



Following the Breadcrumbs: Young Adult Holocaust Novels and their Intertextual Use of Fairy Tales

Olivia Marsh 

University of Cambridge, Cambridge

To cite this article:

Marsh, O. (2020) Following the breadcrumbs: young adult Holocaust novels and their intertextual use of fairy tales, *Cambridge Educational Research e-Journal*, Volume 7, pp. 125-140. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.58331>



Published online: 1st November 2020



[Link to Apollo](#)



[Video of Article Summary](#)



Cambridge Educational Research e-Journal published by the [Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons \(CC\) Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported Licence](#).

Following the Breadcrumbs: Young Adult Holocaust Novels and their Intertextual Use of Fairy Tales

Olivia Marsh 
University of Cambridge

Abstract

This article explores young adult Holocaust literature and its intertextual use of fairy tales, examining the primary text *Gretel and the Dark* (2014) by Eliza Granville which uses the fairy tale Hansel and Gretel. I discuss the ethical complications of using fiction to represent the unrepresentable and how intertextual use of fairy tales provides opportunities and limitations for navigating the moral grey area between fact and fiction. I employ Smith's (2007) framework of intertextuality to examine two methods of intertextuality: explicit incorporation through framed silences and through metafictional discussion of fairy tales. I seek to answer three questions: How are fairy tales used intertextually in this text; what can be gained through the intertextual use of fairy tales; and what problems arise from the intertextual use of fairy tales? I find that the use of non-realist storytelling techniques such as framed silences, meta-framed silences and metafictional elements allows the reader to actively collaborate with the work of fiction in meaning making and to build literary competence. However, intertextuality can potentially be frustrating for a reader unable to grasp the intertextual references or unable to interpret the framed silence. I conclude that the use of fairy tale intertextuality in Holocaust novels creates cracks in the text which point the reader to the fictionality of the text itself, this is significant when negotiating the difficult ethical borders in Holocaust fiction between fact and artistic creation.

Resumen

Este artículo explora la literatura del Holocausto para adultos jóvenes y su uso intertextual de los cuentos de hadas, examinando el texto principal *Gretel and the Dark* (2014) de Eliza Granville que usa el cuento de hadas Hansel y Gretel. Discuto las complicaciones éticas del uso de la ficción para representar lo irrepresentable y cómo el uso intertextual de los cuentos de hadas brinda oportunidades y limitaciones para navegar por la zona gris de la moral entre la realidad y la ficción. Empleo el marco de intertextualidad de Smith (2007) para examinar dos métodos de intertextualidad: la incorporación explícita a través de silencios enmarcados y mediante la discusión metafictional de los cuentos de hadas. Intento responder tres preguntas: ¿Cómo se usan los cuentos de hadas intertextualmente en este texto?; ¿qué se puede ganar mediante el uso intertextual de los cuentos de hadas?; y ¿qué problemas surgen del uso intertextual de los cuentos de hadas? Mis hallazgos muestran que el uso de técnicas de narración no realistas, como silencios enmarcados, silencios meta-enmarcados y elementos metafictionales, permite al lector colaborar activamente con el trabajo de ficción en la creación de significado y la construcción de la competencia literaria. Sin embargo, la intertextualidad puede resultar potencialmente frustrante para un lector incapaz de captar las referencias intertextuales o incapaz de interpretar el silencio enmarcado. Concluyo que el uso de la intertextualidad de cuentos de hadas en las novelas del Holocausto crea grietas en el texto que apuntan al lector a la ficcionalidad del texto en sí, esto es significativo cuando se negocian las difíciles fronteras éticas en la ficción del Holocausto entre los hechos y la creación artística.

Article History

Submitted: 17th

January 2020

Accepted: 16th

August 2020

Keywords

fairy tales;
holocaust;
intertextuality;
children's literature;
metafiction

Palabras Clave

cuentos de hadas;
holocausto;
intertextualidad;
literatura infantil;
metaficción.

الملخص:

