Crafty Kids: "Hansel and Gretel" and the Survival of the Cleverest

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Abstract

Parental abandonment, starvation, and exposure to predators are well-known motifs in The Brothers Grimm's "Hansel and Gretel" (1812), which belongs to the ATU 327 tale type. ATU 327 tales pit young, vulnerable protagonists against the cruelty of parents and the brutality of strangers. These stories are usually framed as a celebration of children's craftiness and resourceful use of language. With the central theme of the power of language to persuade, various versions of the fairy tale "Hansel and Gretel" offer multiple ways to engage students as literary scholars and critical thinkers. This paper compares five classic ATU 327 versions with three contemporary retellings: Emma Donoghue's "The Tale of the Cottage" (1997), Megan Engelhardt "A Mouth to Speak the Coming Home" (2013), and Louise Murphy's novel The True Story of Hansel and Gretel (2003). In analyzing how the absence of home, food, and parental love and protection force Hansel and Gretel to become self-reliant in the classic versions, it is evident that contemporary retellings take a much more critical look at what parental neglect may mean for the child protagonists. Discussion of Bruno Bettelheim's interpretation of "Hansel and Gretel" in conjunction with more recent scholarship on this tale type provides perspectives on how students interpret ATU 327 stories in historical and social contexts.

Keywords: "Hansel and Gretel"; child abandonment; fairy tale; ATU 327; critical thinking

Introduction: The Relevance of Teaching Fairy Tales

The pedagogical benefits of teaching fairy tales in the literature classroom are well documented. Fairy tales are versatile texts that serve many pedagogical purposes. Nancy L. Canepa notes that "fairy tales can be uniquely adapted as teaching tools in contexts that range from introductory foreign-language courses to upper-level foreign-language seminars to large culture or survey courses offered by literature and other humanities departments to a general student audience" (2019, p. 325). Similarly, folklorist Eric Taylor (2000) points out that folk and fairy tales "also fit well with the growing emphasis on content-based instruction and with communicative approaches that focus on teaching language while communicating meaning," because the study of fairy tales stimulates critical thinking in the form of "analyzing, drawing,
inferences, synthesizing, summarizing, and noticing underlying text structures" (p. 3). With its sharp focus on cruelty towards children, various versions of the fairy tale "Hansel and Gretel" offer multiple ways to engage students as literary scholars and critical thinkers, including awareness of the power of language in overcoming social conflicts.

Child abandonment, infanticide, starvation, dismemberment, cannibalism, murder, physical violence, and cruelty to children may not seem like suitable themes for fairy tales. Yet, the classic European fairy tales abound with violence and cruelty, and the victims are typically the weakest members of society: orphans and motherless children. Surveying the classic fairy-tale collections of Giambattista Basile (Italy), the brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm (Germany), Charles Perrault (France), and Joseph Jacobs (England) reveals that domestic violence then as now is sadly often part of family life. Child abandonment, though relatively rare today, "probably ranged from 15 to 20 percent of registered births" in pre-industrial Europe (Tatar, 1992, p. xxi). The historical record shows that pedophilia and child molestation were common and mostly unreported and that serial killers also existed in the past. For example, the Breton nobleman Gilles de Rais (1404-1440), a "comrade in arms of Joan of Arc," confessed to have kidnapped, tortured, sodomized, and killed more than a hundred children ("Gilles de Rais"). By examining a cluster of fairy tales that focuses on child abandonment and physical brutality, students can discern thematic continuity between past and present. Since fairy tales were endowed with moral content by linguists and folklorists like the brothers Grimm, who collected and edited them from oral traditions, cruelty towards children has been held up as a didactic tool through centuries of oral tradition, not simply to warn young listeners of what dangers may befall them if they step off the beaten path, but more importantly to teach them how to deal with predators and evil stepmothers by using language persuasively and effectively. Quick wit and the power of language offer hope in these tales of horror and child abuse.

Historically, cruel fairy tales have had an essential function in children's socialization by employing a "pedagogy of fear" intended to scare children into behaving well (Tatar, 1992, p. 22). However, there are other important lessons beyond strategies for survival to learn from such stories, including lessons about using language persuasively and creatively. Quick wit and clever dialogue steer many a young fairy-tale protagonist clear of danger, thus demonstrating to young readers that command of language can be an essential element in surviving dire situations. Not only is a command of everyday expressive speech empowering, but language also has magical properties beyond clever dialogue. Knowledge of spells and magical chants may save the day. When Hansel and Gretel escape from the witch's house and suddenly face a wide body of water, Gretel chants to a white duck, "Help us, help us, little duck / Hansel and Gretel are out of luck / There's no bridge, not far or wide / Help us, give us both a ride" and the duck takes them both across the water (Tatar, 1999, p. 189). There is power in using language cleverly and creatively for the physically and socially powerless young child protagonists.

