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Fairy Tales in Relation to Monster Theory: Stories Defining the Transformation of Culture

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Introduction

Fairy tales and monsters at first appear to lie on completely opposite sides of the spectrum of stories. Fairy tales are often considered bite-sized narratives of wonder, rhyme, whimsy, and magic. These stories are filled with beautiful and clever princesses, meaningful transformations, ancient forests, plucky heroes and heroines, lessons to be learned, and wicked stepmothers who always meet their horrific demise. When we think of monsters on the other hand, what often arises in our minds are the forms of hideous, terrifying creatures. Perhaps it's the unnatural patchwork body of Frankenstein; the scaly, humongous fire-breathing Godzilla; sleek predatory lifeforms with bulbous heads and slimy dripping maws; or any of the creatures on the long list of horrors humanity has come up with. However, deep beneath the veneer of terror inspired by these monsters, lies an often overlooked but vital question that forms itself around the core of a monster: what do these monsters imply about their creators and victims by existing in the first place? Sullen Frankenstein with no crazed scientist to frighten in his story, hulking Godzilla with no city to demolish, aliens without a crew to stalk through the dull metal hulls of a spaceship and burst out of, and shadowy monsters with no child to scare into the safety of sleep become far less compelling if we remove the reason for their existence and the victims subject to their terror. Fairy tales too utilize this same question and that is where both domains, which seemed separate, become inexplicably intertwined. Monster Theory applied to fairy tales can be useful in uncovering how the shifting form of these stories are built upon the framework tweaked by new periods and generations throughout time. The shapes of a monster within these tales then offer insights into where the lines of society are drawn in delineating valid or invalid expressions that are either envalued, reflected, or challenged by the existing societal norms. In

turn monster theory within fairy tales lends a fresh and deeper understanding of our culture and the bodies that exist within it.

Monsters are brought to life by the cultural body they are born into, shaped and informed to be the reflections or embodiments of a culture's fears, desires, anxieties, emotions, or beliefs. Jeffery Jerome Cohen captures and explores this idea and the concept of monstrosity in his introductory essay titled "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)" from his edited collection of *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, which was published in 1996. Cohen proposes Seven Theses, or insights, on what monsters in society reflect about the culture they are embedded in. He seeks to dismantle the idea that monsterhood can be smoothly defined by epistemological wholes that exist consistently throughout all of humanity. He rather suggests that monsters are built on a "loosely integrated net or unassimilated hybrid" that capture specific cultural phenomena which in turn capitalize on turning a creature into a monster (3-4). Monsterhood, Cohen explains, is determined by the culture of the time and serves as an embodiment of characteristics; qualities; and ideas that scare, intrigue, and define a society; all the while laying down a firm line of division between what is acceptable and what is "monstrous". Cohen addresses the question of how monsters are made and the influence of culture in defining their characteristics, diving past the initial assumptions that monsters are only meant to scare in order to understand what purposes monster serve in society. He looks deep into the DNA of monsters and asks why certain qualities are deemed monstrous in the first place and what effect they create within a story and the cultural society associated with it. By portraying his seven different insights on the monster's ability that ranges from being able to take on cultural aspects, return no matter how visible the demise, and force its victims to face crisis, Cohen explores how monsters reflect humanity's biases and narratives. By defining why the concepts of monsters exist, what determines a

monster, and why narratively monsters are intriguing, Cohen questions not exclusively monster culture, but actually human culture (6-20).

Brief Summarization of Monster Culture Theses

These seven theses define clear-cut characteristics monsters possess and what purposes they serve across time. Cohen explores these theses in depth in his actual paper, but for reference I will also briefly summarize the theses tittles and basic content.