تنظر هذه المقالة إلى أدب الهولوكوست الذي يستهدف القارئ الصغار وتحاول اكتشاف التناس الروائي بين ذلك النوع الأدبي وبين أدب الحكايات وذلك من خلال دراسة رواية " غريتل والظلام" للكاتبة إليزا جرنفيل والتي اعتمدت على رواية هانسل وغريتل في عملها. أيضا، تناقش هذه المقالة المعضلات الأخلاقية التي تكتنف توظيف الأدب القصصي في تمثيل ما لا يمكن تمثيله وكيف يخلق التناس الروائي بين روايات الهولوكوست والحكايات فرصا وحدودا تمكننا من اجتياز المنطقة الرمادية للمعايير الأخلاقية التي تفصل بين الحقيقة والخيال. انطلق في دراستي هذه من نظرية الكاتب سميث (٢٠٠٧) للتناس لفحص طريقتين للتناس الأدبي وهما التضمين الصريح من خلال الصمت المؤطر ومن خلال مناقشات ما وراء قصصية للحكايات. أحاول أن أجيب على ثلاثة أسئلة وهي: كيف تتم الإحالة على نصوص الحكايات الخيالية من خلال التناس الأدبي وما الفوائد الأدبية من ذلك التناس وما التحديات التي تنشأ من منه؟ من الممكن القول إن استخدام تقنيات السرد القصصي مثل الصمت المؤطر وما وراء الصمت المؤطر وكذلك أسلوب ما وراء القص تجعل القارئ قادرا على التفاعل مع العمل الروائي بل مشاركا في صناعة المعنى مما يساعد في بناء القدرة الأدبية. على الرغم من هذه المزايا، قد يكون التناس محبطا للقارئ الذي لا يستطيع الإحاطة بالإحالات على النصوص الأخرى مما يجعله غير قادر على تفسير الصمت المؤطر وفهمه. أستنتج أن استخدام التناس لتضمين أساليب القصص الخيالية في روايات الهولوكوست يخلق علامات في النص تنبه القارئ إلى خيالية النص نفسه، وهذا بدوره يساعد في تجاوز المعضلات الأخلاقية التي تنشأ من الفصل بين الحقيقة والإبداع الفني في الأعمال التي تتناول مأساة الهولوكوست.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

حكايات خيالية
هولوكوست، التناس
الأدبي، أدب الأطفال
، ما وراء القص

Introduction

Holocaust narratives which are consumed by children and young adults tread a difficult line of adult scrutiny. They must simultaneously be engaging for the reader, communicate historical events, find a way to mediate the trauma of the Holocaust for their young audience and are assumed to provide a moral compass for the reader to aid them in interpreting this troubling time which is at best, challenging to comprehend. The ethical and literary difficulties of literature which explores the Holocaust have been extensively debated by survivors, authors and scholars such as Theodore Adorno, Primo Levi, Elie Weisel, Lydia Kokkola, Hamida Bosmajan and Adrienne Kertzer: the latter three specifically in relation to children's literature. Patterns of phrasing are well rehearsed: How do we represent the un-representable? How do we rationalise the barbaric? Specifically, in relation to children: What is appropriate to communicate to young readers?

The ethics of representing the Holocaust in literature is debated widely for adult readers, however, this issue becomes more complex for young, and therefore potentially novice readers. The complexity is due to the notion of a preservation of innocence of the young reader, possibly encountering the events of the Holocaust for the first time, and with an imagined lack of emotional maturity to process the trauma. Therefore, the amount of detail communicated, its fidelity to the real events of the Holocaust and the way in which it is communicated is further scrutinized. I will be using the term *novice reader* to refer to those who lack factual knowledge and *expert reader* as those who have factual knowledge and trained literary competence. *Literary competence* being characterised as the ability to read challenging texts, a tolerance for ambiguity and paradox, enduring feelings of failure and confusion and a knowledge of literary conventions (Blau, 2014, p.44). The notion of emotional maturity of the reader and the literary competence of the reader are not necessarily tied but are often tied when discussing a young

reader's ability to handle challenging texts, however a full exploration of this debate is not within the scope of this article.

I will be exploring the way that Eliza Granville navigates the ethical issues of writing Holocaust literature for a young adult audience in *Gretel and the Dark* (2014) through its intertextual use of fairy tales. The primary narrative is that of Krysta moving to a concentration camp with her father, who is a doctor employed by the Nazis to experiment on prisoners of the camp. When Krysta's father commits suicide, Krysta is placed in the camp and is subjected to sexual abuse and starvation. A secondary narrative runs in parallel of the psychologist Doctor Breur in Austria who takes on a new patient Lillie. Lillie claims to have travelled back in time to kill the monster and is another incarnation of Krysta; travelling back in time to kill Hitler in Austria before the Holocaust can happen. There is a final third narrative in the last chapter where the reader discovers everything they have read so far has been told to them by an elderly Krysta, recounting the story of her and Daniel's life and the additional story of Lillie and Doctor Breur. The text employs intertextual use of various fairy tales but the main intertext is Hansel and Gretel.

Many writers have explored the intertextual use of fairy tales in modern texts for adults and children, and there is an extensive body of work on Holocaust literature. The ethics of fiction as an appropriate format for communicating the un-representable is particularly important when exploring the use of fairy tales within Holocaust texts. There is, however, less exploration of children's Holocaust literature and there has been little work on the combination of fairy tales in children's Holocaust literature. I will be using the term children's literature inclusively of literature intended for children and young adult readers. The questions I will be exploring are:

1. How are fairy tales used intertextually in this text?
2. What can be gained through the intertextual use of fairy tales?
3. What problems arise from the intertextual use of fairy tales?

I will be exploring these questions through the theory of intertextuality of Gérard Genette (1997) and using elements of Kevin Smith's (2007) intertextual use of fairy tales framework to analyse *Gretel and the Dark*. I will explore the limitations and opportunities provided through using fairy tales within a Holocaust narrative, specifically for young readers.

