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The Grotesque and Fairy Tales

by Gayanne Ramsden

Witches, trolls, dwarves, beasts, and ugly, powerful stepmothers step out of the storybook and onto the stage when fairy tales become dramatized for children. Even though children’s theatre has come to encompass modern-day problems of divorce, drugs, and delinquency, children’s theaters still have a strong repertoire of fairy tales. Most of these tales have the juxtaposition of the beautiful and the grotesque. There have been opponents of fairy tales for children who feel that the grotesque is harmful and frightening to the child; yet it is the grotesque in these tales that can be the most helpful to children. The grotesque can be used as an instructional tool for the child to subdue the demonic, or to overturn and liberate those aspects of nature that appear both terrifying and ludicrous. But what is this thing that both liberates and terrifies? What is the grotesque?

We find it all around us in the world of faerie. In a picture found in a book of fairy tales, illustrated by the English painter, Arthur Rackham, three ugly and distorted faces in a pond look up at a beautiful young lady. In the same book, tormented trees twist and turn, yet have a rather wry and whimsical expression on their ghoulish faces. Sixty years later, an American children’s illustrator, Mercer Mayer, has shown trolls with blue faces and red, glowing eyes berating an unfortunate girl. In film, Disney’s Fantasia has a dark and menacing episode in the film "On Bald Mountain," which has wraith-like creatures emerge from graves and float over the sky in a demonic manner. Disney’s evil fairy-witch in Sleeping Beauty has henchmen that are somewhat comic, and scary goblins. While all of the above, the evil and comic, could be termed the "grotesque," it is particularly this combination of frightening and comical that, at least in the nineteenth century, was termed grotesque.

The English nineteenth century art critique, John Ruskin, in his Stones of Venice, said that the grotesque had two elements: the ludicrous and the terrifying (Pfordresher, 47). Artists, in portraying the grotesque, have combined these two elements and have also separated them, as a historical survey of the grotesque would show. When they are separated, they can become either the demonic-grotesque or the carnivalesque-grotesque.
Wolfgang Kayser was a German author who wrote on the grotesque in art and literature using primarily German sources, and Mikhail Bakhtin was a Russian theorist who wrote on the grotesque as found in the works of the French Renaissance writer Rabelais. Kayser wrote about the grotesque and emphasized it’s demonic elements which threaten society. Bakhtin wrote about the grotesque saying it is that part of society or culture which is often taboo; and if we acknowledge the whole of man, one is liberated. Demonic-grotesque is the unnatural, the insane, the dark side, and even threatens the moral order; but the carnivalesque is a liberation of all inhibitions. Kayser said that "the grotesque is the estranged world" (Kayser, 184), it is "a play with the absurd" (187), and it is "an attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world" (188). Bakhtin felt that the carnivalesque-grotesque originated with the carnivals of medieval society, (although there are also some origins in classical times) that ridiculed the medieval structures of an authoritarian church and state. This world of carnival which overturned the social order, making a commoner king for a day, with its bawdy and risque jokes about the body, was liberating Bakhtin believed.

The word "carnival," as used by Mikhail Bakhtin, refers to the culture of the marketplace and the forms of folk humor which arose in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. The manifestations of this popular culture included comic festivities and ritual activities, memorialized in the oral and written parodies from which an entire body of recreational literature was born. Among the most salient traits of carnivalesque compositions are licentiousness, irreverence, and an exaggerated fascination with the human body and with its appetites and instincts, both noble and base. (Sherno, 370)

These are two usages for the word grotesque, both of which have a historical bases. The grotesque is not only found in modern adaptations of fairy tales, but also has a history in Western art and literature. The grotesque was found in classical times with its festival of Dionysus that included festival and sacrifice. There were irreverent participants, dressed as satyrs (part man and part goat) that were the predecessors of the medieval carnival. The grotesque was also found in literature, especially in the works of Aristophanes. In his plays, intellectuals are parodied, and the social order, where wives refuse their husbands’ conjugal rights, is a world turned upside down. The combination of the ludicrous and the terrifying can be found in much literature of the Middle Ages as well. In the Decameron, a collection of tales by the Italian writer Boccaccio, some youths attempt to hide from the plague and overcome their fear of death by telling immoral tales—as though they were thumbing their noses at death. There are
also many passion plays (plays that portrayed stories from the Bible) that combine buffoonery and evil in such characters as Herod, Pilot, and the Devil. It would seem that if fear can be lampooned, it takes away some of its sting.

