

# THE TRAIL OF TALES: EXPLORING THE THEME OF TRAVELLING IN FAIRY TALES

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## ABSTRACT

I have always found the legendary opening line of fairy tales particularly interesting- “Once upon a time”. At the very outset, the fairy tales invite us for a time-travel. But, it is not only the readers who travel, the protagonists and other characters also travel in the course of the narratives. A journey is quite a familiar motif in fairy tales and folk narratives, where the hero/heroine has a quest at hand.

Rather than non-fictional travel narratives, I have chosen to look at the fictional journey that some of the fairy tale characters undertake. Why do they undertake that particular journey? Is it a self-imposed quest or a compulsion? Where does the journey take them? What is the significance of that journey? Of course, the journey can be viewed at times under a metaphorical light, which simply adds to its significance. Is it a mental/inward journey for the character as well? A journey towards self-realization perhaps?

To discuss the nuances of the motif of travel in fairy tales, I have chosen texts like *The Little Red Riding Hood*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Hansel and Gretel*. I will also refer to the novel *The Wizard of Oz* (though it does not go hand in hand with the above-mentioned tales) as travelling plays a major role in it. In addition to this, I will be looking at certain modern retellings of the above-mentioned tales, looking at how the old tales have travelled ahead in time. Do these retellings deviate from the well-trodden path and offer us new perspectives on the idea of travelling? Keeping the idea of travelling central to my paper, I would like to trace the various depictions of it through the fairy tales and their retellings.

## INTRODUCTION

Who doesn't remember Alice going down the rabbit hole or a wardrobe opening up to Narnia or the platform Nine and Three Quarters? In tales of fantasy and magic, portals seem to play a timeless role, allowing the characters to escape the mundane world. Such tales, in turn, become a portal for the readers through which they can escape into the land of fantasy. Travelling to new realms add on to the element of wonder that is so inextricably tied to fantasy narratives. However, my essay, rather than focusing on portals or magical getaways, is based on a more generalized idea of travel as depicted in some popular fairy tales.

While discussing the fairy tales, I will be sticking to the stories as told by Charles Perrault and Grimm Brothers. The common beginning of fairy tales is usually "once upon a time", which immediately invites us to a time travel. It invites the reader to a world filled with magic and unlikely circumstances. So, why do the characters in these fairy tales travel? What is the significance of those journeys? Through the stories *Briar Rose* or *Sleeping Beauty*, *Red Riding Hood* and *Hansel and Gretel*, I will be exploring these questions. Taking into account one literary adaptation of each of these three stories, I will trace the journey of transformation that these stories have undertaken and the changes that the adaptations have brought into the theme of travel.

### ***Briar Rose, or Sleeping Beauty***

We are all familiar with the story of Sleeping Beauty, the damsel who slept for a thousand years under a curse till a prince rescued her from her predicament. Her name is more of an epithet, combining her curse and her cure; it was her beauty that would tempt the prince to break the curse. She is called Sleeping Beauty in Perrault's version and Briar Rose in the Grimms' narrative. For my essay, I would be sticking to the latter, as it is a more widely known version. It is interesting that the Grimms chose to call her Briar Rose- it not only becomes symbolic of her innocence and virginity, but it also alludes to the thorny path that one would have to traverse to reach her. The name also gave her the aura of a legendary beauty, whose praise had spread far and wide.

Cursed with a thousand years of sleep, the princess slept on while hedges of thorns sprang around the entire castle, which grew thicker with passing time. At this point of the story, the Grimms reveal her name or at least the name by which she was known then- Briar Rose. She was like a beautiful rose that lay in the centre of the briar, waiting to be plucked. She is portrayed as the ultimate “prize” that the prince has to win to prove his chivalry. But, before he could win her over with the kiss, he had to travel through the thorny path to reach her and here begins the theme of travel. The princes who came in the hope of winning Briar Rose had undertaken the journey as a quest, to prove their valour and win a partner. But the thorns acted as a barrier and I quote, “the thorns and bushes laid hold of them, as it were with hands; and there they stuck fast, and died wretchedly” (Grimms 43). The journey was a challenge that none of them could complete; and the punishment was terrible. Surprisingly, this part of an apparently children’s story deals with actual, gory deaths. The journey, unfortunately, would become their nemesis. But why did they fail? It was not simply due to lack of valour; the path would remain unyielding till that magical period of hundred years passed and the right person turned up.