The importance of language competence is equally evident in contemporary retellings of fairy tales, for as Jack Zipes (2012) surmises, "if it is through language and story that cognition is fostered, it is all the much more important that we see the connections between ancient stories and how as well why we continue to repeat them in innovative ways" (p. 7). Language and cognition have been central plot elements in survival stories through retellings of the fairy-tale genre for centuries. We suggest that students learn important elements of language's persuasive powers by analyzing
representative examples of fairy tales similar to "Hansel and Gretel" and comparing them to (post)modern retellings. "Hansel and Gretel" is the central model for the Aarne-Thompson-Uther (ATU) 327 category of folktales. We will analyze and compare five older folktale versions of "Hansel and Gretel" and three contemporary variations of ATU 327 stories to discern how similar themes of child abuse and survival occur in Emma Donoghue's "The Tale of the Cottage" (1997), Megan Engelhardt's "A Mouth to Speak the Coming Home" (2013), and Louise Murphy's novel The True Story of Hansel and Gretel (2003). We will focus on how child protagonists fall prey to or overcome situations of violence and cruelty and how they use language to outwit powerful opponents. We argue that cruel fairy tales teach important lessons about the power of language to take charge of a dangerous situation.

Classic Variations of "Hansel and Gretel" (ATU 327)

Child abuse and survival are familiar elements in Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's "Hansel and Gretel," originally known as "Little Brother and Little Sister" and first published in 1812. This fairy tale pits young, vulnerable protagonists against the cruelty of parents and the brutality of strangers. Though an anxiety-provoking scenario for young children to hear about, the story is usually framed as a celebration of children's craftiness and resourcefulness. Hansel and Gretel eavesdrop on their parents, devise plans for returning home after being abandoned in the forest, become enslaved by a witch, and eventually kill the witch and return home. The ATU 327 fairy-tale category is labeled "Children and the Ogre" and belongs within the larger division of "Tales of Magic" (Types, 2019, n.p.). Maria Tatar (2002) relates that this category of tales involves "a child or a group of children [who] innocently enter the abode of an ogre, wicked witch, a bloodthirsty antagonist, and flee, often with material goods in the form of jewels or gold" (p. 44). Where many classic fairy tales describe sibling rivalry, the "Hansel and Gretel" cluster is remarkable in depicting sibling solidarity and mutual love as bulwarks against unfeeling parents and predatory strangers.

The Grimms' "Hansel and Gretel" features two siblings who are abandoned in the forest because there is not enough food to feed them, and their parents put their own needs before their children's. The father voices his worries to his wife, "how can we take care of our poor little children when the two of us don't have enough to eat?" (Tatar, 2002, p. 45). The stepmother coerces their father into leaving them out in the forest so there will be more food for the adults. The children overhear the parents talking about their plan and gather white stones to mark their way home.

Hansel and Gretel are left in the forest but are able to return home by following the stones they dropped along the way. Their stepmother is furious and scolds her husband. Next time, the parents take the children further into the woods hoping that they can't find their way back again. The children are lost in the woods but follow a white bird and find the witch's house built of bread with a roof of cake and windows of sugar. Hungrily, they start eating bits of the house. The witch invites them in and feeds them a good meal. The witch is a cannibal who enjoys eating children, but she wants to fatten Hansel before she does so. The near-blind witch uses Gretel as a slave and keeps the children locked up. When she tries to check if Hansel has gained weight, he cleverly uses an old bone for her to touch. When she finally decides to cook him anyway, she tries to coax Gretel into the oven but is outsmarted by the girl. Gretel succeeds in pushing the witch into the oven and
is able to free Hansel from his cage. According to Bruno Bettelheim (2010), "these children achieve their higher humanity as soon as the witch is burned to death, and this is symbolized by the treasures they gain" (p. 146). They take all the jewels from the witch's cottage and walk out of the forest. They come to a big body of water with no way of crossing it. The resourceful Gretel knows how to talk to animals, which "deepens the sense that invisible powers exist around us, and intensifies the thrill, the strangeness and terror of the pervasive atmosphere of enchantment" (Warner, 2014, p. 30). Gretel uses a magic verse to ask a white duck for help, and the duck carries the children safely across the water. When they return home, they find that their stepmother has died. They live happily ever after with their father.

Several fairy-tale scholars point out that in the earliest versions of "Hansel and Gretel," the children are abandoned by their biological parents (Tatar, 2002, p. 45). However, being reluctant to ascribe such cruelty to biological mothers, the Grimms (mainly Wilhelm) introduced the stepmother as the evil agent and the father as kind but weak. This parental cast is found in several much older versions, for example, Giambattista Basile's "Nennillo and Nennella" (1634-1636) from Italy. Memorably, Basile's version opens with a moralistic diatribe against stepmothers in general: "woe to him who thinks to find a governess for his children by giving them a stepmother! He only brings into his house the cause of their ruin. There never yet was a stepmother who looked kindly on the children of another" (Basile, 2007-2015, n.p.). Nennillo and Nennella's stepmother is indeed very cruel. The family is not threatened by starvation. She simply refuses to look after children who are not her own and threatens to leave her husband if he does not abandon them in the forest. Nennillo and Nennella learn a harsh lesson of the power of words to persuade when their father, lashed by the tongue of his new wife, then abandons them in the woods. There, the siblings become separated when a hunting party crashes through the forest. Nennillo eventually becomes adopted by a prince and Nennella by a sea captain. She falls overboard during a storm and is swallowed by a magical fish that takes her to the shore where Nennillo lives in the prince's castle. Nennella hails her brother with a song from the belly of the fish, which then releases her. Like Gretel, Nennella is associated with animals and the power to use language in magical ways. The siblings no longer remember the names of their parents, so the prince issues a proclamation that brings about a joyful reunification with the father and violent punishment of the stepmother, who is rolled down a hill in a closed casket and dies.