Literature Review

One of the issues raised in relation to children's Holocaust literature is how children will be able to cope with the information about the events of the Holocaust. Addressing the matter of children's perceived lack of emotional maturity to process Holocaust narratives if they are novice readers with limited knowledge of the events, Jack Zipes argues in *Sticks and Stones* that we assume as adults that we know children, what is appropriate for a child reader and the way in which they will interpret the text (2002, p. 92). Zipes comments were made in relation to fairy tales and who can govern what is appropriate for a reader or what the definitive version

of a tale is, however, this appears particularly poignant in relation to children's Holocaust literature: how do we decide what is appropriate for children and why do we presume that we can?

A scholar who has written extensively on the representation of the Holocaust in children's literature is Lydia Kokkola in her text *Representing the Holocaust in Children's Literature* where she outlines: "Holocaust literature for young people attempts to weave together a variety of textual traditions – writing history generally, writing specifically about the Holocaust, writing for young readers, for portraying human lives – which do not always sit comfortably together." (2003, p.9). These sometimes-conflicting elements are a challenge which writers of children's literature seek to manage and which I will be evaluating in relation to *Gretel and the Dark* and Holocaust literature scholarship. Returning to Kokkola, she proposes three possibilities in response to how we deal with the subject of the Holocaust. Firstly, silence, as propositioned by Adorno in *Culture and Criticism* (1951), if there can be "no poetry after Auschwitz" then the implication is that the only acceptable representation is linguistic silence. Secondly, non-fiction writing, especially first-hand accounts by survivors, is seen to be the most ethically responsible as a way of communicating history. The final option which is the subject of this article: fiction.

Lucy Pearson and Kimberly Reynolds discussing realism in young adult fiction and specifically in relation to the Holocaust assert that the increasing historical distance of the contemporary reader to the Holocaust has resulted in writers being increasingly experimental in order to aid young readers understanding of the events, noting that "As thinking about the representation of the Holocaust has become more subject to conflicting interpretations, so realistic narratives have become more complex." (2010, p.70). Some of this experimentation in the storytelling techniques include unreliable narrators, conflicting narratives, and limited focalizers which depart from the classical realist style. I found Pearson and Reynolds consideration of increasingly experimental forms a useful starting point to consider how far and how successful experimental forms can be and in what way they can aid a novice reader to comprehend the complexity of the events. Although an experimental form and use of fantasy does not specifically suggest that the texts become historically inaccurate it does invite further questioning of how departure from reality might invite historical inaccuracy more so than the realist form. Further, by expressing the Holocaust through a fictional form it could lead to the historical importance being reduced, especially for young readers as noted by Maria Nikolajeva in *Reading for Learning* (2014, p.39).

Fairy tales

Gretel and the Dark uses Hansel and Gretel as well as an array of other fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm to construct the narrative. Key to its effectiveness as an intertextual reference, Hansel and Gretel is a relatively well-known fairy tale throughout the world. As a result of its popularity as a fairy tale it makes it effective as a hypertext (the base text which the new, or hypertext uses), especially for novice readers who will find the narrative elements easily

accessible rather than feeling they are missing out on a literary allusion. This use of the fairy tale can help to build young readers' literary competence as Nikolajeva notes "[...] exposure to various texts, verbal, visual and multimodal, historical and contemporary, highbrow and mass-market-related, stimulates readers to make connections between texts, recognize allusions [...] and appreciate parodic play." (2010, p.156). I agree with Nikolajeva and use this to consider the way that novice readers can train their literary competence through interpreting intertextual references in relation to a fairy tale.

In addition, I find Zipes explanation of fairy tales in *Breaking the Magic Spell* to be a useful starting point to connect fairy tales with children's Holocaust literature and specifically this text which uses several fairy tales intertextually. Zipes explains that the fairy tale "emanate[s] from specific struggles to humanize bestial and barbaric forces, which have terrorized our minds and communities in concrete ways, threatening to destroy free will and human compassion. The fairy tale sets out to conquer this concrete terror through metaphors" (1979, p.9). The Holocaust then as a time which marks a caesura in history because of the extremes of evil which we are often linguistically unable to adequately express and struggle to comprehend, can be subjected to the fairy tale treatment in order to tame the "concrete terror through metaphors". I agree with Zipes that fiction can be a suitable genre through which to explore the events of the Holocaust. He asserts in *Breaking the Magic Spell* that using the imagination and fantastical elements results in "breaking the magic hold which oppressors and machines seem to have over us in our everyday reality" (1979, p.4). Focussing on Zipes' final point on oppressors, just as fairy tales sought to expose political and social inequalities, fiction too can break the hold of right-wing ideology and expose the ways in which the Nazi's controlled the population and terrorised certain groups of people. If we cannot realistically expect fiction to be completely historically accurate then combining fantastical elements follows the convention of fairy tales which address social and political problems to communicate moral messages.

