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## **“You Eat the Red Cheek and I’ll Eat the White Cheek”: Wholesome Nourishment and Chaotic Consumption in the Grimms’ Fairy Tales**

Snow White eats a poisoned apple, Hansel and Gretel nibble a house made of bread and sugar, and Little Red Cap herself is gobbled up; whether the protagonists are eating or being eaten, consumption is central to the plot of each of these tales by Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm. First published in 1812, stories like “Snow White,” “Hansel and Gretel,” and “Little Red Cap” are rife with food imagery. In these tales, food soothes, nurtures, entices, and foils, and often represents a relationship with a maternal figure; wholesome eating is associated with benevolent motherliness, while inappropriate eating is linked to the ubiquitous evil mother archetype. Although fairy tales are now considered children’s literature, they were originally intended for adults as well. In *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre*, Jack Zipes elucidates that the Grimms’ tales were “appropriated from an oral tradition that included the entire family and [were] a cultural form of entertainment determined by adults” (206). Therefore, the Grimms’ depictions of food express contemporary anxieties about consumption that affected all levels of society despite age and class, and continue to be relevant today. As Carolyn Daniel suggests in *Voracious Children: Who Eats Whom in Children’s Literature*, “food events are always significant, in reality as well as in fiction. They reveal fundamental preoccupations, ideas, and beliefs of society [. . .] and produce visceral pleasure” (1-2). In this essay, I will

demonstrate that positive and negative depictions of eating connote order and disorder, respectively. I will then explore the relationship between food and parenting, followed by a discussion on the prevalence of the cannibalistic mother in the Grimms' fairy tales. I intend to show that the Grimms placed emphasis on food and eating in their tales, in order to reinforce the appropriate behaviours concerning consumption for children and adults alike.

When food is depicted positively, it represents stability and order; conversely, negative associations connote disorder. Zipes quotes Marina Warner: "food – procuring it, preparing it, eating it – dominates [fairy tales] as the overriding image of survival; consuming it offers contradictory metaphors of life and civilization as well as barbarity and extinction" (Zipes 224). In the Grimms' tales, food either signals safety or tricks and entraps. For example, upon reaching the safety of the dwarves' cabin, Snow White sees a table spread with a white tablecloth and helps herself to "a bit of bread and vegetables from each plate and [drinks] a sip of wine from each cup" (Grimm 118). She then finds the most comfortable bed and allows herself some rest, because she feels safe. This same sense of security is evident in "Hansel and Gretel" when the witch takes the children warmly by the hand and says, "Don't be afraid, come in and stay with me. You will come to no harm" (114). She treats them to a beautiful feast before showing them to "two little beds made up clean and white" which they climb into, thinking all the while that "they were in heaven" (114). In each of these scenarios, food, coupled with a warm place to sleep, is an indicator of security and order after an ordeal in the perilous forest. These are positive associations between eating and order that the young reader will be familiar with.

However, both the protagonists and the villains use food to foil their foes. Snow White falls prey to her wicked stepmother by way of a poisoned apple, and Hansel and Gretel are seduced by a house "made of bread, [with a] roof

made of cake and the windows of sparkling sugar” (114). The very foods that the fairy tale protagonists trust put them in harm’s way. These scenes suggest that there are times when we ought to be wary of other people, of food, or of that which is ordinarily comforting to us; this is where the representations of food become didactic lessons in control and identity. Daniel writes, “to be a proper (human) subject one must eat in a controlled manner, according to cultural rules” (3). Self-control and caution are the lessons being taught here; in these stories, food does not always symbolize order and stability, and the tales show the importance of being cautious during encounters with strangers. Little Red Cap learns a lesson about trusting strangers when the wolf swallows her whole; however, she escapes and retaliates against the wolf, tricking him through an appeal to his appetite. She fools the wolf once, when she fills his belly with rocks, making him feel full so she can escape; she fools the wolf a second time when she lures him off of her Grandmother’s roof with water leftover from cooking sausages: “the smell of the sausages rose up to the wolf’s nostrils. . . he stuck his neck out so far that he couldn’t keep his footing. . . and he slid off the roof and slid straight into the big trough and was drowned” (30-1). Gretel also uses the witch’s appetite to her advantage and pushes the greedy hag into the very oven where she intends to cook Hansel. Again, food, or the promise thereof, is employed to harm. In all of these scenarios, food is associated with disorder, demonstrating what ought to be nourishing can sometimes be used inappropriately, to trick and entrap.