The violent demise of stepmothers and witches is found in many "Hansel and Gretel" versions. Tatar (1987) identifies this as a narrative pattern that creates a balance between the victimization of the innocent children and the deserved punishment of their principal tormentors (p. 182). In "The Juniper Tree," a widower with a little boy marries a second wife with whom he has a daughter. The two half-siblings get along very well, but the woman wants to get rid of the boy so that she can "get the entire family fortune for her daughter" (Tatar, 1999, p. 191). Thus, it is not starvation or lack of interest in caring for a stepchild that ignites the stepmother's hatred of the little boy, but rather anxiety about inheritance. She slaps, pinches, and cuffs her stepson to the effect that "the poor child lived in terror" (Tatar, 1999, p. 191). Eventually, she beheads him by slamming the lid of a trunk down on him as he reaches for an apple inside the chest. Fearful of being found out, the woman then ties the boy's head back onto his body with a scarf and orders her daughter to slap him. The boy's head rolls off, and the little girl consequently thinks that she has killed her brother. Craftily, the mother blames her daughter for the murder and then, to hide the
evidence, cooks the boy's body into a stew and serves it to her husband, who eats it with great gusto. After this cannibalistic, incestuous meal, the little girl picks up her brother's bones and buries them under the juniper tree, where his birth mother lies buried. A magical bird appears and loudly sings the damning lines, "My mother, she slew me, my father, he ate me..." (Tatar, 1999, p. 194), eventually driving the stepmother insane with its song as the villagers gather around the house, and the woman's crime gets exposed. When she dashes out the door, the bird drops a millstone on her head and crushes her to death. The bird then transforms into the little boy, and joy is restored as the children join hands with their father and go into the house for a meal. The meal's restorative effect symbolizes the reunified family and offers a counterpoint to the father's delight in unwittingly eating his son's flesh in a stew. The restored family emerges out of the stepmother's violent death, the boy's resurrection, and his transformation from bird to a boy with the healing effects of a meal to transition the family into harmony. The stepmother's destructive control of food in "The Juniper Tree" is used to inaugurate death (the boy reaching for an apple) and feed incestuous, cannibalistic appetites (the father enjoying the stew cooked on his son's body). Once the stepmother is dead, harmony is restored, and peace is made between father and children, who share a healthy meal upon the punishing death of the family-destroying stepmother.

Tatar (1999) discusses the inexorably wicked stepmother in the classic fairy tales within the context of "maternal power run mad" (p. 183), which suggests that the stepmother's evil disposition towards the motherless children in her charge is an excessive state of unnatural motherhood. In theorizing the absent mother in Western literature, Marilyn Francus (2017) examines "the desired ideology of the 'good' mother and the narrative fecundity of the 'bad' one" (p. 29). Francus points out that the "good" mother figure, deep-rooted as an archetype in narrative traditions, embodies social codes of conduct and domesticity that include "modesty, chastity, piety, charity, duty, compassion, self-control, and virtue" (p. 26). Clearly, the stepmothers in the ATU 327 cluster do not meet those ideal standards. They are bossy, angry, haughty, mean, untruthful, selfish, sharp-tongued, and out of their husbands' control. Thus, the "bad" stepmother functions narratively as the antithesis to the "good" mother.

In the fairy-tale genre, this contrast becomes a so-called script, that is, "a knowledge representation in terms of which an expected sequence of events is stored in the memory" (Herman, 2002, p. 10). In other words, fairy-tale readers know what to expect when the stepmother enters the story. From a different perspective, Bettelheim (2010) argues that "the fantasy of the wicked stepmother not only preserves the good mother intact, it also prevents having to feel guilty towards one's angry wishes about her" (p. 69). While Bettelheim's psychoanalytical perspective offers a valuable insight into the effect of the fairy tale on the child reader, it is also important to keep in mind the effect on the child reader of a negative representation of female assertiveness and command of language. The stepmother is eloquent. She persuades her husband to abandon the children using logic and reason. Her candid analysis of the situation may be shockingly void of compassion for the children, yet also reflective of the history of infanticide and child abandonment in Europe. In the past, infanticide was often disguised as stillbirth or, in some cases, openly displayed. For example, in the 1730s, Thomas Coram, one of the founders of the London Foundling Hospital, "was motivated by seeing, on his daily walk to work, the large number of infants thrown on dunghills or the sides of the road, 'sometimes alive, sometimes dead, and sometimes dying' (Newman, 2017, n.p.). Even after
establishing orphanages in various European countries in the 1800s, between half and one-third of abandoned children in these institutions died (Newman, 2017, n.p.). The poor, and especially unwed mothers, did not have the luxury of letting compassion prevail in deciding how to survive. As Max Lüthi (1976) writes, "in the story of Hansel and Gretel . . . poverty provides the basis for the hardness of the heart" (p. 64). The cold-hearted stepmothers in "Hansel and Gretel," "Nennillo and Nennella," and "The Juniper Tree" raise important questions about the intersectionality between poverty, gender, and parenting, which echo both historical and contemporary realities and anxieties.