In *Sticks and Stones* (2002) Zipes offers some background on the Brothers Grimm who were the collectors of fairy tales during the 1800s and their written versions were popularly available across Europe. The stories themselves were collected and adapted by the Grimms from earlier oral versions. The Grimms' versions of the fairy tales from a contemporary perspective are Janus-faced: simultaneously facing the past (encapsulating various oral versions of the tale and revealing the social, historical, political and economic context) and facing forwards creating new meanings in each iteration. Fairy tales are complex in their variation and composition embedded with didacticism and social, economic and historical context according to which version is being read. Fairy tales were stories told to communities or to children to communicate morals or teaching; the Nazis themselves used fairy tales including Snow White as propaganda and sought to Aryanize the tales for their own ideological purposes in the 1930s (Zipes, 2002, p. 85). Granville explores this idea in the paratext of *Gretel and the Dark* at the close of the book

[...] I began to wonder how fairy tales had fared in Germany under the Nazis. I expected to find editions of the Grimm tales especially rewritten for children growing up in the Third Reich. This does not appear to have taken place. The Nazis approved of the tales and methodically exploited them to uphold the idea of racist and nationalist supremacy of the German people. Any changes were in the interpretation of those tales in accordance with Nazi ideology. (Granville, 2014, p. 358).

This exemplifies how versatile fairy tales are to be exploited for different purposes. Zipes observes in *Sticks and Stones* that at the end of World War II in Germany the allied forces attempted to ban the publication of the Grimms' fairy tales because "They attributed many of the atrocities and crimes committed by the Nazis to the horror and cruelty of the tales. Moreover, they asserted that the tales had given German children a false impression of the world that had made them susceptible to lies and irrationality" (2002, p.100). It would seem then paradoxical that the very texts which the allied forces identified as a contributing factor to the rise of fascism and indoctrination of a country to commit atrocities can be transformed to communicate the horrors of the Holocaust for a modern reader. I will be investigating what we can learn through both the lessons of the hypertext and the subversion and manipulation of it by Granville.

Further insightful on the retelling of fairy tales is Zipes' exploration of what he terms the "contamination" of fairy tales in *Sticks and Stones* (2002, p.102). Although his discussion refers to a more closely subverted version of the fairy tales, I maintain that it applies more broadly to the manipulation of the fairy tale form. The debate in the 1930s and throughout the discussion of fairy tales has been concerned with the pure or original version. Specifically, Zipes stipulates that the Grimms themselves were great contaminators of the fairy tales: introducing new elements and editing the stories in different collections. Zipes argues that rather than a negative connotation as can be drawn from the verb contaminate, it can rather be viewed as an "enrichment process; it can lead to the birth of something unique and genuine in its own right" (2002, p.102). The uniqueness of the new text is unavoidable and they are not merely poor copies of an original story but Zipes goes on to explain: "To contaminate an oral folk tale or a literary fairy tale is thus to enrich it by artfully introducing extraordinary motifs, themes, words, expressions, proverbs, metaphors and characters into its corporate body so that it will be transformed and form a new essence." (2002, p. 103). *Gretel and the Dark* then forms a new essence and exposes the fragility of the fairy tales as they are woven into new stories. Or as Greet, the storyteller and Krysta's carer, puts it in *Gretel and the Dark*:

'Stories,' says Greet, 'are fast travellers, always moving on.'

She empties the bucket of mangle-water over the stones, making me jump out of the way as soap bubbles tinted ultramarine by the Waschblau bag rush towards the drain. 'Oh, yes, stories change with the wind and the tide and the moon. Half the time they're only plaited mist anyway so they disappear altogether when daylight shines on them.'

(Granville, 2014, p. 213).

Methodology

In *Palimpsests: literature in the second degree*, Genette outlines hypertextuality which is utilised in *Gretel and the Dark*. Hansel and Gretel as a fairy tale is the hypotext and the new incarnation the hypertext. The text uses the process of “transformation” which “evokes more or less perceptibly without necessarily speaking of it or citing it.” (1997, p.5). The hypotext undergoes what Genette terms a “serious transformation” and the hypertext becomes a “transposition” and “transpositions that are overtly and deliberately thematic, in which transformation of meaning is manifestly [. . .] the purpose”. (1997, p.214). *Gretel and the Dark* seeks to communicate something new about the events of the Holocaust but anchors the narrative in a transposed hypertext; the meaning of the hypotext Hansel and Gretel is thus transformed when viewed from a new perspective and its narrative deconstructed, subverted and ideologies exposed.

In order to interrogate intertextual use, I have utilised Kevin Smith’s eight elements of intertextual use of fairy tales in *The Postmodern Fairytale* (2007). Smith’s framework is derived from Genette’s five sub-categories of transtextuality and informs his exploration of intertextuality of fairy tales in postmodern fiction. While Genette uses the term transtextuality, like Smith, I will be using the more popularly employed term intertextuality.