Thesis I: "The Monster's Body is a Cultural Body:"

First there is Thesis I: "The Monster's Body is a Cultural Body." Cohen proposes that a monster is "an embodiment of a certain cultural moment–of a time, a feeling, and a place" that "quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy" (4). He wants us to know that our culture determines the monster's existence and to recognize that even if society insists monsters are sperate entities disconnected from us that we must defeat, they are actually thoroughly intertwined with humanity. These qualities breathe life into the monster, lending them an "uncanny independence" as they become a pure cultural construct or projection meant to signify something other than itself for the culture it is embedded in (4). Cohen writes that the monster "always inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again" stalking culture through time and staying relevant to every new generation's fears and fantasies (4).

Thesis II: "The Monster Always Escapes:"

Thesis II is called: "The Monster Always Escapes." Cohen notes in this thesis that monsters never truly die. Their form may eventually be defeated, dispersing into the background, but the threat they posed hangs in the air no matter the state of the tangible body (5). Within this thesis Cohen writes that monsters must also be "examined within the intricate matrix of relations

(social, cultural, and literary-historical) that generate them," as monsters possess the ability to adapt to the specific climate of attitude at the time and shift their bodies to encapsulate changing differences; each reappearance and analysis being bound in "a double act of construction and reconstitution" (5-6). Monster theory is driven by the change and escape associated with monstrous figures and comforting them is both a process and epiphany (6).

Thesis III: "The Monster is the Harbinger of Category Crisis:"

Thesis III is titled: "The Monster is the Harbinger of Category Crisis." This proposal is tied to Thesis II as Cohen states that what allows the monster to escape is its resistance to easy categorization. The monster is often called dangerous because it is "suspended between forms that threaten to smash distinctions" and has consistently possessed the power to evade and undermine since they began appearing in our stories and history (6). In refusing to fit into convenient compartmentalization, the monster demands a "radical rethinking of boundary and normality" from those it faces. It challenges those who perceive it to think in new spirals and forces them to adopt "new interconnected methods of perceiving the world" (6). It rebukes methods of traditional organization and is therefore always a contested cultural space (7).

Thesis IV: "The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference:"

Thesis IV proposes: "The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference" which explores 'othering' of monsters and how the seemingly monstrous characteristics arise from cultural, political, racial, economic, and sexual differences (7). These become powerful catalysts to monstrous representation in history and storytelling, and Cohen notes how "political or ideological difference is as much a catalyst…on a micro levels as cultural alterity in the macrocosm" (8). Cultures birth the monster in real time as "one difference becomes another as the normative categories of gender, sexuality, national identity, and ethnicity slide together like

the imbricated circles of a Venn diagram, abjecting from the center that which becomes the monster" (11). Cohen writes that difference is like the monstrous Hydra that sprouts two heads in the place of one lost, and invites more "possibilities of escape, resistance, and disruption" with even greater force (11).

Thesis V: "The Monster Polices the Border of the Possible:"

Thesis V is titled: "The Monster Polices the Border of the Possible." The monster attempts to prevent mobility, whether intellectual, geographical, or sexual, by bordering the social spaces personal bodies are allowed to exist within. Cohen writes that to step outside of this space risks being attacked by the monsters patrolling the borders, or risk becoming monstrous oneself (11). "The monster of prohibition polices the borders of the possible, interdicting through its grotesque body some behavior and actions, [and] envaluing others" and in turn its "destructiveness is actually a deconstructiveness that threatens to reveal that difference originates in the process rather than fact as fact itself is weak to reconstruction and change" (13-14).

Thesis VI: "Fear of the Monster is Really a Kind of Desire:"

Thesis VI is titled: "Fear of the Monster is Really a Kind of Desire" which reveals that though we may be trained to distrust and loathe the monster, there is an enviable quality in its freedom and sublime despair (17). Monsters allow for safe expressions of escapist fantasies that may include darker tendencies, but are only performed in delimited and liminal spaces. It is when the monster threatens to overstep its boundaries and destroy or deconstruct the thin walls of category and culture that the escapist delight gives way to true horror and fury (17). This thesis also relies on an audience's understanding of the genre and story being told, building upon their assumptions and learned experiences, which only furthers the horror felt when those walls start to crumble.