The positive associations between safety, comfort, and nourishment stem from the child’s primal relationship with their mother. As such, the good mother stereotype in fairy tales is always associated with wholesome food (Daniel 90). Daniel argues, “the physical and psychological satisfaction derived from (babies) feeding creates a fundamentally important and lasting attachment to the

mother's body and to rich, sweet foods" (90). These sweet, nourishing foods are found in abundance within the Grimms' tales. For instance, Little Red Cap's mother sends her daughter to grandmother's house with freshly baked cake. The girl tells the wolf "we baked yesterday, and we want my grandmother, who's sick and weak, to have something nice that will make her feel better" (Grimm 29). There are clear connections between Little Red Cap's loving mother, a safe home warmed by the oven, the comforting smell of food baking, and notions of nurturing and care. Daniel notes, "[. . .] protagonists receive 'emotional nourishment' (in varying degrees) as well as gastronomic pleasure from the food provided by maternal figures. The food symbolizes love, comfort, and safety" (95). Thus, as Daniel further argues, when protagonists crave rich, intoxicating foods, they are yearning for that "primal mother-child relationship" (90). Hansel and Gretel are ravenous when they see the witch's house sparkling with sugar; they have been abandoned by their mother twice, and the sweet chunks of roof and window that they gobble voraciously represent a desire to re-establish some maternal comfort in their lives. They are then easily taken in by the witch, who pretends to be a sympathetic mother figure and offers them "a fine meal of milk and pancakes, sugar, apples, and nuts" (Grimm 114). Though she later reveals herself to be evil, the children accept the witch unquestioningly as a woman who will take care of them because they associate rich, sweet foods with a nurturing mother. Thus, in fairy tales a mother who feeds and nurtures her child appropriately is the paragon of love, order, and the good parent against which all other maternal figures are measured.

Unfortunately for the protagonists, bad mothers appear more frequently in the Grimms' tales than good mothers do. These women are just as closely linked to food and consumption as their benevolent alter egos; however, the food they are associated with is as unfulfilling and

dangerous as a good mother's food is wholesome and safe. As Maria Tatar writes in "Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales," "the many faces of maternal evil in fairy tales represent the obverse of all the positive qualities associated with mothers. Instead of functioning as nurturers and providers, [. . .] female villains withhold food" (140). Hansel and Gretel's mother abandons them to starve in the woods, with only crumbly pieces of bread to sustain them. She does this so that she and her husband might have a chance at surviving the famine (Grimm 111). While such a heartless act might seem unthinkable to modern readers, the Grimms touched upon an issue not unheard of to their contemporary audiences; they likely employed this didactic story to "warn against child neglect in times of suffering" (Tatar 140). Zipes argues that translating "Hansel and Gretel" for a modern audience exposes the plight of impoverished families and "means revisiting the social conditions that make poor people desperate" (205). Starvation is not the bad mother's only motivation for neglect or harm. As the evil stepmother in "Snow White" demonstrates, jealousy could also be a factor. When the Queen discovers that she is no longer the fairest in the land, "envy and pride [grow] like weeds in her heart. . . she [sends] for a huntsman and [says]: 'Get that child out of my sight. Take her into the forest'" (117). When the Queen discovers the girl has survived, she deliberately crafts a poisonous apple to finish the job. She offers it Snow White: "look, I'm cutting it in half. You eat the red cheek and I'll eat the white cheek.' But the apple [was] so cleverly made that only the red cheek was poisoned" (121). Clearly, the Queen's maternal instinct is wanting; not only is she withholding safety and order, by sending Snow White into the woods, she seeks to poison the girl by feeding her an ordinarily wholesome apple that she has pointedly tampered with. The mother figures in "Hansel and Gretel" and "Snow White" are the Grimms' attempt to illustrate neglectful or inappropriate parenting. These examples of bad mothering

are exhibited through the associations with food, which stand in direct contrast to fairy-tale representations of good mothers, in order to inform children and adults on appropriate behaviours regarding childcare.