1. Authorised – explicit reference to a fairy tale in title;
2. Writerly – implicit reference to a fairy tale in title;
3. Incorporation – explicit reference to a fairy tale in text;
4. Allusion – implicit reference to a fairy tale in the text;
5. Re-vision – putting a new spin on an old tale;
6. Fabulation – crafting an original fairy tale;
7. Metafiction – discussion of fairy tales within the text;
8. Architextual/Chronotopic – fairy tale setting/environment.

(Smith, 2007, p. 10)

These categories can more broadly be split into two wider categories: implicit and explicit inclusion. Alternatively, this is what Nikolajeva terms “open and hidden dialogues” – open dialogue referring to texts that are “written intentionally so that readers recognize the original setting, the characters and plot pattern.” (1996, p.155). This use of intertextuality is one in which both the reader and the author take part. The author is playing with the traditional fairy tale and the reader is expected to compare the hypotext with the hypertext.

I will be adapting Smith’s framework for my own methodology and using the explicit incorporation of the fairy tale (3) with discussion of framed silences, and the use of fairy tales as metafiction (7). Although *Gretel in the Dark* employs more than these two elements from the framework, I found these two the most compelling and I contend they can be used to build literary competence for novice readers and the way in which they afford a variety of readings depending on whether they are consumed by a novice or experienced reader.

Framed Silences

Smith identifies explicit reference to fairy tales in the text as “incorporation” in his framework of intertextuality. In the text the explicit references have a further function as a framed silence. Framed silence is an expansion of the first of three possibilities for communicating the Holocaust identified by Kokkola as previously cited: silence, non-fiction and fiction. Silence is used as a narrative technique for communicating the horrors of the Holocaust to a novice reader: by pausing or breaking away in the middle of a narrative to avoid conveying detailed information of trauma a reader may not be perceived as mature enough to process. In the example I will go on to explore, the main narrative stops and instead our narrator recalls a story told to her when she was younger, before she arrived at the camps. The challenge for Holocaust texts aimed at young readers is to balance how much trauma and violence can, and should, be communicated. The Holocaust and the events were real and when communicated in non-fiction the events are presented as facts. However, the question of how to represent the unrepresentable perpetually follows authors of Holocaust fiction. As Pearson and Reynolds observe when discussing the ethics of realism within the genre: “The issue [...] is brought into sharp focus in Holocaust fiction, where the tension between the desire to document and warn against the horrors of genocide and the impulse to protect children from the worst excesses of human cruelty magnifies the inherent tension surrounding truth-telling in children’s fiction.” (2010, p.70). As a solution to communicating this trauma Granville and others used framed silences.

Framed silences function to protect young readers from knowing more than they are perceived to be ready for, without misleading or disguising events. They mediate the trauma and horror of the events of the Holocaust and are quite different to withholding information. (Kokkola, 2003, p. 26). Further, the way the reader engages with these blanks in the text as a form of dialogue provides agency for the reader (Bosmaïjan, 2002, p.127), echoing the notion of Tosi (2009, p.34) of the reader as active collaborator in meaning-making as the reader contemplates why the narrative has been paused and broken away from and what meaning is being communicated by the supplemented story. Thus, creating an extra layer of reading challenge for novice readers developing literary competence: to engage both on an intertextual level and with the blanks in the texts to derive meaning. This could potentially result in frustration for a novice reader, unable to draw connections with fairy tales and wondering what information they are missing.

The problem of mediating trauma for the reader and use of fairy tales is addressed directly by Granville in the paratext of the book as she explains, “As I began writing *Gretel and the Dark*, it was important to me that Krysta’s experience be mediated through fairy tales. Maintaining an oppressive and chilling atmosphere without explicit details of acts of cruelty seemed challenging; however such elements are already present in fairy tales, notably in the Grimm versions.” (Granville, 2014, p.358). Granville combines framed silences and intertextual reference with storytelling within the storytelling. On a simple level and example in the text, the sexual relationships of the female camp members with the Nazi officers are hushed mid-

discussion and broken away from when they realise the child and protagonist Krysta can hear their conversation. The women stop discussing sexual matters because of Krysta's youth and innocence, thus simultaneously protecting Krysta and the novice reader. Positioning the child character as one who needs to be protected from knowledge of sex just as the child reader is also protected from the detailed description.

Krysta's own trauma of the sexual exploitation by several Nazi officers is mediated in a more complex way for the reader. There are explicit breaks in the text where Krysta stops in her account of the events of the evening and moves to a framed silence. The narrator, Krysta, instead recounts a memory of being told a fairy tale before the time she was in the camps. The Robber Bridegroom, is told to Krysta by Greet (the storyteller and Krysta's carer) prior to coming to the camps, it is recalled as a memory and repeated at intervals in the narrative to break away from Krysta's traumatic experiences at the hands of the Nazi officers, therefore functioning as a repeated framed silence. The Robber Bridegroom is a fairy tale with many variations but was recorded by Jacob Grimm in *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, first published in 1812. An experienced reader will likely understand the implication of the group sexual exploitation of Krysta as a child whereas the novice reader who cannot fill this framed silence will be left unenlightened. Greet tells the cautionary tale to teach Krysta to listen to what she is told, however, the dark subject matter appears to have been partially forgotten by the extradiegetic narrator

'This silly girl, like so many others, took no notice at all until it was too late, for the wicked bridegroom and his friends were at the door. Just in time, the old woman hid her behind a barrel. In come the evil men, betrunken wie Herren, dragging after them a young girl. First they forced her to drink wine with them: a glass of red, a glass of white, and a glass of black. After that they pulled off her pretty clothes and put them in a pile ready to sell in the market. And then they – ' Greet stops abruptly.

