

Ajankohtaiset

Considering Genre through the Lens of Space: The Case of the Grimms' Fairy Tales

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I am very grateful for this opportunity to present for examination my research on fairy tales published in the final, 1857 edition of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's famous collection *Children's and Household Tales* (*Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, 1812/15–1857). My goal in writing this dissertation was to highlight one aspect of the fairy tale that has so far been largely overlooked: narrative space. While it would be misleading and overly simplistic to say that existing scholarship has completely ignored this topic, space has (until recently)¹ rarely been the central focus of research. Instead, it has mostly been used to study other aspects of the fairy-tale genre, such as characters or plot, or interpret the meaning of individual tales. For instance, the protagonist's departure from home and subsequent journey through forests and kingdoms have commonly been viewed as a symbolic journey of maturation (Bettelheim [1976]1991). While valid and insightful, such readings fail to consider space as a narrative element in its own right, viewing it instead purely as a symbol or metaphor.

This research takes a different approach and studies space not as a stand-in for something else, but as a narrative element which is significant and interesting in its own right. Moreover, it views space not as a symbol, but as the material, physical environment which the characters inhabit, where they move and interact. As such, it suggests that space is more than just a background or container for the action. The presumed irrelevance of narrative space largely stems from the fairy tale's strict focus on action, which accounts for its economical language, devoid of descriptions and other elements that do not move the plot forward (Lüthi [1947]1986). Viewed from this perspective, it seems that the only thing that matters is advancing the plot – telling the audience primarily *what* happens to the characters, rather than *where* it happens, which might lead to the conclusion that space itself is irrelevant and exists simply because the story has to take place somewhere.

To examine the importance of narrative space for the fairy tale, this research attempted to answer two key questions: what do fairy-tale narratives tell us about space and what can space tell us about the fairy tale as a genre? To answer the first question, I examined the following aspects of fairy-tale space: its structure (the study of which largely relied on

¹ See, for instance, Messerli 2003, 2005, 2019; Leeuwen 2007.



narratology; see Dennerlein 2009; Ryan [2009]2014) and general features, as well as the linguistic and narrative strategies used to convey spatial information. The second question prompted me to explore whether there was anything about the narrative space of the fairy tale that might be considered genre-specific, i.e. that sets it apart from other short prose narrative genres. Due to time limitations, this lecture will focus on the second research question and the possibilities of viewing space as a criterion for genre classification.

Genre in *Children's and Household Tales*

What allowed me to consider the question of genre in more detail is the generic diversity of the Grimms' collection. While the name Grimm has become almost synonymous with the fairy tale, *Children's and Household Tales* contains a variety of short prose narrative genres, including (among others) legends, religious tales, animal tales and formula tales. The first step in this research was therefore to identify the primary corpus – i.e. fairy tales – and classify the secondary corpus (all the other tales) into appropriate genre categories.

Fairy tales were identified with the help of a working definition of the genre, based primarily on the writings of Max Lüthi. In his *European Folktale* ([1947]1986), the scholar lists several key features of the fairy tale, including what he terms one-dimensionality. This feature stems from the fact that fairy tales see the human and the magical (or, as Lüthi terms it, the otherworldly) as part of the same "dimension" or experience, which is why encountering the magical does not provoke fear, shock or surprise in the human protagonist (Lüthi [1947]1986, 10). My preliminary working definition of the genre therefore described the fairy tale as a (short) prose narrative genre which depicts the contact between the human and the magical (which must occur in the course of the story) as, to quote Maria Tatar, "part and parcel of everyday reality" ([1987]2003, 61).

One feature of the fairy tale commonly identified in scholarly sources is the existence of two qualitatively opposite worlds: one often referred to as "realistic" and inhabited by human characters, the other "non-realistic" and populated by imaginary creatures such as witches or talking animals. In my research, I substitute the term "world" with "domain" or "realm", widely used in research on fantasy to designate the "part of a world where the laws of nature and causality differ from the rest of the world" (Ekman 2013, 71). Borrowing Alfred Messerli's terminology, I describe the individual fairy-tale domains as the "non-magical" and the "magical" (2005, 274).

Fairy-tale domains

In and of itself, the existence of two qualitatively different domains is by no means unique to the fairy tale. On the contrary, many other genres encompass contrasting domains: the legend depicts the human and the supernatural, the religious tale the sacred and the profane, etc. This prompted me to ask whether there was something about the relationship and spatial parameters of these domains that might be characteristic of the fairy tale.