However, other fairy tales associated with the ATU 327 cluster are not concerned about inheritance or a cruel, murderous stepparent, but rather with the simple but perplexing problem of being poor and having too many mouths to feed. Joseph Jacobs' "Molly Whuppie" (1890) starts matter-of-factly by stating, "once upon a time there was a man and a wife [who] had too many children, and they could not get meat for them, so they took the three youngest and left them in the wood" (Tatar, 1999, p. 209). One detects the cruel math behind this choice: since the parents had invested the least amount of food and shelter in the youngest children, and they were the least capable of earning an income for the family, they were abandoned. The children – "three lassies" – wander the woods and come to the house of a giant, whose wife kindly feeds them milk and bread and puts them to bed alongside her own three daughters (Tatar, 1999, p. 209). The giant, however, plans to kill the "earthly" children (p. 209). The youngest, Molly Whuppie, who is "very clever," observes how the giant puts gold chains around the necks of his own daughters and straw ropes around the necks of Molly and her sisters (p. 209). In the dark, she switches the chains. The giant comes over to the bed with a club, feels for the straw ropes, pulls his own daughters on to the floor where he "battered them until they were dead" (p. 210), and then goes back to sleep. Molly and her sisters run off find the king's house, and tell him the story. The king, being greedy, promises Molly that he will let the three sisters marry his sons if she goes back to the giant's house and steals first his sword, next his purse, and finally his ring. Molly being small, but shrewd, outsmarts the outsized giant time and again, each time with the giant roaring, "woe worth you, Molly Whuppie! Never you come again" and Molly responding with the apparent nonsense rhyme, "once more, carle, I'll come to Spain" (p. 211).

Molly's vocabulary reveals her trickster-like, disrespectful nature. Insultingly, she calls the giant "carle," which in Scottish dialect refers to a big, strong fellow. Carle is also a version of the English word churl, meaning a boor, miser, or peasant. Her taunt to "come to Spain" equates the giant's home with Moorish Spain, the enemy of Christian Europe. Tatar (2002) believes this phrase merely refers to Spain as a "distant, exotic locale" (p. 204), but the literary context is more likely the 11th-century epic poem The Song of Roland (La Chanson de Roland), which celebrates Charlemagne's nephew Roland and the Frankish army's fight against the Muslims in Spain. In this poem, several lines refer to going to "Espain" (The Song of Roland, 2008, n.p.). The giant's otherness is underscored by Molly's assertion that when she visits him to steal his treasures, she is going to "Spain", a different country altogether, although the giant's house is the woods not far from her own home. The giant, too, establishes the divide between humans and giants by yelling "fee, fie, fum, I smell the blood of some earthly one" (Tatar, 1999, p. 209) when Molly and her sisters first arrive, revealing both his bloodlust and his un-earthliness. Yet, despite the clear divide between the giant as a foreign other from distant "Spain" and the humans as belonging to the familiar, homey earth, there are striking similarities between the giant
and the king, both male and both concerned with power. Neither can match Molly's craftiness. The king, who desires the giant's treasures, must rely on clever Molly to procure them for him. She doesn't do it for free, though. The king trades his sons in marriage for the sword, the purse, and the ring, which respectively are symbols of military, economic, and feudal power, all of which are desirable for the king. Molly does not want those things for herself. She wants a long-term solution to her and her sisters' homelessness and parental abandonment through advantageous marriages to princes. Her strategy fits neatly into the traditional fairy-tale wedding closure with the promise of a happily-ever-after. More realistically Molly's strategy reflects the historical reality of poor girls' innate desire for social climbing, marital stability, and long-term economic security.

The Scottish setting of this story - with its references to lassie, carle, and other Scottish idioms - has a deeper Gaelic context. Ludwig Lenz (1902) identifies an earlier Irish version, "Smallhead," and the Gaelic "Maol Chlioban" from the Scottish Highlands (p. 51). "Molly Whuppie" and the Irish and Gaelic versions differ significantly from "Hansel and Gretel" in eliminating any return home and reconciliation with the parents who abandoned the children. Instead, the three sisters are able to forge new lives with upward social mobility, thanks to Molly's craftiness and quick thinking. Thus, in comparison to the home-seeking Hansel-and-Gretel prototypes of filial piety, where children model forgiveness and yearn to return home despite having been betrayed by their parents, Molly takes action to secure a comfortable future for herself and her sisters without looking back.