[...]

'And then they ... uh ... after they'd finished doing evil things – '

'What sort of things?'

'Things so bad I can't tell you. All I'll say is that it went on for a long time and she screamed and cried and called on God and his angels to help her. And when they'd all finished doing what they were doing over and over again she was dead – ' (Granville, 2014, p.282)

The use of the extradiegetic narration by Greet of the also unspeakable group rape creates a level of meta-storytelling and meta-framed silences which saves the novice reader from knowing more than they are able to process at the point of reading and avoids describing too explicitly the group rape, however with sufficient detail to convey the horror. For the reader who can interpret the silences, the dialogue with silence identified by Kokkola and Bosmajan occurs; the reader understands what is being communicated by the silence but also engages on a further level with why Krysta is recalling Greet's story at this point in the narrative. This leads to further questioning the didacticism of the fairy tale being recounted, Krysta is being

cautioned into obedience but the punishment for disobedience in this instance results in her rape in the camps which subverts the original moral of *The Robber Bridegroom*.

Framed silences then are a way for authors to hold back from complete mimetic fidelity of the trauma of the events of the Holocaust without fictionalising the events; they preserve the balance between historical accuracy and fiction by creating blanks which can be deciphered by the expert reader. The reticence to communicate all of the trauma for a young audience protects them through the silence while maintaining fidelity. In *Gretel and the Dark* the story substituted in for the framed silence allows for a richer layer of understanding or further mediating of the trauma for the reader, depending on the level which the reader is able to access the information being withheld, just as the Grimms did in their collected fairy tales. There is the potential negative consequence for a novice reader who cannot interpret the layers of storytelling and framed silence to become confused and frustrated with their reading of the text. However, there is also the opportunity for framed silences to encourage the reader to actively collaborate in meaning-making, thus encouraging them to interpret the frames and teaching literary competence.

Metafiction – discussion of fairy tales within the text

Reaching beyond an explicit incorporation of a fairy tale, metafictional incorporation has the characters in the novel discussing the fairy tales themselves. When considering metafiction I have used the explanation offered by Nikolajeva as she observes that metafiction is used to point the reader towards the fictionality of the text. It exposes the tension between fact and fiction through techniques such as impossible temporality and spatiality, complex narrative structure and frames which “[...]can be confusing, not to say frustrating. [...] Non-mimetic modes, such as fairy tales and fantasy, abundant in children’s literature, are sometimes counted among metafictional elements since they emphasize the constructedness of fictional worlds” (2010, p.153). Placing emphasis on the constructed nature of the texts is a useful approach for highlighting the fictionality and making it clear that this is not historical fact but instead a creative interpretation. However, this does rely on the literary competence of the reader; as discussed by Nikolajeva the metafictional elements can be confusing and even frustrating.

Gretel and the Dark uses many of the metafictional elements discussed by Nikolajeva and it highlights for the reader the fictionality of the text through its use of fairy tales, an impossibly interconnected temporality and spatiality of chronotopes, and an elaborate narrative structure. The denouement in the final chapter that Krysta has survived the camps and the narrative the reader has just experienced is part of her storytelling to Daniel. Daniel is the friend she met in the camps and we discover she later marries following the liberation of the camps. It is the story of their survival and the fictional story of her time travel back to Vienna to kill Hitler. Whilst autobiography is often considered as the apotheosis of historical fidelity, for example by Kokkola (2003), and the correct way to record the events of the Holocaust, it points to experimental forms and fantastical elements to be an inappropriate form. This is amplified in the case of children’s literature because these forms can be confusing for the novice reader and

the line between fact and fiction is blurred. When representing the Holocaust it seems dangerous to call into question any doubt over the authenticity or experience of the events. However, I contend that in spite of the problematisation of fiction as an appropriate form, Granville's use of fairy tales and metafictional elements, and her experimental form bring a much richer meaning for the reader and does so on different levels depending on their level of experience and understanding.

The use of metafiction as an element of storytelling is utilised by Granville as she includes various fairy tales throughout *Gretel and the Dark*. Moreover, her characters discuss the fairy tales other than Hansel and Gretel; also included are *The Robber Bridegroom*, *The Pied Piper* and the stories of the Brothers Grimm more broadly. These texts therefore exist in a dialogue with the historical setting, with the fairy tales they embody and subsume, and with our modern understanding of the vocabulary, genre and meaning. Through this process the reader themselves creates meaning from the novel: becoming active collaborators in meaning-making. The reader potentially understands at the close of the text the constructed nature of the narrative, and can then re-evaluate the whole text in light of the revelation that it is a constructed narrative told by the autodiegetic narrator.