Thesis VII: "The Monster Stand at the Threshold…of Becoming:"

The last thesis, Thesis VII is titled: "The Monster Stands at the Threshold…of Becoming" which is Cohen's final thoughts on why monsters exist. The existence of monsters asks humanity why it has created them in the first place, returning to haunt its creators no matter how far we may attempt to push them away. They question how we perceive the world and how we have misrepresented what we may have attempted to place, generating monstrous figures in the place of real cultural assumptions about differences or what we don't understand. From being shaped extensively by cultures, to being un-categorically defined, to forcing individuals to confront crises, to capturing what is the other and separating it from acceptable society, to maintaining power for certain groups of people and keeping others subjected, to highlighting repressed or secret desires in a safe and clearly limited way, and to revealing hidden truths about culture through the lens of monstrosity, monsters are identified in many ways. By these concepts the author means to define a few of the forms monsters can take. Through his theses Cohen seeks to widen the reader's understanding of the cultural impact on a monster's construction and purpose.

History of Folk Tales to Fairy Tales

What may seem to be two completely separate domains actually share many borders and similarities, the main connection being how both are greatly influenced by culture, resist neat categorization, are perpetually escaping, reforming, and delineating what is acceptable or possible during a moment in culture. Cohen stresses that culture is a constantly fluid concept that like history, individuality, subjectivity, and gender is better understood when we realize it is "composed of a multitude of fragments" that does not crystalize until solidly placed in the past where it finally settles and remains stagnant until the next revealing epiphany stirs up its

sediment (3). Likewise fairy tales are pieces that are consistently being resurrected and transformed by time, culture, and the needs and interests of every new generation and group who engages with them (Warner xxvii). In that reconstruction and reconstitution of fairy tales, they act as connective tissue between a mythological past and the present realities. Typically fairy tales are now associated with children's literature/storytelling, dominated in the modern age for the most part by the visions established by large corporations like Disney, who have reshaped them into sanitized, family-friendly, profitable tales of animated color and whimsical creature sidekicks. Writer Jack Zipes sums up Disney's hold on these stories as "so consummate that his signature has [obscured] the names of Charles Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen, and Collodi. If children and adults think of the great classical fairy tales today, be it *Snow White, Sleeping Beauty,* or *Cinderella,* they will think Walt Disney" (414). However, the origin of fairy tales stretches far before silver screens and even before the original bound collection of stories published by the Brothers Grimm in the 19th century.

Fairy tales began as oral folk talks told by gifted tellers, often women, and were meant to embed meaning into the daily lives of their community. Telling stories brought members together to bond and provided them with a sense of purpose or mission. Tales were meant as a way to explain, describe, and report incidents that happened relevant to the community and were "consequently… tales of initiation, worship, warning, and indoctrination. Whatever the type may have been, the voice of the narrator was known" (Zipes 415). Then as the ages changed so did fairy tales. With the rise of the printing press and literacy, fairy tales adapted to fit the new needs of forms, themes, productions, receptions, and social classes. What likely started out as stories told and shaped by maternal lineages in villages and nurseries all across Europe changed ownership and came to rest under the names of the Brothers Grimm (Rowe 405). With that shift

the stories too readjusted their morals, messages, and structures to refit the culture they were injected into. During this period of time there were also attempts to categorize the tales into myths, fables, legends, comical anecdotes, and fairy tales. However, these clear-cut distinctions are not as sticky as scholars would like as these labels tend to blur together as the tales are reinvented and tropes subverted with every new re-telling in the form of a new book, movie, or artifact (415). It is difficult to categorize when "fairy tales have no more sense of nation or native tongue than swifts or butterflies, and have proved stubborn and repeating immigrants, always slipping across borders (and back again)" (Warner 49). In fact, it wasn't until the eighteenth and nineteenth century that fairy tales were even aimed towards children due to their "vulgar" origins in the lower class according to Zipes. Before this period they were literary tales written for adults and meant to push and showcase certain cultural morals in their content. When they became accessible to children many were further sanitized and expurgated or were completely new moralized tales that aimed to domesticate imagination (418). This may have been for some good reasons too, because as magical as fairy tales may be, they hold their fair share of monsters and horrors. It may be a wolf devouring a young girl, a palace chef ordered to cook a young woman, a child chopped up to make blood pudding, a wicked stepmother poisoning a fair lady, flippant death, or a grievous injury to a man that will kill him outside the narrative (Warner xxvi). As fantastical as the stretches of faerie may be, the horizons are fraught with both the "unknown or the intimated–the violence of monsters and the caprices of imps" as well as "open to the blissful idleness and pleasure (which also come with their own risks)" (Warner 4).

