Bernheimer, and Helen Oyeyemi to film adaptions such as Disney, these stories never grow old.

Traditional fairy tales are a product of their time. Authors such as the Brothers Grimm, Charles Perrault, Hans Christian Anderson, and Andrew Lang documented the wonder tales of folk tradition and brought permanence to the genre of literary fairy tales we know today. Until their inscription to the written word, communication of these stories was through a process I have termed “telephoning the narrative.” In this process, stories and narratives are fluid, adaptable to the various speaker’s biases, life experiences, and unique perspectives of the world. In his book, *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre*, Jack Zipes describes the application of this process a specific
tale, as one of memetics: “a good example of a meme is a fairy tale, but not just any fairy tale, an individual fairy tale and its discursive tradition that includes oral and literary tales” (5). Fairy tales, much like any story, are informed by the culture in which they are shared. Thusly, as told in various publications in the nineteenth century, the Grimms' fairy tales will not carry the same weight and effect for modern readers as they did for Victorians. Different versions of the same fairy tale exist culture to culture, beginning as folklore and, just as in the childhood game, are “telephoned” by the teller. Kate Bernheimer, the founder of Fairy Tale Review, hints at this “big game of telephone” as a movement within contemporary literature that “can help carry us forward” (The Little Red). The process of retelling, of telephoning through the lens of our experience, makes fairy tales not only prime candidates for retelling but the process of retelling necessary.

In contemplating the idea of telephoning the narrative, I have come to understand the importance of not only keeping these tales alive but continuing to use them in the manner of their creation: old stories told through the lens of the teller’s experience. Versions of Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella were among some of the tales Charles Perrault penned in the late seventeenth century as a commentary on not only politics but the moral failings he saw in the upper class (Zipes, The Oxford Companion, 380). Often, it is easy to get stuck in the tales' fantastic versions, escaping to the realm of fantasy, where ideas such as “happily ever after” exist or to revisit the past and understand and avoid the cruelty there. However, while there are lessons learned from such journeys, they often remain removed from the world in which we live. Therefore, I see the need and importance in recrafting the tales of old, telephoning them, and bringing them alive once more to be fluid within the modern world.
Though these tales' small details undergo this process of telephoning, there always remains a moral associated with the story. In the words of Maia McPherson, whose short story “The Flood” appeared in the 2020 issue of *Fairy Tale Review*, “There is often a central question that is asked in the story, sometimes an unanswerable one, and the pursuit of that question creates an expansion of reality” (114). Frequently, this expansion of reality borders on the fantastic, and within it, we find a safe harbor to explore such questions. A harbor far from our everyday lives. It is one thing to question fantasy; it is another to question the very world we exist within. Fairy tales are a world of extremes – good and evil, right and wrong, princesses and paupers – but what happens when these ideals intersect our lived experience, our own lives?

Such is the question “Where Light Greets Night” attempts to answer. In a world that thrives on binaries, it attempts to query them and, to borrow McPherson’s words, “creates an expansion of reality” (*Fairy Tale Review* 114). That reality is not simply some fantastical reality that represents our history or our future, but rather one that expands the reality in which we exist. Fairy tales mine the soul of humankind and work to elicit cross-cultural understanding. In this retelling of “The Sea-Hare,” I hope to not only expand readers’ understanding of humankind but to make explicit the dangers of stereotypes and binaries.

**Navigating the Conversation**

Binary is inherent in the very trope of fairy tales – juxtaposing good and evil ideas, light and dark, human and nature, royal and peasant, male and female. Of the binaries present within “The Sea-Hare,” the ones I will discuss are: good and evil, truth
and deceit, life and death, woman and man, and nature and human. Perhaps the clearest of the binaries is the choice the suitors face – remain hidden and live, face discovery and die. Similar to this is the binary of human vs. nature visible as the suitor sets out to kill each creature he comes across, only stopping at the promise of a reward. Later, upon discovery of their trickery, these animals face death while the suitor receives forgiveness. Even the gender binaries pit the princess against the suitors and, as a result, force her into marriage. The message is clear—women are to marry even if they do not like it. Some versions of this tale, such as Margret Hun’s translation of David Hockney’s illustrated works, hint that the princess was humbled by the suitor’s ability to trick her. In the end, the princess thinks, “he was able to do more than I” (Grimm) – therefore reinforcing antiquated gender roles.¹ Such binaries work to create tension in the stories that we tell and serve to engage the reader’s pathos but are harmful when applied as a judgment with such a black and white focus.