The dark and the humorous are to be found in the masterpieces of the Renaissance. Shakespeare juxtaposed the irreverent and funny grave diggers next to the tormented Hamlet who joked about death. Cervantes gave his insane nobleman, Don Quixote, all the virtues of chivalry and put him in ironic situations that showed the cruelty of life. And certainly, there was Rabelais, the French author, who made us aware of both the wonder and the absurdity of the body.

In the eighteenth century, we see many examples of this carnivalesque free-wheeling and amoral world in such works as the cynical world portrayed by the French writer Voltaire in his work Candide where we learn that the best of all possible worlds is the cruelest and most sadistic world. Then, there is the horrific laughter of Jonathan Swift. We often think of the charm of his Gullivers Travels which mostly children read now, but he also wrote in one work of the eating of babies as a gourmet luxury: "good to eat, cheap, and excellent for keeping the population down."

Perhaps the demonic-grotesque where the somber, terrifying, and supernatural are most emphasized is found in the Gothic-Grotesque which originated in Germany and then found its way with its ghosts and castles into the English novel in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Goethe and Byron were advocates of this genre. In many of these stories, such as in Goethe’s Faust, the dark side is shown in opposition to the prevailing moral order. And although the fairy tale undoubtedly originated before this era, it does have much in common with this genre where the horrific is overcome by the forces of good.

Later in the nineteenth century Dickens, Hugo, and Twain also used the grotesque. In Dickens, the grotesque is usually evil and disfiguring in contrast to Hugo’s Quasimodo in The Hunchback of Notre Dame, who embodies goodness—although his outward appearance is grotesque and ugly. Twain, in Huckleberry Finn, uses the grotesque as satire to point out the hypocrisy in society.\(^1\)

The twentieth century, however, with its loss of moral order, and the horror of the Holocaust, has become the century of the grotesque. From the comic-horror of the writers of the first part of the century, to the writers immediately following World War II, we are shown a world without hope. Although there are some postwar authors,

particularly among the feminine grotesque writers such as Angela Carter and Flannery O'Connor who, in their "joyful acceptance of both body and soul, irreverent humor," and their "vision of the emancipatory function that Bakhtin attributes to the original Renaissance grotesque" (Lolcke 12) write of the celebration of the "unending cycle of life, death, and rebirth" (12).

In this history of the grotesque, wending its way down to the modern era, remaining popular throughout the centuries, is the fairy tale. It has used the grotesque to both show the terrifying overcome by a moral order and a Bakhtinian world of reversal where the terrifying becomes acceptable. The Bakhtin model of irreverence and bodily liberation (whether one agrees if this is good or not) is seldom found in children's theatre (although it has made its way into children's videos such as Shelley Duvall's Faerie Tale Theater). But in children's plays that have been adapted from fairy tales, there have been two examples of using the grotesque image, that could be used in overcoming a child's fear of the grotesque. It is not done through the means of the grotesque evil figure being destroyed as in "Sleeping Beauty" and "Snow White," but in the grotesque character, that at first appears threatening, becoming benign.

In the two plays, Beauty and the Beast, and Rumpelstiltskin, both by Brenda Joyce Dubay, the grotesque is portrayed in both a traditional and untraditional way. In Beauty and the Beast, the story remains the same except Beauty is a young man rather than a woman, and the Beast is a woman. Although it is a little difficult, at first, to accept the name Beauty for a boy, it does work. This however, does not influence the use of the grotesque. It is in the fundamental situation that we are perturbed. A beast, which threatens Beauty's father, now wants Beauty to wed her. We, like the father and Beauty, are horrified. Beasts do not marry human beings. But in this context, we see the norm overturned (which Bakhtin says is part of the grotesque). This threatening creature is eventually shown to be noble, patient, and wishing only the best for the captive Beauty. In this story, the child learns that that which is ugly need not be harmful and the child's fear of what appears to be a loathsome being is overcome.

Dubay does the same thing in Rumpelstiltskin, although this time the fearsome being that is overcome does not follow the pattern of the traditional fairy tale.

In this play of Rumpelstiltskin, the little old dwarf who could inspire fear in children (for they fear that they too might be given away to a scary little man), turns out to be a friendly being who had once been a playmate and babysitter to the miller's-daughter-turned-queen. In this story, the queen realizes she has found a long-lost friend and wants the dwarf to stay and help her raise her child. Once again, the grotesque has been transformed, and that which was fearful becomes benign.
While neither of these stories exactly follow the two models described by Kayer and Bakhtin, they do show evil overturned and overcome. In these two tales by Dubay, the grotesque becomes an instructional device to help children overcome their fears. The grotesque, which has been used in so many ways for adult literature, can also be very effective for helping children overcome their fear of the ambiguous combination of the ludicrous and the terrifying when it is shown to be either overcome, a liberating force, or benign.

Works Cited