Charles Perrault's “Little Thumbling” (1697) (Le petit poucet), also known as “Hop o’My Thumb” and “Little Thumb,” has many features in common with both “Hansel and Gretel” and “Molly Whuppie.” The overall frame of famine and abandonment is the same. A woodcutter and his wife have too many children to feed: seven sons born closely together as twins or triplets in the span of three years. This narrative detail evokes the double-edged sword of abundant fertility as both the treasure and the curse of the poor. Additionally, this story warns not to dismiss someone born with a handicap. The youngest son, nicknamed Little Thumbling, “was hardly larger than a thumb” at birth – which we must surmise to mean that he was premature (Tatar, 1999, p. 199). He was “sickly and didn’t speak a word” (p. 199). We learn that he was “the underdog in the family, and he got the blame for everything” (p. 199). Perrault moralizes at the end of the story: “You never worry about having too many children / When they are handsome, well-bred, strong/ And when they shine. / But if one is sickly or mute, / He is despised, scorned, ridiculed. / But sometimes it is the little runt / Who makes the family’s happiness” (Tatar, 1999, p. 206). Perrault warns against the stigma and social exclusion that Little Thumbling faces because of his disability. Ann Schmiesing (2014) argues that in “Thumbling or Dummy tales,” where the protagonists are stigmatized for being cognitively or physically different, the main characters must overcome their disability by becoming “supercrips” that overcompensate for their disability by outperforming their peers (p. 112). This is particularly evident in “Little Thumbling” when the titular character takes possession of the ogre’s seven-league boots, which enable him to travel faster than anyone else, and that he, once a mute, shrewdly and persuasively lies to obtain the ogre’s treasure.

Despite mistreatment at home, Little Thumbling turns out to be the wisest and craftiest of the seven brothers. When their parents abandon them in the woods during a famine, Little Thumbling leads the boys home by following a trail of white pebbles he has
dropped along the way. There is a happy reunion at home because the parents have suddenly received some money owed to them. But soon, the larder is empty again, and the parents abandon their seven sons much deeper in the darkest part of the woods. The boys can’t find their way home and instead, like Molly Whuppie and her sisters, knock on the door of an ogre’s house and beg for food. The ogre’s wife is kind but warns them that her husband “eats little children” (Tatar, 1999, p. 202). Little Thumbling reasons that they may as well be eaten by an ogre than starve to death, so they enter the house and hide under the ogre’s bed. As soon as the ogre comes home, he smells them and pulls them out from under the bed. He orders his wife to feed them, “so they won’t lose any weight” (p. 203) before getting cooked the following day. The ogre has seven daughters who already “were in the habit of killing little children to suck their blood” (p. 203). The daughters are sleeping with gold crowns on their heads in a big bed. The seven brothers are put to sleep with them. In the dark, Little Thumbling removes the gold crowns from the daughters and puts them on his brothers’ and his own head. In the middle of the night, the ogre goes to the children’s bed, feels for the crowns, and “without a moment’s hesitation, he cut the throats of his seven daughters” (p. 204) and goes back to sleep. Little Thumbling and his brothers escape and hide in a cave. The ogre puts on his enchanted seven-league boots and stumps through the landscape to find them. When the tired ogre naps, Little Thumbling pulls off his boots and puts them on. They magically shrink to his size, and he hurries back to the ogre’s house and tells the wife that her husband has been captured by bandits and must be ransomed. The wife gives Little Thumb all the ogre’s treasures, with which he returns to home “where he was welcomed with open arms” (p. 205).

The association between parental embrace and the child’s procurement of economic assets reveals an economic reality that may grate against modern sensibilities. Similarly, lying, stealing, and cheating hardly sound like desirable behaviors to be modeled by contemporary child readers, but traditional folktales are not meant to please. They tell us truths about human nature in plots set in far-far-away times and lands. “Fairy tales have and always have had social functions – to entertain, to acculturate, but also to grapple with and question dominant values and ideologies” (Canepa, 2019, p. 2). Cruel fairy tales may be hard to swallow for contemporary readers because we often forget that beneath the magical luster of seven-league boots and birds turning into boys, there are very real social and historical realities. Nevertheless, in its complex and compact form, the fairy-tale genre is as flexible and malleable as Molly Whuppie’s quick wit and situational Fingerspitzengefühl.