Once again, Lüthi's work proved to be a stimulating starting point. When discussing the previously mentioned one-dimensionality of the fairy tale, he compares it to the legend, which, he claims, is two-dimensional. Unlike fairy-tale protagonists who remain unperturbed when faced with the magical, the protagonists of the legend perceive supernatural creatures and



events as something alien to their everyday experience (Lüthi [1947]1986, 7–8). This is why encounters with ghosts, vampires, or werewolves provoke shock, fear, and disbelief in the human characters. Lüthi further develops this argument by claiming that the relationship between the human and the “otherworldly” in fairy tales and legends is also translated onto the spatial plane. In legends, the human and the supernatural can exist in close proximity to each other because they are clearly marked as experientially distant. In contrast, the non-magical and the magical in the fairy tale are experientially close, which is why they must be separated by large distances (ibid., 9). However, my analysis of the Grimms’ collection showed that Lüthi’s claims were valid only for certain types of fairy tales – specifically, adventure or quest fairy tales in which protagonists travel far and wide to encounter the magical. In contrast, fairy tales such as “Cinderella”, “Brier Rose” or “Rumpelstiltskin” do not feature immense distances separating the non-magical and the magical, nor do they see their protagonists set off into the world.

The results of this research indicate that, while not necessarily far apart, the two fairy-tale domains are clearly delineated and separated by a firm boundary. However, since the domains must come into contact in the course of the story, the interdomain boundary has to be crossed. The interaction between the magical and the non-magical, and the way in which the crossing of the interdomain boundary is negotiated constitute potentially genre-specific aspects of the fairy tale. Specifically, when compared to other dual-domain genres featured in the Grimms’ collection, three features of the interaction between the domains appear to be unique to or at least prevalent in the fairy tale: first, the interdomain boundary can be crossed from both sides, meaning that non-magical characters can enter the magical domain and vice versa. Second, the boundary crossing is always temporary, requiring the mobile characters to return to their native or endemic domains by the end of the story. Third, the boundary crossing is predicated on fulfilling certain requirements, which differ for magical and non-magical characters. In both cases, mobile characters must first establish contact with what might be termed a gatekeeper: a character endemic to the target domain who grants them access.

The magical gatekeeper usually tests the human protagonist, who must prove his or her worth by demonstrating positive traits such as kindness, selflessness, or diligence. Alternatively, the human character must show that he or she is familiar with certain automatic rules the story operates on. In some cases, the magical lures the human protagonists into its midst in order to help them (this is typically the case with vulnerable protagonists, who are lost and/or victims or abuse), solicit their help, or harm them. To that end, it typically employs visual and auditive signals, such as a light in the distance, or manipulates animals and objects which guide the protagonist into the magical domain.

Magical characters typically enter the non-magical when human protagonists need their assistance. This happens when they are faced with an insurmountable problem which cannot be solved with human means (for example, performing an impossible task such as building a castle in one day or draining a pond with a leaky spoon). This causes the protagonists distress, which is expressed verbally or nonverbally, and acts as an (usually unintentional) invitation to the magical to appear in the midst of the non-magical. Verbal summons include wishes (often spoken in anger and immediately regretted), incantations and similar verbal formulae, cries for help, explicit invitations and permissions, and marital vows. In the latter case, a non-magical character marries a magical one, thus allowing them to enter the



non-magical domain. Nonverbal summons, which may accompany verbal ones, include various physical gestures expressing despair: for example, a character will suddenly stop doing a task which he or she perceives as futile, sit down on the ground, throw his or her hands up in the air, engage in negative thoughts, and/or start crying.

Space and genre

These observations, which were tested by comparing the fairy tale to other dual-domain genres featured in the Grimms' collection – specifically, religious tales, legends, and their humorous (*Schwank*) versions – led me to revise my initial definition of the fairy tale. The new definition, which takes space into account, sees the fairy tale as a (short) prose narrative genre which encompasses two domains – the non-magical and the magical – which are perceived as experientially close and which must come into contact in the course of the story. While the domains are clearly separated, the boundary between them can temporarily be crossed from either side, but only if certain conditions have been met.

Furthermore, taking space into account prompted a revision of my initial genre classification, especially that of the secondary corpus. Namely, I noticed that in the case of humorous or *Schwank* tales, didactic tales, and aetiological tales, the number and quality of domains changed from narrative to narrative. These categories were therefore re-classified as modes or sub-categories of other independent genres, which are characterised by a stable spatial structure (e.g. aetiological animal tale, didactic fairy tale).

While my corpus is admittedly imbalanced as fairy tales outnumber other genres featured in the Grimms' collection, the findings presented here (and described in more detail in my doctoral thesis) nevertheless point to the still insufficiently explored potential of space as a possible criterion for genre classification. They also hopefully enhance our understanding of the fairy tale and its individual narrative elements.

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