As humans, we crave this simplicity of black and white, right and wrong, and fairy tales are born from this idea. Max Lüthi, a literary theorist known for his work on folk tales, discusses the idea of “linking tension” and how it drives the genre in his book *The Fairytale as Art Form and Portrait of Man*. Some of the more common examples of these tensions that he describes are: “need/help, task/fulfillment, battle/victory” (Lüthi 56). These ideas, however, are never as simple as they appear at first blush. There is no single concept of what defines “help” or “victory” in any circumstance. Both are primarily dependent on the situation they are addressing. For example, in “The Sea-Hare,” victory for the suitor looks utterly different than victory for the princess; yet, in

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¹ The Aarne-Thompson version of the tale is called “Hiding from the Devil” (AT 329).
the traditional ending of the fairy tale, marriage and implied “happily ever after,”
proclaim it as victory.

Stereotypes, a form of binary that enables us to assess a situation quickly, are not
always harmful. Based on our lived experience, their formation is a product of bias for a
particular idea, belief, or value, and they allow us to judge something as safe or
hazardous. However, when applied as the absolute truth, with no other versions
accounted for, the result can be detrimental. These ideas of binary and stereotypes can
purport the idea of the “single story,” as identified by author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
in her TED Talk, “The Danger of a Single Story.” Therefore, idea of avoiding “a single
story” and looking at the whole picture was crucial. Discussion of multiple perspectives
is something I feel is prevalent in today’s society and culture of “othering” those who are
different and feel “The Sea-Hare” provides a good framework from which to expand my
readers’ reality and widen their perception. In the traditional tale, the princess’ judgment
is final, and the suitors face condemnation based on one thing and one thing alone – their
ability to hide or, a single story. In the retelling this is complicated. I want readers to walk
away from the story wondering about the consequences of judging based on one aspect of
a person and think about what effects their actions and judgments have.

In her talk, Adichie also recalls reading fiction growing up in Nigeria and thinking
that the only characters in books were white Europeans. Similarly, the majority of fairy
tales found in mainstream media today are full of casts of white characters. When
characters from diverse backgrounds are portrayed, they are often associated with
problematic stereotypes or represented as the villain or antagonist. While the most urgent
need for more is for more diverse voices in literature, authors such as I, a female who has
experienced white privilege, must also be mindful of the diversity represented in our prose. I firmly believe that when writing a story that exists in the same world as us, writers must show our world in as true of light as possible. For this reason, I have included diverse characters with “Where Light Greets Night.” I do, however, acknowledge the need for accurate representation in the diversity of the characters portrayed.

In a world that encourages divisiveness against the “other” and that is just beginning to recognize the ongoing oppression of diverse voices, these ideas become even more critical. This story encourages readers to question binaries, and the focused judgment of stereotypes and single stories as Perrault and many others have before me.

**Establishing a Place Within the Genre**

“Where Light Greets Night” tells the story of Chiara, the Keeper at Cape Legerdemain Lighthouse. The beams of the lighthouse’s lantern have the power to provide her with the truth of anything they illuminate, animate or inanimate. She receives notice from the U.S. Lighthouse Service that conveys their decision to replace her as Keeper. Fearing the loss of her home, Chiara uses the light’s power to disqualify any potential candidates. From the beginning of the story and the arrival of three new candidates, the story seeks to examine the ideas of light/dark, human/nature, truth/deceit, and good/evil.

As I examine the specific areas adapted in my retelling of “The Sea-Hare,” I will use the work of Vanessa Joosen as a scaffold. In her book, *Critical and Creative Perspectives on Fairy Tales: An Intertextual Dialogue Between Fairy-Tale Scholarship*
and Postmodern Retellings, Joosen outlines the ways the tropes of retellings differ from the traditional tale: relocation to a tangible setting; reestablished magical realism; complication of fringe characters; removal of the “happily ever after”; orientation toward character development; and narratological perspective (13-16). By examining these ideas, I will show how “Where Light Greets Night” criticizes binarism and stereotypes.

In “The Sea-Hare,” the princess’ source of power is a tower with twelve windows, making it an ideal tale in which to explore the ideas of binaries and the metaphors that come naturally in the setting of a lighthouse. In my retelling, the muse for Cape Legerdemain was Heceta Head Lighthouse on the Oregon Coast. I have always found the Pacific Northwest magical, and I wanted to bring this perspective into my story. Setting the story in a location familiar and accessible to U.S. readers allows them to connect to the story in a way that would not be possible if the story were told in a fantastic location or Europe, the traditional setting for many fairy tales. Additionally, bringing the story to the United States provides readers in America with an automatic kinship – the number of retellings based in the U.S. is small compared to those in Europe.