Contemporary writers, particularly feminist writers, often gravitate towards the fairy-tale genre for its opportunities to subvert patriarchal values by twisting themes from the classic fairy tales into new shapes. In the next section, we will examine contemporary retellings of ATU 327 that “are determinedly and openly ‘intertextual’ and ‘stereophonic,’ Roland Barthes’ terms for the ways all writing is intertwined with other writing” (Harris, 2001, p. 17). The retellings’ intertextuality depends on the premise that readers are familiar with some version of the classic fairy tales. Moreover, the retellings tend to “stretch the generic boundaries of the fairy-tale genre, creating hybrids in combination . . . with other literary genres” (Joosen, 2011, pp. 302-303). Students studying these clusters of stories will learn that fairy-tale retellings often go beyond the fairy-tale genre into other literary genres and popular culture in general, and that they signify critical reassessment of cultural traditions, social structures, and gender expectations.
Contemporary Retellings of ATU 327 Fairy Tales

Intertextuality refers to the way a given text, such as a fairy-tale retelling, “cites, rewrites, absorbs, prolongs, or generally transforms” a source text intelligibly by drawing on its “network of codes and signifying practices” (Prince, 1987, p. 46). The fairy tale’s network of codes includes the use of magic (both in plot and in language), while its signifying practices is the fairy tale’s ability to tell us truths about human nature and experience across time and geographical space. Consequently, fairy tales are not fixed, self-contained narratives, but rather multilayered intertexts in which each new generation encounters meaningful cultural knowledge about social practices and cultural values (Makinen, 2008, p. 151). This is particularly true for feminist writers who find abundant examples in the classic fairy tales of mistreatment of girls and women, cruelty towards socially marginalized individuals, as well as uplifting examples of how the mistreated underdog can overcome obstacles. Thus, in challenging the prevailing patriarchal hegemony in Western culture, feminist authors often dip into the treasure trove of fairy-tale plots, not to replicate the old stories, but to put a new spin on old yarns and hence to question those networks of codes and to signify practices the classic tales are founded upon. As Julia Kristeva (1980) points out about retellings, “the writer can use another’s work, giving it a new meaning while retaining the meaning it already had. The result is a word with two significations; it becomes ambivalent” (original emphasis, p. 73). With ambivalence comes critical thinking about cultural values and social behaviors such as cruelty, violence, and mistreatment of children.

In the contemporary retellings of ATU 327 tales by Donoghue, Engelhardt, and Murphy, the authors not so much re-tell “Hansel and Gretel” as they re-interpret it. Parody and satire are well-known vehicles for dressing old stories in new clothes. Consider, for example, how Hans Traxler completely revamps “Hansel and Gretel” in his 1963 satirical murder-mystery novel Die Wahrheit über Hänsel und Gretel [The Truth about Hansel and Gretel]. Traxler’s archeologist-detective Georg Ossegg discovers that the Grimm story is a hoax to cover up the murder of the so-called “Bakkerhexe” [baker witch] Katharina Schaderin, a successful independent businesswoman who is famous for her bestselling gingerbread cookies (Traxler, 1997, p. 74). Katharina’s rejected suitor Hans Metzler and his scheming sister Grete, both adults in their thirties, brutally murder Katharina by pushing her into the oven and – unsuccessfully – ransack her house to steal her gingerbread recipes. To hide their grisly deed, the Metzler siblings spread rumors that Katharina was a cannibalistic witch who lured little children to her house with gingerbread and that two little children turned the trick on her, killed her, and ran away. The naïve brothers Grimm mistook these false rumors for a genuine folktale (Kaube, 2007, n.p.). Traxler’s parodic story makes child abandonment, cannibalism, and cruelty towards orphaned children part of the Metzler siblings’ lies, but it also raises pertinent questions about male predation, violence against women, and punishment of female independence. These are central themes in Donoghue’s retelling of “Hansel and Gretel.”

Donoghue’s “The Tale of the Cottage” is a chapter in her novel Kissing the Witch (1997), which loops retellings of the classic fairy tales into a coherent narrative in which roles are reversed, gender questioned, and old plots are rewritten with radical interpretative twists. As the title suggests, “The Tale of the Cottage” explores the concept of home and belonging. The child protagonists are brother and sister. The boy is twice as old as his little sister, who is cognitively impaired. The story is told through the little sister’s voice and shows the reader that while she is limited in some ways, in other ways, she is very intuitive. Little sister is able to sense danger and also is clever enough to listen to her parents’ conversations when she
should be sleeping. She senses danger from the stepfather and hears sounds of physical abuse towards her mother. “After mother cries and gone quiet like sleeping, I hold my head like apple shake it for seeing what sick. Sound all right. Never can tell” (Donoghue, 1997, p. 135). The under-developed syntax from little sister’s first-person narration underscores her vulnerability. Without the competent command of the language, she is stigmatized as worthless by her stepfather, the huntsman, who is violent and crude.

The stepfather bullies the mother into abandoning the little girl because he considers her useless and will not feed her. He takes the children into the woods but only brings back the brother. The brother goes out and finds his little sister and brings her home. The mother is happy when they get home, but the stepfather is angry and calls the little girl a half-wit. The stepfather takes both children into the woods again and leaves them, threatening the boy with a beating if he moves from that location. The brother tells the little sister he will find their house with the morning light, but it snows during the night. The snow covers up all of his familiar landmarks, and he becomes disoriented. They find a little cottage on their search, and to the little girl, the windows look like spun sugar, and the brown walls look like gingerbread. The brother immediately wants to knock on the door, but the little sister is somewhat fearful. She knows that bad things are sometimes covered with something that looks good. The smell of bread baking wafts from the house, making it seem even more inviting to the hungry children. The woman of the house takes in the children, and the little girl feels safe and warm.