Granville's use of *The Robber Bridegroom* shows the violence and cruelty of the didactic tales. The hypertext of Hansel and Gretel is about triumphing over the evil of the witch who wants to bake them in the oven to eat, but this isolated act of cannibalism was mechanised by the Nazis in the ovens of the camp for what they thought was a positive cleansing of society. The roots of this hatred of outsiders and the Jews being echoed in the secondary narrative set in Vienna exposes the causality and development of the anti-Semitism which would come to define the Nazi party. The very fact that Krysta as an adult has to retell this story suggests a psychological processing only possible through narrative. The fantastical element of the Viennese narrative demonstrates an impossibility to go back in time to prevent the events of the Holocaust occurring in the first place (by killing Hitler as is Krysta's suggestion) but identifies the sets of behaviours and rising xenophobia exacerbated by poverty which allowed a right-wing fundamentalist ideology to flourish. The fictionality points the reader towards the need to remember the events which lead up to the genocide in order to not repeat them and learn from the lessons of the past. If a text were to only faithfully recount a survivor's tale from the camps, then there would be no space to present the causation that was directly outside of the protagonist's experience. What Granville is skilfully able to achieve through her use of metafiction and narrative experimentation is to construct a moral message beyond the barbarity of the camps. The text therefore engages in its own level of didacticism and moral-making, much like the original fairy tales it utilises.

Beyond the explicit incorporation and telling of the fairy tales within the text, discussion of how appropriate fairy tales are for children is commented on by Doctor Breur, the Austrian psychologist treating Lillie in the secondary narrative. He notices a copy of the Grimm's *Kinder-und-Hausmarchen* on the window ledge

he paused to flick through the pages. It fell open at ‘Hänsel und Gretel’. Josef smiled. It had been Margarethe’s favourite childhood story, the volume no doubt hidden here because Mathilde so strongly disapproved of the Brothers Grimm. She considered their tales quite unfit for children. Witches, ovens, talking animals, small frissons of fear – he’d never really understood her objections to these things, which seemed so natural a part of childhood. (Granville, 2014, pp. 317-18).

This echoes the view taken by the allied forces after 1945 where they considered the fairy tales to be part of the reason that Germany had been so easily indoctrinated into compliance with Nazi ideology (Zipes, 2002, p.100) but also explicitly mentions the elements of the witch and ovens that form part of the Hansel and Gretel hypotext. Thus, serving as an addition to the linguistic paper trail for the reader to follow the intertextuality.

Returning to the question proposed at the start of this discussion which is derived from Zipes: How do we decide what is appropriate for children? Why do we presume that we can? This very idea is reiterated in the words of Krysta’s father in *Gretel and the Dark*, employing irony when he admonishes the maid for telling the young Krysta gruesome fairy tales: “Such tales spring from sick imaginations. Childhood is precious. It’s where the building blocks of life are laid. We have a duty to protect our little ones from hearing about such atrocities.” (Granville, 2014, p.35).

Much like the ethical discussions of communicating the trauma of the Holocaust to children, Krysta’s Papa romanticises the notion of childhood innocence. He seeks to preserve it for as long as possible by not exposing her to what is deemed unsuitable content. As Jeffrey Gibson observes in *And the Princess, Telling the Story* “fiction maintains its integrity as fiction while still allowing for self-reflection upon its own compositional process.” (2009, p.87). By having the characters discuss the fairy tales in the text it reminds the reader of the constructed nature of storytelling and highlights how and why fairy tales were used in the past. Further, forcing them to engage in a dialogue with the hypotext and hypertext to create new meaning and interpret the new essence.

Krysta’s use of storytelling and engagement with stories becomes an act of survival and defiance. The inference is that through telling stories she was able to sustain herself and Daniel to survive the camps and through the rest of their lives. Stories offer escapism and sustenance at different points in the story, but Krysta also becomes lost in the stories that she tells. Krysta and Daniel live and exist inside the fiction of the stories and the boundaries between their real life and the story we are told of their life is indistinguishable. This complete level of understanding would be accessible for an experienced reader, however the smaller glimpses of metafictional fairy tale discussion allows a novice reader to engage with the explicit discussion of the fairy tales in the text. The novice reader can add their own thoughts and experience to what kind of stories they think are appropriate to children. This in itself is an act of Tosi’s

active collaboration in meaning-making and can help to build the novice reader's literary competence through engaging with more cognitively challenging elements of the text.