When it was time and *the* prince undertook the same journey that had taken so many lives, he did not find the journey so tough “and as the prince came to the thicket he saw nothing but beautiful flowering shrubs, through which he went with ease, and they shut in after him as thick as ever” (Grimms 43). Though his quest was the same as the previous princes, the charm ensured that his path was different. The successful completion of his journey forms the crux of the narrative; it is a trial of love for the prince and the only chance of redemption for the princess. If seen metaphorically, this hundred years (of course, hyperbolically) can be seen as the time period during which the princess attains sexual maturity. If the piercing of her thumb by a spindle (unmistakably a phallic symbol) is taken as the onset of puberty and the arrival of the prince as her first sexual encounter or “awakening”. So, it can be said that it is not only the prince who travelled, but the princess also underwent a journey of her own, though of an inward nature. Her journey towards maturity is a passive one as compared to the prince’s actual journey. The name with which she is more popularly known- “Sleeping Beauty”, carries in it the essence of that passivity.

This story *Briar Rose* has inspired numerous adaptations. For this essay, I will stick to the novel *Briar Rose* by Jane Yolen, as the idea of travelling plays a pivotal role in it. It is a

brilliant take on the *Sleeping Beauty* narrative, where the fairy tale is initially used as a leitmotif running throughout the narrative, but goes on to have bigger implications. Yolen undertakes the seemingly impossible task of weaving the story of a Holocaust survivor into the fabric of a “happily ever after” story.

The protagonist of the tale is Becca. Her grandmother, fondly known as Gemma, is fond of narrating stories to her grandchildren but the story of *Sleeping Beauty* is the only one that she narrates over and over again. Her version of the tale has a few changes from the usual narrative of the fairy tale, for example, there is no spindle, but a great mist puts the entire kingdom to sleep. When Gemma dies, delirious, she could only utter, “I am Briar Rose” and she expresses her last wish to her favourite grandchild Becca, “Promise me you will find the castle. Promise me you will find the prince” (Yolen 16). Becca did, and it was this promise that led her towards a journey, or a quest towards a staggering discovery.

Becca systematically began her research with whatever information she could gather to unravel the meaning behind Gemma’s words. While the others believed that Gemma had been simply delirious, Becca suspected that there was more to it. Her investigations take her on an actual journey (a long one), to Chelmno, in Poland, a Jewish extermination camp, where she discovers that Gemma had been a Holocaust survivor. The trail leads her to Josef Potocki, who narrates Gemma’s story of survival. She had been a victim of gassing by the Nazis and left to die in a pit. A gang of Holocaust survivors on the run had chanced upon her while she was still alive and happened to save her, Josef Potocki being the one to revive her. She had been nicknamed princess after her survival and the ill-famed concentration camp was supposedly the “castle” which had put her to sleep. She married one of the Holocaust survivors, who was killed soon afterwards. Seeing that she was with child and was determined to save it, Josef and his group acquired forged papers for her and helped her escape to a normal life with a fake Polish identity.

The idea of travel keeps occurring in this story. Becca’s journey to Chelmno plays a significant role in the narrative. The attempt to unravel her grandma’s identity also becomes an inward journey for her, a journey towards self-realization. She found a new self-identity, rooted in one of the darkest chapters in history. Though Josef claimed that it was “a story of survivors, not heroes” (Yolen 163), she had found both in her Gemma.

In this story, we can assume that there are two princesses- one is of course Gemma, who was nicknamed so and the other one is Becca, who also has her own love story in the narrative. As opposed to the original fairy tale, the princesses have an active role of travelling in this narrative. Gemma travels to escape persecution and evade identification and Becca travels to truly discover and identify her grandmother for who she actually was. Gemma's "prince" or Josef (interestingly, not the man Gemma married) plays a more passive role of simply waiting to be discovered and narrating Gemma's story to Becca. The "princess" or Becca has to travel towards him to complete her quest. Becca is also united with the man she loves, after she comes back from her journey. It is as if she was not ready for a relationship till she had fully discovered herself. This adaptation changes the idea of men being active travellers as seen in the original fairy tale. Here, the women travel towards safety or self-realization, while the men play a more passive role of being stationary and simply aiding them in their quest.