Where Donoghue’s retelling is set in the non-descript long-ago of traditional fairy tales, Engelhardt’s “A Mouth to Speak the Coming Home” (2013) is a modern re-telling of the Grimms’ story. Maryn is the teenage protagonist tasked with finding the missing children, Hans and Gret, and bringing them back home. Maryn’s parents light a jacklight to illuminate the way home, but the young children’s stepmother snuffs the light out because she doesn’t want her stepchildren to come back. Maryn finds the children and then has to figure out new route home. Along their journey, they teach everyone they meet how to make a jacklight, and eventually, people become creative and give faces to the jack lights. The lights create a warmth that gives a feeling of home and safety.

Murphy (2003) also writes a modern tale of survival titled The True Story of Hansel and Gretel. Murphy’s novel is set in Poland during the last few months of the Nazi occupation of the country. The children are Jewish. They are abandoned in the forest at the urging of their stepmother in hopes of hiding from the Nazi search teams. The reality of the Holocaust is lurking over their escape, and their parents fear they will all be captured. Therefore, the father and stepmother tell the children to find a place to hide in the forest, while the parents lead the pursuing Nazis in a different direction. Before leaving, the stepmother teaches the children how to speak to strangers. She changes their Jewish names to the Aryan-sounding Hansel and Gretel to protect them from revealing their true identity to strangers. Unlike the wicked stepmothers in the classic fairy tales, this stepmother loves her stepchildren and ultimately loses her life while leading the Nazi hunters away.

The child characters in Donoghue, Engelhardt, and Murphy’s retellings show how resilient they can become when left in horrible situations such as abandonment and abuse. When abandoned in the forest to survive with only their wits, the children find an inner strength to go on. They learn to use language persuasively to protect themselves from predatory strangers. The siblings rely on one another rather than wait for a parental figure to tell them what they should do. The older child takes on a protective role but is protected by
the younger sibling. This is especially highlighted in Murphy’s scene of Gretel’s brutal rape and her ordeal’s traumatic effects in the forest. Gretel, all along, has been the caretaker of her little brother, Hansel, but when she can no longer deal with reality, Hansel becomes the responsible one. This behavior is also seen in Donoghue’s story. The older brother has watched over his little sister and taken care of her. When he becomes sexually predatory towards the woman in the cottage and is locked in a cage, the little sister frees him and tells him to run away and never come back. He tries to make her run away with him, but she is clever enough to see that she has found a warm and safe place to live and stays with the woman. This suggests a female survival strategy of finding safety and comfort in the company of other women.

From the point of view of child psychology, there are many lessons presented to children in classic fairy tales. These lessons provide a road to understanding a child’s inner fears such as isolation, abuse, and abandonment. In *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, Bettelheim (2010) examines the positive outcome of cruel fairy tales for children. He explains that there are always very defined images of good and evil in fairy tales, or perfect beings and imperfect beings. This is necessary to provide clear boundaries enabling a young child to clearly understand good versus bad. Bettelheim believes that fairy tales provide a means for a child to learn morality and understand why something is good or evil and then choose what kind of person that child would like to become. Fairy-tale plots have complex implications that psychologically give a young child “a secure understanding of what the meaning of one’s life may or ought to be” (Bettelheim, 2010, p. 3). Fairy tales outline a way for a child to comprehend adult themes and dilemmas by providing an understanding through the telling of a story that highlights these dilemmas. By presenting the good and evil in easily defined images, the child can see consequences for behavior.

In each of the stories, an initial break of trust happens between the child and its adult caretaker. Because of issues relating to war and the Holocaust, as illustrated in Murphy’s story, the children are abandoned with hopes that they will survive the war. In Donoghue and Engelhardt’s narratives, poverty and the lack of food for the children are the main issues. The abandoned children in the stories are faced with isolation and fear of dying. They are left alone without parental guidance or supervision to figure out how to survive. Bettelheim writes that a “child is subject to desperate feelings of loneliness and isolation, and he often experiences mortal anxiety” (2010, p. 10). Parents either don’t like to talk about these subjects to their children or simply tell them not to worry about such things. A fairy tale helps to put these feelings of the child into a coherent and thought-provoking narrative. Bettelheim further argues, “If we try to escape separation anxiety and death anxiety by desperately keeping our grasp on our parents, we will only be cruelly forced out, like Hansel and Gretel” (2010, p. 11). The child can grasp the concept of good over evil and survival over death or failure.

While the motifs presented in the retellings highlight cruelty and abandonment, the children cleverly learn survival techniques when left to their own devices. In doing so, the children, who had previously depended on an adult to supply them with food and shelter, become independent by believing in themselves and making moral choices to become “good” human beings. They learn to use language to take command of the situation, and they learn that sometimes lying is a life-saver. They also realize the need for learning from others for survival and practice cooperation with each other. In Murphy’s novel, we are shown the children learning how to survive in the forest when pursued by Nazi hunters. In Donoghue’s story, little sister shows how she has grown as a person when she acknowledges that her brother needs to leave. She no longer needs or wants his protection since it would be at the
cost of the safety she has found with the woman in the cottage. Finally, in Engelhardt’s tale, Maryn survives with the children in the years she spends looking for a way home. By overcoming adversity and escaping death, the children achieve personal growth and maturity. With their newfound optimistic attitude appears a hope and desire for a future because of their knowledge of their own inner strength. Students studying these stories as a cluster will develop essential critical and analytical thinking skills by weighing all these story elements.

