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Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm were German researchers and linguists who are best known for their collection and retelling of folklore. They popularized stories like *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty*, etc.; pretty much every Disney classic was first popularized by the Grimm Brothers. What makes their stories so timeless? Why do people from different cultures, backgrounds, and even from different time periods all connect to those stories?

One common theme throughout each of these Grimm folktales is the discovery of self or establishing an identity. No matter someone's age, ethnicity, or gender, having a firm grip on one's identity is vital to living a happy and contented life (Erikson). Looking at the Grimm Brothers' *The Goose Girl* through the lens of identity development highlights overarching themes and obstacles that anyone going through an identity crisis can relate to.

The main character in Shannon Hale's *The Goose Girl* is Anidori-Kiladra Talianna Isilee, Crown Princess of Kildenree. She learned to speak quickly and her "wild aunt" taught her to speak to swans. Her aunt also related stories of horses that turn into wind and how people can be born with the language of persuasion, animals, or elements of nature on their tongue. Because Ani didn't live up to all the expectations placed on a Crown Princess, she was betrothed to a prince of a neighboring nation. While traveling

there, her lady-in-waiting incited the guards to rise up against her. Ani made her way through the forest and ended up at the palace with no proof of that she was the princess. She became a goose caretaker and made friends as she tried to figure out her place in society as well as among friends and family. Through the help of friends, Ani grew into her own skin and—rather than being self-conscious like she previously was—confidently accepted her new identity as strong, wind-speaking princess who had the power to stimulate change.

Ani's development and change in the way she perceives herself makes this book particularly attractive to adolescent and young adult audiences since they may be undergoing similar changes or challenges in establishing their identity. The perception of one's identity is also known as self-concept. Self-concept is made up of "a blend of what we imagine important people in our lives think of us" (Mead 459). Another psychologist described it as "see[ing] ourselves according to how we perceive others see us—we look into the social mirror and see our reflections" (House). In other words, how someone perceives himself or herself is largely crafted by how they think society views them. In *The Goose Girl* Ani "was constantly worried about what others thought of her and how every word she spoke could condemn her further" (Hale 27). The important people in her early life who Ani worried would condemn her included her mom, dad, aunt, and lady-in-waiting.

Because Ani was largely isolated from friends and her siblings in her youth, the people who influenced her most during her childhood were adults. Due to social isolation, Ani's development of a healthy self-concept was stunted. From 3-5 years old, children's self-concept simply consists of their observable or physical characteristics as

well as typical emotions and attitudes. Aged 6-11 year old children develop a concept of their personality traits—either positive and negative, smart or dumb—and begin performing social comparison (Harter). Because the primary people Ani interacted with were adults, she constantly worried “how unlike [the queen]” she was (Hale 45).

Ani’s aunt and father encouraged her to do what she loved, making Ani feel like they loved her for her individuality. Conversely, Ani felt she had to earn her mother’s love through achievement. That kind of conditional love is harmful to child development (James). Harter also explains that a large part of self-perception and worth is based off of a strong maternal relationship. Although Ani had a good relationship with her aunt and father, her relationship with her mother was unhealthy. She viewed her mother as perfect, “lovely” (Hale 45), manipulative, leading Ani to feel like she “[did] not know this woman at all” (Hale 33). Because of this, Ani believed she could never live up to her mother’s, or her nation’s, high expectations. She felt that everyone “knew how she tried to be what her mother was, and how often she failed” (Hale 25).

So much pressure on Ani or on any child can lead to many long-lasting issues. As a child develops a sense of identity and begins to figure out how to make and maintain relationships, they may acquire different thinking errors. Thinking errors are:

“Defense mechanisms we use to help us avoid feeling painful, negative, or scary emotions. They protect us from realities which are difficult to deal with. Thinking errors are thoughts we create or have learned that in some way distort this reality. They often relieve anxiety temporarily, but cause long-term difficulty in relationships.” (*Ego Defense Mechanisms*)

Both Ani and her mother display a multitude of thinking errors that inhibited their relationship with each other as well as their relationships with others. Ani exhibited three distinct thinking errors which affected her establishment of a healthy self-concept most directly: identification, compensation, and fantasy.