While the year is modern, it is never precisely named. There are several reasons for this choice, but perhaps the most prevalent is the timelessness of fairy tales. While I want the readers to feel it is contemporary, I do not want to date the piece to a specific year or even decade. I want something that can live and grow with the audience, and so this is a specific attribute of fairy tales that I chose to keep. Additionally, technology seems out of place in a lighthouse that refuses automation and is seemingly stuck in the past. This separation between the natural and the artificial is part of what gives fairy tales their allure. In the introduction of My Mother She Killed Me, My Father He Ate Me, Kate
Bernheimer states that society’s increased interest in the fairy tale and retellings “is correlated to a growing awareness of human separation from the wild and natural world.” Our increasing separation from the natural world ignites a craving within readers to connect to the natural world – one that feels magical to them and pulls them in. I hope to create this setting within “Where Light Greets Night.”

With the story relocated to the Pacific Northwest and a readership craving the natural, it seemed fitting that the environment should take a significant role in the magic. Here, the “magic” of the tale is not the traditional sort you would find in a fairy tale; in fact, the magic is born of siren lore. While many authors knit together tales in this way, Neil Gaiman’s work has particularly influenced mine. In an examination of his work, Anna Katrina Gutierrez discusses Gaiman’s “ability to pull together scripts and schemas from distinct stories and re-weave them into a ‘third’ narrative that is new yet old, strange yet familiar, and that is ultimately unique and meaningful” (217-218). This idea aligns well with that of telephoning the narrative. Not only do sirens fit the coastal setting, but they are a part of the lore I am interested in exploring as a writer. In the original tale, the magic used to beat the princess is born of manipulation; in my retelling, the manipulative magic controls the princess, or Keeper. The traditional siren provides a good outlet for this idea. Not only are sirens known for their manipulation and allure, but also for their ability to mask and disguise. I feel these ideas, juxtaposed against the ideas of light and dark inherent in a lighthouse, are an intriguing way to explore binaries and the idea of not seeing the whole picture.

To adequately explore these binaries, the fringe characters had to become more dimensional. I wanted characters that the reader could relate with, understand, and none
of which were wholly good or bad. Taking a page from Helen Oyeyemi’s book, I wanted to “turn[ ... ] familiarity on its head” and “leav[e] the reader to question pre-conceived notions of what a villain or victim is and how they should behave” (Ormond 152-153). The readers of my retelling should be able to see pieces of themselves in the characters. Further, Oyeyemi also “asks readers to consider the construction of the villain while at the same time shedding light on issues such as trauma, identity, race and gender-based violence” (Ormond 153). There are several ways I do this in “Where Light Greets Night.” The story’s antagonist has survived a trauma that has made her into the character she is. While it does not excuse her actions, it complicates the reader’s understanding of her motives. Aletta’s aim in being a successful candidate is not as simple as that of the suitor in “The Sea-Hare.” The stakes are not just her life but the life of the Cape itself. The other characters, the brothers (or candidates in this case), are described in more detail and given genuine and relatable faults for which they are judged harshly through a binary lens.

As I worked to bring the characters alive on the page, my focus also shifted toward their development. Though action has a place in this tale, the focus is equally on the characters, and the goal is readers’ investment in the characters’ emotions and actions. Chiara is perhaps the character readers see develop the most, although there is also development in Marta and Aletta’s characters. These characters’ development allows the reader to process the ideas of redemption, good and evil, and the power to see the whole picture. With such development of the characters came an ending more complicated than “happily ever after.” In fact, with no clear “good” or “evil” characters, there can be no “happily ever after,” as is often the case in real life. Further, considering
the premise of the retelling is to question the idea of black and white, the whole picture must be messy, grey. The ending is abrupt and meant to leave the readers' minds marinating the questions posed to mirror this.

Adding to these character development complications, the narrative is told from two perspectives: Chiara’s and Aletta’s. While the narrator remains in third-person, free-indirect discourse allows for the readers’ perception of the characters' thoughts as it follows them on the page. This tension allows the reader to engage more fully with the story. The different character perspectives can be seen in the focused attention to opposition and obsession with the Light in Chiara’s narration compared to the questioning attitude of Aletta that allows her to see a fuller picture.

Conclusion

Through shifting the traditional tropes in these ways, this story asks readers to think critically about how they view the world – including binaries and how they assess the world around them. As Zipes argues, “Whether oral or literary, the tales have sought to uncover the truth about the pleasures and pains of existence, to propose possibilities for adaptation and survival, and to reveal the intricacies of our civilizing process” (Why Fairy Tales 42). Through knitting together the tropes of the traditional tale with siren mythology, increasing the dimensions of the characters, and questioning the idea of truth/deceit, this contemporary retelling of “The Sea-Hare” fits not only within the genre but poses essential and timely questions to the readers.

I hope you enjoy “Where Light Greets Night.”


Ormond, Jo. “‘People can smile and smile and still be villains’: Villains and Victims in *Mr Fox* and *Boy, Snow, Bird.*” *Telling It Slant: Critical Approaches to Helen Oyeyemi*, Buckley, Chloe and Ilott Sarah eds. Sussex Academic Press, 2017, pp. 152-166.