### ***Red Riding Hood***

This is another popular story that we have all grown up with. Told usually with a moralistic intention, sometimes the story warned the girls against sexual curiosity and sometimes, against disobedience. The wolf has also shifted forms to represent various types of danger at different points. Red Riding Hood's journey towards her grandmother's house forms the crux of the story; it was during this journey where she met the "Big Bad Wolf" and committed the mistake of straying away from her path. This story also has two versions- one by Perrault and one by the Grimms. The major difference between the two is that Perrault's narrative offers no redemption for the little girl. She is gobbled up and that is the end of the story, which is followed by a clear moral by Perrault directed towards all young girls to steer clear of wolves, clearly alluding to men who can turn into sexual predators. Grimms' version offers the girl a second chance where a woodcutter saves the girl and her grandma. She has a second encounter with another wolf, but this time she is wise enough not to fall prey to him.

In the Grimms' version, there is also a clear lesson that the girl learns, "As long as I live, I will never by myself leave the path, to run into the wood, when my mother has forbidden me to do so" (Grimms 115). This is of course a clearly didactic part, teaching little girls the



value of obedience. Red Riding Hood undertook that particular journey as a dutiful little girl, carrying food to her sick grandmother. Her mother had told her to walk “nicely and quietly” (in a lady-like manner, we can say) and to not run off the path (not to deviate). But, she got herself into trouble as she stopped to talk to the wolf and gather flowers, spurred by his encouragement. This journey of Red Riding Hood is significant for her and for the readers to learn a lesson in caution. The detour that she takes is frowned upon as disobedience that lead to danger. Her second journey (referring to the Grimms’ version here) is also to be noted as a clear proof that she has learnt the lesson and implemented it. Between these two journeys, Red Riding Hood has also undergone an inward journey, transforming into a more cautious person. Just as Briar Rose’s hundred years of sleep can be seen metaphorically, this journey by Red Riding Hood can also be seen as her rite of passage into womanhood, at the end of which she is cautioned against sexual predators.

The literary adaptations of this story, in their turn, often explore whether there can be any other significance of Red Riding Hood’s journey apart from a moralistic one. In a beautiful poem by called “Silver and Gold” by Ellen Steiber, she discusses how the journey might not have been so fateful for the girl. She describes with lavish imagery the beautiful parts of the forest that the wolf helped her discover,

Is it any wonder that when the wolf appeared,  
coat of silver, eyes of gold,  
when the wolf sauntered toward me, kindly as you please,  
and showed me fields of lavender and jessamine,  
hawkweed and flax —  
purple and yellow and flame run wild,  
blue stolen from the skies;  
when he bade me shed the heavy woolen cloak  
and hear the birds calling their young,  
spinning the moon light on their song;

when he taught me to follow the sunbeams  
dancing through the trees,  
warming the pine needles till their scent filled the air  
and led me far from the path;  
when he told me there was no reason to be so grave  
when the wood was merry;  
is it any wonder I went deeper and deeper into the green trees? (9-25)

The temptations and freedom that the wolf symbolized for her was a welcome break from the strict instructions and regulations that her mother imposed on her, symbolized by her thick-knit cloak, without which she was not allowed outside. The deviation, which is otherwise seen as the nemesis of her journey, is viewed here as something new and beautiful.

The poem hints at the fact that Red Riding Hood is being treated by a doctor at that point; it can be either due to physical injuries suffered when the wolf gobbled her up, or the psychological trauma that followed it. The doctor also seems to be an extension of the mother figure who is also eager to impart lessons of caution to the young girl and believes that she should be thankful to the man who had saved her. But, as she addresses the reader, we understand that the girl might not perceive the woodcutter as a saviour at all; for her, the wolf played that role better as the one who introduced her to the taste of freedom. The girl says-

I tell him I am grateful  
that my grandmother still lives in her cottage  
with gifts tucked in every corner;  
grateful that I am alive,  
that a stranger held out the hope  
that from what nearly destroys you  
love may emerge.  
What I do not tell him is that

I will again leave the path  
and wander into that fragrant green wood  
and when I see  
coat of silver, eyes of gold,  
I will follow. (64-76)

As opposed to the simple cautionary role of the original tale, Ellen Steiber brings in more dimensions and complications into the journey and the relationship between the wolf and the girl. While in the original tale, the journey serves a didactic purpose, moulding the girl into an obedient individual, this poem views the journey as a liberating experience for the girl, turning her into a “rebel” figure. A similar idea is expressed in the short story *Riding the Red* by Nalo Hopkins, where the author views the tale from the grandmother’s perspective and the encounter with the wolf as a ritualistic rite of passage that every generation has to go through. The grandmother fondly reminisces about her encounter with the wolf as a little girl; between domestic chores and her mundane conjugal life, she recounts how that encounter had been the only moment of freedom for her.