Identification is “increasing one’s feeling of worth by identifying ones self with a person or group perceived as desirable. We lose our own identity in the process, and fuse our identity with the other person or entity” (*Ego Defense Mechanisms*). For Ani, the entity she wanted to identify with to increase her self-worth was the role of Crown Princess. Even at a young age, she felt that her worth was solely defined by her abilities as a political leader. She desperately wanted to live up to expectations but couldn’t. Her mother said, “You should never have been only a little girl, you should have always been a crown princess” (Hale 45), validating Ani’s feelings of inadequacy.

Due to Ani’s sense of failure and inadequacy as a child, she often turned to her aunt and father as safe harbors. She described how “It was [her father] who in earlier years had held her weeping at his chest and told her that she was good enough, that she was his best girl. She had not sought his comfort in years, trying as she was to grow up, to be independent and queenly enough not to hurt, but she longed for his succor now” (Hale 25). However, when her father passed away and her mom sent Ani’s aunt away from the palace, Ani was left vulnerable. This was the beginning of Ani’s thinking error of compensating.

Compensation is “a form of denial in which one covers up weakness and avoids change and accountability by emphasizing only desirable traits or making up for frustrations in one area by over gratification in another area” (*Ego Defense Mechanisms*).

Depending on one's view of themselves, or their self-esteem, compensation is used to try and increase their feeling of self-worth. General self-esteem is composed of academic competence, social competence, physical/athletic competence, and physical appearance. Due to Ani's shortcomings in school, social settings, and, she thought, her physical appearance, she had very low self-esteem. One thing she considered herself good at was horseback riding. Ani was good at riding, leading her to dodge out on other duties like entertaining guests, memorizing treatises, and going to the stables instead. Because Ani overcompensated with horseback riding, she was also woefully unprepared when she undertook her journey away from home. Due to a lack of attention in her studies and shying away from the few peers she was allowed to associate with as an adolescent, Ani didn't know much about her future home and didn't have the skills to build healthy relationships.

The last thinking error Ani consistently portrayed was fantasy. "One must realize that fantasy and reality are two separate entities, and that fantasizing will neither resolve conflict nor bring about self-improvement...Fantasy become unhealthy when it is used to avoid important real experience and development" (*Ego Defense Mechanisms*). As a child, Ani's obsession with swans caused her to miss out on developmental opportunities and understanding healthy relationships. Later on in the book, when she leaves her home and travels to Bayern to be married to a foreign prince, she fantasizes about magical items. Her mother gave her symbolic tokens for good luck on her travels: a handkerchief with 3 drops of blood, a golden cup, and a crown. Instead of taking those as symbolic, Ani believed they were "something fantastic...just for her, a symbol of the real, hidden love of her mother. . . something magical, something powerful, something that meant her

mother had not flung her aside but loved her” (Hale 88). This error in thinking placed Ani in dangerous situations as she waited for the magical items to protect her.

These thinking errors lasted through Ani’s childhood and early adolescence until she changed her self-concept and became an adult. She had a confused sense of identity, which includes a “lack of direction and definition of self, [and] restricted exploration in adolescence because of unresolved psychosocial conflicts” and was therefore unprepared for the beginning stages of adulthood (Erikson). Ani left her home without a chance to resolve things between her and her mother. In addition, she was denied chances to explore different avenues of self-discovery, both of which are vital to developing high self-esteem.

Self-concept of a young adult includes scholastic, athletic, and job competence, physical appearance, romantic relationship, peer social acceptance, close friendship, parent relationship, sense of humor, and morality (Harter). As Ani traveled to a new country, she had opportunities that weren’t available to her previously. Interacting with people from different social classes and exploring new hobbies helped Ani realize she had talents that she wasn’t allowed an opportunity to explore in the palace.

As Ani overcame some of her thinking errors and started addressing her emotions in a healthy manner—allowing herself to feel them, telling others how she felt, and communicating healthily—she was able to overcome some of the obstacles to feeling self-worth as a child. Through new experiences and building healthy relationships, Ani was able to turn herself into a strong, capable woman who was able to help others attain a similar feeling of accomplishment and worth. No longer did Ani “tr[y] to shut out the

world where she did not belong” (Hale 19), instead she confidently stated, “I will not hide anymore” (Hale 308).

Understanding how Ani overcame obstacles caused by common thinking errors and unhealthy self-concept can help adolescents as they wade through their own trials. As Ani said, “If all the tales were true, then maybe they could tell me what I’m doing, and what I am to do now” (Hale 99). Through reading and connecting with characters in stories, young adults can recognize thinking errors and attributes they identify with. The stories and also provide a template to show them “what [they are] to do now” in order to help them develop a strong and healthy self-concept.

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