Fairy tales are constantly undergoing a reconstitution as they are deconstructed, stitched together, picked apart, and retold again in a thousand creative ways. Their characters and antagonists are shaped by every new generation's feelings, and the monsters found lurking in

their margins are no exception. The figures in a fairy tale seek to signify something other than themselves, inviting those who engage with them to spiral in laboratories of thought experiments, allegories, or alternatives to the world they know in safe expressions (4). These stories are like an ancient ever bubbling soup where narratives, characters, lessons, and emotions are scooped out and added to the pot, becoming an amalgamation of human experience and deepening the flavor as time passes and it becomes accessible to more voices. The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss commented on beast fairy tales and how they are used to explore "common experiences–fear of sexual intimacy, assault, cruelty, and injustice; and, in general, the struggle for survival" (Warner 20). Beast fairy tales also are culturally widespread and revise themselves to fit the cultures of Europe, Ancient Egypt, India, Africa, and America as needed. Scholar Donald Haase actively encourages adults and children alike to reshape classic fairy tales to fit their experiences and understandings. "By actively selecting, discussing, enacting, illustrating, adapting, and retelling the tales they experience, both adults and children can reassert their own proprietary rights to meaning" (446). Haase supports the notion that fairy tales are malleable bodies that allow anyone the freedom to express their ways of thinking and the growing consciousness of the world around us. These stories offer readers a wide variety of elements, characters, and monsters to pick from and mold to our will, no matter the time or place.

Red Riding Hood

Monster theory invites readers and enjoyers of fairy tales to engage in a deeper avenue of thinking that asks what the underlying implications of the monstrous figures that may lurk in our fairy tales represent. By reading into the monsters our cultures have adopted or brought to the spotlight only to destroy, we can pierce through the veil of obscurity to strike at the murky heart of what some fear, or desire, the most. Monsters are abundant in fairy tales, constantly escaping a

permanent demise and returning at full force to confront the protagonists of the story. Little Red Riding Hood is a tale that has existed for centuries and been told across all cultures whether in Italy, France, China, Africa, or Germany. It goes by many names and usually follows a storyline that tends to include a girl not yet grown, a politely dangerous predator, food of some sort, death (temporary or permanent), and cleverness (or a savior in the versions where the girl does not save herself). Using Monster Theory to dissect the many versions of Little Red Riding Hood offers us a looking glass into the values and sentiments reflected during the times they were written or told. By using this theory we can gain an additional understanding on how these feelings change. The Brothers Grimm's recorded version, titled "Little Red Cap," functions as a story of caution that envalues staying on the morally right path to prevent bad things from happening. Then there's Charles Perrault's "Little Red Riding Hood" which blatantly blares the moral of obeying authorities and tells children it is best to behave meekly while keeping neat appearances and to be cautious about those who might trick them in their own lives and social circles. Then there are other versions like the "False Grandmother," "The Tale of the Tiger Woman," and "The Story of the Grandmother" which celebrates the girl's cleverness and survival instincts no matter the personal loss suffered.