Another prevalent motif in the story of Hansel and Gretel is the evil witch. According to Bettelheim (2010), “the witch, who is a personification of the destructive aspects of orality, is as bent on eating up the children as they are on demolishing her gingerbread house” (p. 162). However, Hansel and Gretel’s literal devouring of the witch’s house evokes the reason why their parents abandoned them: they were eating them out of the house. The children in the stories presented have been abandoned and extremely hungry, but they need to control their impulses to survive. The witch has abundant food resources, but like ogres and giants, also an unearthly appetite for little children.

Feminist writers are generally reluctant to dismiss the witch as an evil woman. For example, the woman known as the witch by the townspeople in The True Story of Hansel and Gretel is really just an old woman who lives alone and gathers medicinal herbs. She instructs the children in ways to control their impulses as a means of survival. She also teaches them that they need to work and help the household by doing chores. Many times in fairy tales, a woman living alone is seen as wicked and strange because she is living without the protection of a man. Silima Nanda (2014) writes, “fairy tales embody the ways that societies attempted to silence and oppress women making them passive. Much of fairy tale literature reinforces the idea that women should be wives and mothers, submissive and self-sacrificing” (p. 248). Donoghue’s story also depicts a woman living alone who takes in the children to help them survive. She protects the children and as well as feeds and cares for them. These women are strong, independent, and able to survive alone without the help of a father, son, or husband. The women in both stories are perceived as witches by a patriarchal society but are shown to be single, intelligent women capable of surviving independently.

Bettelheim’s focus on oral fixation as a developmental stage in psychology is a central critical theme in the interpretation of Hansel and Gretel. Bettelheim ignores the themes of cruelty, starvation and abandonment. Tatar (2015) disagrees with Bettelheim’s theory of oral fixation and believes the children are exhibiting normal behavior by eating the gingerbread cottage. They have been lost in the woods and are extremely hungry. Tartar writes, “To speak of the heroes’ ‘oral fixation’ seems preposterous in light of the facts of the story” (p. 197). Tatar’s objection is grounded in the historical record of famines and child abandonment. However, the association between home, food, and mothers (with the witch representing an uncanny mother figure) suggests that when poverty is dire, and parents lack resources, children must look for support among their peers.

Predatory, hostile adults produce a rare occurrence of unity between siblings in “Hansel and Gretel.” Cooperation and caring for each other are ways that the children learn to overcome obstacles to their survival. The children live with fear and, by doing so, find the courage and the ability to grow as individuals. The narratives teach that fear can be overcome with clever dialogue and crafty thinking. The contemporary retellings also illustrate the existence of abuse and dysfunctional family dynamics but exemplify that one can overcome the bad. Once the children are able to overcome adversity, they experience self-growth and
awareness. They learn valuable life lessons about their capability to survive by using their quick wits and language persuasively. The primordial fears invoked in “Hansel and Gretel” make these retellings relevant and uplifting despite their dark themes.

Closure and personal growth are attained by each of the protagonists in their prospective stories. In “The Tale of the Cottage,” the little sister learns that she can sense danger and uses that to find safety. When she finds the comfort of the woman in the cottage, she realizes that survival is better than going back home. In Engelhardt’s story “A Mouth to Speak the Coming Home,” Maryn discovers that home is not always a place but rather a feeling of safety and warmth. She is able to survive with the twins, Hans and Gret, by sharing the tradition of jack lights along the way, which brings her comfort and warmth. In Murphy’s novel The True Story of Hansel and Gretel, the children survive horrendous experiences but can overcome bad with the good. Through their trials, they learn that they are capable of survival and independence by using their cleverness and command of language.

**Conclusion**

The ATU 327 cluster of stories like “Hansel and Gretel” presents obstacles in life, such as suffering and abandonment but also highlights courage, fortitude, and salvation. ATU 327 fairy tales call attention to child abuse, child abandonment, greed, and adversity. These stories also advocate for cleverness and quick thinking on the part of the children when left alone to survive. These tales and their contemporary retellings can be assigned in the language and literature classroom to prompt students to study how fairy tales exemplify cultural values, steer our desires and expressions towards the common good in humanity, and filter our personal aspiration through the larger sieve of morals and ethics. In particular, ATU 327 tales emphasize the central importance of language skills and persuasion as part of survival in a hostile world. Fairy tales call attention to the reality of evil and adversity in the world while accentuating that good is also there to counteract the bad. Survival plays a big part in the stories by demonstrating how quick thinking and intuition may eventually lead to a happily ever after.

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