### ***Hansel and Gretel***

This is another popular tale by Grimms where a woodcutter’s children are left in the woods to fend for themselves as food had become scarce. But, Hansel had strewn pebbles all the way to the woods and as the moon rose, he could find his way back following the shining pebbles. Though he came back to his home, the problem of poverty was not yet solved and they had to be left out again in the woods. This time, their stepmother made sure that they were not carrying any pebbles. So Hansel marked the route with breadcrumbs. But he did not foresee that the birds would eat it up and this time, there was no way to return. They got hopelessly lost and ended up at a witch’s house who intended to eat them up. But Gretel succeeded in killing her and they escaped with her riches. Miraculously, they could find their way back this time even though a month had passed by. This time, their return was a joyous one as they had



found a solution to their poverty and their stepmother was dead. Of course, we still wonder whether they would have been equally acceptable without the riches.

In *Hansel and Gretel*, the protagonists travel due to compulsion, they are driven out of their home and do not have a say in the matter. They can travel back only when they have gained sufficient wealth to support themselves. The journey that had its source in their vulnerability, ultimately ended up in empowering them. In the course of their journey, they killed the witch, undermined their stepmother's efforts of driving them away for good, and became self-dependent.

In *Sleeping Beauty*, it is the prince who travels, in *Red Riding Hood* it is the girl and here it is both the boy and the girl. Sleeping Beauty is seen as a prize while Red Riding Hood is under the threat of a sexual predator. In (Hopkins) both the stories there is an element of vulnerability surrounding the woman characters. In *Hansel and Gretel* however, as the siblings travel together, they are united by their misfortune and there is no gender divide. If Hansel chalks out the plans of return, Gretel is the one who pushes the witch into the fire and saves the day. Along their journey of becoming self-sufficient, they do not even require a saviour figure (except a duck who plays a minor role in taking them across a river).

*Hansel and Gretel*, like most fairy tales, have a happy ending. But, the adaptation *Breadcrumbs and Stones* revisit and alter that redemptive ending. This adaptation also has a backdrop of the Holocaust just like Yolen's *Briar Rose*. The German origin of the Grimm Brothers, the source of numerous fairy tales, provides an inevitable connection to one of the darkest chapters of history. This narrative depicts the story of the author's mother who ultimately opens up about her past as a Jew living under a false German identity. The story of Hansel and Gretel runs in the story as a leitmotif, but as the mother narrates it, she stops at the point where the door is locked and the siblings are not allowed to enter their own house even when they come back. Just like her own past, her fairy tale does not have a proper ending. Later, she narrates the story of her own past to her children- the trials of living incognito under the German regime, which she was able to survive but her brother could not. Just like Hansel and Gretel, she and her brother had a feeling of being ostracized under the German regime. But, in this story, both of them do not stand a chance, only one of them could find a way out of those dark woods.

Symbolically, the mother narrates her story in a wood and as they began to walk back, the author is deep in thought, “Had Gretel, I wondered, come back to the forest with her daughter? Many years later, when she was an old woman and tired of secrets, had she taken her daughter by the hand and followed the old path?” (Goldstein 406). It is important to narrate Gretel’s story, so that her children would also know how to find a way out. Similarly, the author had to walk back the “old path” of her mother’s past before she could find her own way or her own identity. The mother’s journey into the woods resonates with Hansel and Gretel’s journey; however, she is equipped with knowledge and knows a way out this time. That journey becomes important to impart her knowledge to her children. As she travels into the forest and back to her past, her children also undertake a journey of self-exploration. In the original tale, the siblings returned after gaining wealth, in the adaptation, the mother had returned (from the “woods” symbolically referring to the dark Nazi period) after incurring the loss of her brother and her children had emerged out of the woods with a new identity, after her narration.

The journey of both Red Riding Hood and Hansel and Gretel follow a pattern of leaving their source of origin (whether by compulsion or freewill), running into a problem and solving it, before they can return safely to their source. In *Briar Rose*, on the other hand, the journey of the prince has its source in the problem. He travels because there is a problem, equipped with the knowledge of the consequences and the reward (unlike Red Riding Hood and Hansel and Gretel). The adaptations take these journeys and reviews the problems associated with them. The adaptation of *Briar Rose* and *Hansel and Gretel* find the problem to be deeply rooted in a violent past and the adaptation of *Red Riding Hood* refuses to acknowledge the wolf as a problem. As these stories travel through adaptations, the theme of travelling (and the problems associated with it) also changes, creating a palimpsest of varied dimensions.

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