No matter the tale, the monstrous 'wolves/tigers/beasts' never fail to lose, whether that defeat results in their death or simple disappearance from the story once finished. If we were to take these fairy tales at their face value, we may be left with a somewhat pleasant moral and a slightly upset stomach, depending on the detail of gore and eating included in the version we engaged in. However, digging deeper, one of the reasons Little Red Riding Hood may be so compelling is because as Maria Tartar puts it, "the girl can stand in for any innocent victim while the wolf can be any kind of predatory villain. Nazi ideologues read the story as a parable about

rapacious Jews preying on innocent German purebloods; feminists read the tale as an allegory about rape; and psychoanalysts saw in it a fable about female maturation" (11). The hulking figure of a wolf, tiger, ogress, or beast no longer stands for the actual creature, but grows larger than itself as it becomes the Wolf or Beast, with a capital W or B and stands to represent an entity outside of itself that possesses darker, more sinister implications about the society it plays a role in. No matter how spectacular the spectacle of the monster's demise may be, they will continue to lurk off-page, rematerializing in Little Red's way when she inevitably must take the forest path again, whether in this century or the next.

The story of Little Red and the predators that hunt her are in a cycle of perpetual transformation as her tale has become the vehicle for a multitude of messages. The short, vivid language of the stories display iconic recognizable symbols that have stepped into our modern culture and can effortlessly be invoked. Whether it's the single flash of a bright red cloak, red hoodie, red jacket, red ribbon, red hat, red boots, or red basket on a screen, the cover of a novel, a newspaper comic, in the words of a poem, or any other media and narrative, her story is fluid, relatable, and alive. She and the monsters in her tale reflect the ever-shifting, and never-ending, personal and cultural anxieties that remind us of who we are, what we care about, and how it came to be that way (Tartar 14).

The Little Mermaid

The tale of "The Little Mermaid" has undergone radical transformation since its initial telling by Hans Christian Andersen in 1837. Many likely associate the classic fairy tale with Disney's animated movie which came out over a hundred years later in 1989, and soon many more will associate that title best with the 2023 live-action starring Halle Baily. The tale of *The Little Mermaid* raises particularly interesting questions when observed under the lens Monster

Theory. Many of Andersen's tales strived to compel his readers by his "evocation of the emotionally gratifying satisfactions in witnessing pain and empathizing with its victims" (Tartar 280). His original version of "The Little Mermaid" mainly served as a vehicle for reader catharsis experienced through the main character, however he also injected some suspiciously Christian moral about the afterlife, suffering silently, and earning salvation as well at the very tail end of his story. She sacrifices aspects of her personhood and identity in order to be near the prince she has fallen in love with. The Little Mermaid trades her fins for legs that shoot pain through her body for every step she takes, she gives her tongue and voice, she abandons her home and sisterhood for a lonely existence above the waves, and ultimately allows herself to perish when she cannot bring herself to slay the prince and his bride.

By contrast Disney's retelling is starkly different, rewriting the story to be one about the power of love and happily ever after–with the underlying intention to make profits on selling such a fantasy. Ariel loses her voice in this story (though not in such a grotesque snatching like the original), but easily gains it back when the villain of her story is defeated. This *Little Mermaid* has no painful transformation, is accepted with warm and ease, and her relationships all work themselves out by the end of the film no matter the state of her rebelliousness and troubled relationship with her family at the beginning of the film. Disney's version is one of an escapist delight, but it leaves more mature audiences to wonder how long the spell of her happiness can last before problems smoothly implied then sidestepped by the movie will arise–like her sidekick Flounder becoming dinner at the royal table.