Conclusion

My motivation for exploring the combination of fairy tales and Holocaust literature was grounded in the ethical complications of using fiction to represent the un-representable and how intertextual use of fairy tales provides opportunities and limitations for navigating the moral grey area between fact and fiction. I have explored two of the methods of intertextuality employed by *Gretel and the Dark*, explicit incorporation through framed silences which recount fairy tales and through metafictional discussion of fairy tales. The benefit of both of these intertextual incorporations is protecting young readers from knowing more than they are able to deal with, asking them to be active collaborators in meaning-making, and building their literary competence. Nikolajeva states that a key part of literary competence which novice readers develop is understanding the border between fiction and real-life events. This is where I return to in my conclusion, even as a

reality-based narrative is an artistic construction. [...] A text may create and maintain an illusion of reality. It may equally subvert this illusion, producing cracks to remind readers of fictionality. [...] Such imaginary worlds enhance understanding of fictionality since readers lack experience of them, unlike everyday worlds similar to that we encounter in real life. (2010, p.152)

Gretel and the Dark requires a high level of literary competence from the reader to distinguish the reality-based narrative from its fictitious elements but the metafictional storytelling and discussion of fairy tales within the text signpost the reader to these interpretations. *Gretel and the Dark* is overt in its fictionality from the first chapter, therefore creating cracks to remind the reader that it is fiction. Explicit incorporation of the fairy tale points to the constructed nature of the text and asks the reader to interpret the text through that lens. The repeated use of the framed silence to re-tell the story of the Robber Bridegroom signposts its significance, therefore even if the novice reader is unclear the first time it happens in the text, the repetition highlights the deliberate diversion from the main narrative, requiring the reader to actively collaborate with the text in order to derive the meaning of the framed silence as a narrative technique. Intertextual reference can help to engage readers and make them active collaborators in meaning-making as Tosi observed and which I fully agree builds agency and encourages a dialogue between hypertext, hypertext, reader and historical setting.

The framed silences rely on the reader's knowledge of the Holocaust to fill in the blanks left in the text and serve to mediate the trauma and knowledge for a novice reader. The disadvantage is that it could, resultantly, become frustrating for the novice reader because of the framed silences and sophistication of the metafictional discussion. As Nikolajeva states, intertextuality can build literary competence but can also lead to frustration if the allusion is missed or not fully grasped. However, I would suggest that *Gretel and the Dark* is successful

in leaving a linguistic paper trail pointing to its own fictionality and is accessible on different levels of interpretation, depending on the experience of the reader.

I would argue that *Gretel and the Dark* demonstrates that texts exploring historical fiction can be effective and train a novice reader's literary competence through devices which highlight the constructed nature of the text and therefore its fictionality, such as the explicit incorporation of fairy tales and metafictional inclusion of fairy tales for discussion by the characters. The text must show that the events of the Holocaust were real but that as a piece of fiction, some parts of the story did not really happen. The various means of intertextual incorporation of fairy tales exposes this fragility between fact and fiction. I contend that fairy tales provide a narrative device which can effectively expose the constructed nature of the text and build the reader's literary competence to understand for themselves the blurred line between fiction and history.

References:

- Adorno, T. (1951). 'Cultural Criticism and Society' in Adorno, *Prisms*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Blau, S. (2014). Literary Competence and the Experience of Literature. *Style*, 48(1), 42-47. Retrieved June 6, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/style.48.1.42
- Bosmajan, H. (2002). *Sparing the Child*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2002.
- Genette, G. (1997). *Paratexts: Thresholds of interpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gibson, J. (2009). 'And the Princess, Telling the Story' In Bobby, S. (Ed.) *Fairy Tales Reimagined Essays on New Retellings*. London: Mcfarland.
- Granville, E. (2014). *Gretel and the Dark*. London: Penguin.
- Grimm, J.L.C & Grimm, W.C. (1993). *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. London: Wordsworth Classics.
- Kertzer, A. (2002). *My Mother's Voice*. Toronto: Broadview Press.
- Kokkola, L. (2003). *Representing the Holocaust in Children's Literature*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Nikolajeva, M. (1996). *Children's Literature Comes of Age: Toward a New Aesthetic*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Nikolajeva, M. (2010). Literacy, competence and meaning-making: a human sciences approach. *Cambridge Journal of Education* 40(2), 145-159.
- Nikolajeva, M. (2014). *Reading for Learning: Cognitive approaches to children's literature*. London: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Reynolds, K. & Pearson, L. (2010). 'Realism'. In D. Rudd (Ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Children's Literature* (pp. 63-74). Abingdon: Routledge.
- Smith, K. P. (2007). *The Postmodern Fairytale*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Tosi, L. (2009). 'What do Fairy Tales Teach?' In Styles, M. and Arizpe, E. (Eds.) *Acts of Reading*. London: Trentham Books.

Weisel, E. (1960). *Night*. New York: Hill & Wang.

Zipes, J. (1979). *Breaking the Magic Spell*. London: Heinemann.

Zipes, J. (1986). *Don't Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England*. Abingdon. Routledge.

Zipes, J. (2002). *Sticks and Stones*. London and New York: Routledge.