Mothers who relish feasting on children are even more terrifying than mothers who neglect, starve, or poison them. Cannibalism is the ultimate evil intention for negative mother archetypes. In both “Hansel and Gretel” and “Snow White,” the child who seeks love and safety through food becomes the object of the mother’s appetite instead: the witch, who is arguably a parallel of Hansel’s bad mother, desires to roast and eat him, and when Snow White’s evil step-mother receives the lungs and liver she believes to be her step-daughter’s, “the cook [is] ordered to salt and stew them, and the godless woman [eats] them” (117). The implication that a mother may desire to eat her child plunges readers and protagonists alike into a world gone topsy-turvy; a mother’s priority should be satisfying her child’s appetite, not satisfying her own appetite with a child. Zipes notes, “folklore is filled with [. . .] a fair share of mothers, grannies, witches, ogresses, sorceresses, and female demons who lust after children, punish them, and destroy them [. . .] Human beings are [. . .] projected as monsters who eat and destroy their own. Why?” (216).

There are several theories regarding the prevalence of maternal cannibalism in fairy tales like “Hansel and Gretel” and “Snow White.” Tatar suggests that evil females who “threaten to turn children into their own source of nourishment [. . .] take ferocious possessiveness to an extreme” (140). She explains that other lesser-known Grimms’ tales that feature the consumption of humans, “suggest[s] that cannibalism was not unknown in times of famine” (140). Perhaps the Grimms addressed this greedy perversion of nature as another attempt at real-life didacticism, urging parents not to eat their children, but to nurture and share with them even in times of famine.

Jacqueline Labbe argues that there is more to the mother-as-cannibal trope than a lesson for parents: “when food transmutes from nourishment for the child’s body to a metonym for the child’s body, eating is less about satisfying corporeal needs than about symbolizing moral needs” (101). Being eaten as a punishment combines “bodily sensations like satiety and self-flagellation” (101) and, Labbe notes, it is only ever the bad children who end up “culinary delights” (100). For example, Little Red Cap disobeys her mother by straying from the path, and is consequently feasted upon (Grimm 29); in this context, the lesson in morality lauds obedience for the young audience. However, according to Zipes there is

no one exclusive reason for the unsavoury and uncontrollable appetites of adults, often represented metaphorically as monsters, who abuse their power over children. The causes are numerous: famine, starvation, disobedience of the young, fear of losing power, jealousy, sensual pleasure, and so on. The adult as ogre or witch arbitrarily eats children, lives off children, is obsessed by children, and devouring the young is his or her way of life. The appetite rules. (225)

Juxtaposed with the nurturing mother, whose motives are clear, the cannibalistic woman’s reasons for eating the young are numerous and yet loosely defined. Like the witch in “Hansel and Gretel,” the child-eating woman is the antithesis of the loving mother but looks just like her. Children cannot immediately discern whether this woman intends to eat them or not; this is what makes the cannibal’s appetite so frightening, and this is why she features so frequently as the ultimate fairy-tale villain. Despite the differing opinions of scholars like Zipes, Tatar, and Labbe, it is clear that depictions of mother figures who aim to dine upon children illustrate the ultimate in disorder and terror.

At the beginning of “Hansel and Gretel,” their father

sighs and wonders, “how can we feed our poor children when we haven’t even got enough food for ourselves?” (Grimm 111). As Labbe notes,

[in the nineteenth century] food was a contentious issue. Whether it was the dining etiquette newly demanded by an increasingly prosperous middle class, or the outrage occasioned by the scandal of food adulteration, or the moralities attached to eating too much or too little of the right stuff or the wrong stuff, eating, appetite, and digestion occupied many minds. (93)

These tales are still remain popular today because they deal with issues that are worrisome two centuries later. Starvation, poverty, obesity, and a concern about what is in our food and where our food is coming from all remain contentious issues: food is still as closely linked to feelings of order and disorder as it was in the nineteenth century (Zipes 219-20). For the young reader, eating is already tied to notions of survival, comfort, love, and order due to the primal mother-child relationship. By reinforcing the image of the nurturing mother through food symbolism and instilling suspicion and fear with examples of bad and cannibalistic mothers, the Grimms’ fairy tales demonstrate how food can also represent disorder. As Tatar writes, “It is telling [. . .] that the Grimms elected to include this kind of account in their collection. Clearly, for them there was no distinct dividing line between the fiction of fairy tales and the facts of everyday life” (140). Whether rich or bland, sparkling or crumbling, saccharine or poisonous, the food motifs in these tales are seductive vehicles for reinforcing cultural norms regarding appropriate and inappropriate eating, feeding, sharing, and parenting.

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