Then there's the case of Disney's live-action *The* Little Mermaid set to release in late May 2023. This movie proves to be the most applicable to the theses of Monster Theory, not necessarily because of the content, but in how Monster Theory can be utilized to analyze

characters that are not inherently monstrous themselves, but invoke monstrous outrage and uproar. The actress set to play Ariel is a woman of color rocking auburn locs, brown skin, and a green-toned iridescent tail (and upper covering that is purple, but in this version almost matches her fins with its color scaling) that is highly reminiscent of 1989 Ariel's most iconic features in her animated appearance. However, in response to Bailey's confirmed casting back in 2019, a large backlash of racially-motivated trolling took place across a myriad of social media platforms with users decrying the 'inaccuracy,' 'agenda,' and 'outrage,' they felt was reflected in the choice. Now with a few years having passed and the movie set to release fairly soon, there are still disgruntled mumbling on the Internet about the aggrieved feelings certain fans feel at the change in skin color and greater diversity included in the overall film. What was once a universally beloved story has become a battleground for an onslaught of resentment, wrath, malevolence, and ill will.

These responses interestingly resonate with Theses I, II, III, IV, and V of Cohen's Monster Culture. This casting appears to threaten certain fans' personal borders of acceptability in these genres and though it may try to hide itself behind a veneer of simply being annoyed, recognizing that these differences are perceived as monstrous informs us about the attitude and disposition of cultural bodies that exist in within our society. Cohen notes that the "feminine and cultural others are monstrous enough by themselves in patriarchal society, but when they threaten to mingle, the entire economy of desire comes under attack (15). It also raises the fascinating question of what happens when individuals with differences that can be perceived as 'monstrous' escape from the spaces society has limited them to. In many cases the individuals are forcefully labelled monstrous themselves, but I would like to challenge that this reveals more about the monstrosity of the labeler versus the labelled. It uncovers the biases, expectations,

fears, and thinking of a cultural body and allows us to clearly understand where they arise from versus blindly accepting the reasons tossed out for sustaining a person's monstrosity at face value. Ultimately I believe that inviting 'monsters' into new spaces are necessary in order to take steps to understanding and breaking down the partitions that create these distinctions in the first place. As Tartar writes about the message of the original fairy tale, and seems to still apply no matter the iteration of the story, "we may enter the tales through the gates of Beauty but we linger in the precincts of the unsightly and grotesque, in places that lead us to look in horror rather than to gaze in pleasure. As compensation we exit these narratives with a renewed sense of compassion and connection but, more importantly, with a more capacious sense of what beauty and its grim opposite can do" (282-283).

Conclusion

Storytelling is engrained in humanity's bones, forming the skeletal structure of our culture and deepest societal truths. It is how we tell of our experiences, communicate with our fellow humans, and relate with the wider world. The fairy tales and monsters produced in these engagements are intertwined with the tapestry of our human narrative and serve to not only delight and terrify in turn, but contain deeper insights that reveal how we perceive the cultures surrounding us and highlight the tolerance we feel towards the diversity of its plentiful expressions. Fairy tales capture our imagination and wonder, bottling it up in succinct but vivid stories that inform us of the values, characteristics, beliefs, and policies we (as a culture) have deemed important, relevant, and meaningful to our presence in this space and moment in time. Monsters embody the differences we see between us and others and challenge us to confront the cultural assumptions we make about gender, race, sexuality, and politics. They lurk at the edges of our fairy tales and stories, demanding us to face them and come to terms with what we've

created and why. They question our reactions to them and thrust us into often uncomfortable, but necessary discourse which allows the full scope of human discovery and knowledge to shine through. They resurrects themselves with every new retelling to ask why it exists and what in ourselves we see reflected in those monstrous bodies.

Today we live in a continually polarizing society where what is considered the 'norm' is consistently being challenged, changed, rewritten, crossed out, and tugged back and forth over the delicate division between acceptable and horrifying. The concepts and ways of thinking posed by Monster Theory and applied to media and human stories are more applicable to us today than then they have ever been, and perhaps keeping the structure of these theories in mind will always be relevant. Understanding how the beloved or well-known stories of our current modern age inform us of our own biases opens our eyes to the influence culture has on us– whether for good or for worse. So the next time you encounter the rising bulk of the perceived monsters that may lurk in your minds, lives, or stories, hopefully you are able to face them and truly see though that monstrous body to see whether they are an amalgamation of true horrors, or simply of perceived differences given form.

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