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6. THE CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FAIRY TALE

You can always tell when Christmas is approaching in America. Sometime in November the bookstores begin displaying glossy fairy-tale books with attractive colors and startling designs in their windows. It is almost like magic, and the store windows appear to be enchanted by these marvelous books. Of course, there is really nothing magical about this phenomenon. It is absolutely predictable: storeowners and publishers are in collusion, seeking to entice both children and parents to buy as many books as possible during the holiday season. In most cases, it does not matter if the contents of the books are vapid. It is the fluff that counts, the ornament, the diverting cover designs that promise a wonderful world of pleasure and take the onlooker away from the harsh realities of the present. In the bookstore window there is the glow of difference and the promise of pleasure. In the fairy-tale books there is hope for a world distinctly more exciting and rewarding than the everyday world in the here and now.

But is there any basis for such hope? Are the fairy tales in America mere commodities that compensate for the technological evolution that has narrowed the range of possibilities for developing the imagination and humane relationships in reality? What socio-cultural function do fairy tales have in an American society, in which the most ex-
treme fantasies and nightmares have been coolly and brutally realized so that little is left for the imagination?

In a significant study of the historical development of the literary fairy tale, Friedmar Apel has argued that, from its origins, the central theme of the fairy tale has always concerned the struggle of the imagination (representing the spiritual side of humanity) against the hard reality of exploitation and reification (representing the rise of inhumane technology). Whereas the earlier fairy tales of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries could optimistically project a harmony of soul and reality brought about by magic or a fantastic element that seemed commensurate with progress in the world, Apel has claimed that the modern temper is stamped by our conscious recognition that such harmony can never be achieved and thus the very basis of the fairy tale is no longer relevant and can never again be valid, unless its formal characteristics totally change. As he states:

While other genres (i.e., the novel, lyric poetry) have been able to maintain themselves only by depicting the impossibility of the unity of the world and soul, the fairy tale requires the possibility of conceptualizing this unity as a starting point, no matter how relativized it becomes. Without this possibility, the fairy tale must give up its formal function of depicting the marvelous (das Wunderbare), unless it wants to degenerate into mere entertainment literature by feigning harmony and thus losing all connection to actual life. . . . all new endeavors to portray the marvelous with the traditional means of the fairy tale and other fantastic stories only serve to amuse the imagination and can no longer fulfill the old functions of conveying a sublime interpretation of life and a way of putting the meaning into practice.¹

In short, Apel dismisses the profound utopian value, which the fairy tale, either as oral or literary product, once had, and he asserts that it is impossible in the twentieth century for it to be anything more than divertissement, escape literature, a cultural commodity that is part of the en-
ertainment business. His position is obviously a radical one and must be qualified, if we are to understand the development and the present function of the literary fairy tale in the West, and more specifically in America. Certainly, if we look at the Walt Disney industry and the vast distribution of bowdlerized and sanitized versions of fairy tales by Perrault, the Grimms, Bechstein, Collodi, and other classical authors, it is apparent that they have been incorporated into the western culture industry mainly to amuse children and adults alike.

Yet, amusement is not to be taken lightly, for distraction and divertissement have an important ideological function: almost all the major classical fairy tales that have achieved prominence and are to be enjoyed in the United States can be considered as products that reinforce a patriarchal and middle-class social code. Their meaning is not limited to this ideological function. For instance, even if their purpose is to amuse and pacify the rebellious instincts of readers, they are received by the public in different and unpredictable ways. Although a text may contain directives within it, it cannot prescribe its effect. Meaning shifts with the individual in history. And, if the more serious fairy tales of the twentieth century and specifically contemporary American fairy tales are to have any meaning today, then we must begin at first in the production phase with the proposition that many authors believe that the classical works are indeed patriarchal and anachronistic and have served an ideological function that needs to be replaced, or, at the very least, to be revised in light of the major socio-political changes since World War II.

Bearing this in mind, the literary fairy tale of the twentieth century, despite what Apel asserts, has maintained a crucial utopian function when it is self-reflective and experimental. By questioning the forms and themes that the fairy tale has traditionally developed, the best of the modern fairy tales reflect the complex problems brought about by
highly industrialized or post-industrial societies and the difficulties that the genre itself has in maintaining its utopian purpose, for the fairy tale has always projected the wish and possibility for human autonomy and eros and proposed means to alter the world. As Michel Butor has remarked about the images conveyed by the ideal and serious fairy tale, "A world inverted, an exemplary world, fairyland is a criticism of ossified reality. It does not remain side by side with the latter; it reacts upon it; it suggests that we transform it, that we reinstate what is out of place."²

One of the qualitatively distinguishing features of the fairy tale in America during the last decades of the twentieth century has been the manner in which it has questioned gender roles and critiqued the patriarchal code that has been so dominant in both folk and fairy tales until the 1960s.³ However, just as feminisms and the feminist movement have been culturally exploited and compromised by the mass media and turned against themselves, the fairy tale that seeks to maintain its utopian purpose and social critique is always in danger of being defused and transformed into mere entertainment.

The quandary of the fairy tale was most evident during the Reagan/Bush years of the 1980s, which brought a destruction of social welfare services and projects, increased pauperization of women and minority groups, and support for the individual self-absorption of the middle classes, often equated with the so-called Yuppies. It would appear that the fairy tale in the 1980s became nothing more than a decorative ornament, designed to titillate and distract readers and viewers, no matter how it was transformed as novel, poem, short story, Broadway play, film, cassette, or TV series. Yet, it would be unfair to the fairy-tale genre and to the writers of fairy tales to dismiss all the creative attempts as mere decoration and a reflection of the narcissism of the 1980s. In some respects, the fairy tale can be characterized as trying to find an adequate fantastical form to reply to the
curtailment of the fantasy in reality and to provide a viable option that will give audiences hope that they can reach their creative potential.

One of the more successful Broadway musicals toward the end of the 1980s was a production entitled *Into the Woods* (1987), which was a hodgepodge of various fairy tales that harmlessly poked fun at various fairy-tale characters like Little Red Riding Hood and was conceived mainly for commercial success. Indeed, it was a success, and there has been something like a fairy-tale resurgence during the late 1980s that one could possibly interpret as a flight from reality, a withdrawal from the problems of American society, or more positively, a postmodernist endeavor to explore possibilities to go beyond the traditional boundaries of the fairy tale and generate new worlds. The fairy-tale TV series *Beauty and the Beast*, which ran from 1987 to 1990, had a large following in the States and has been successful as a rerun on TV and marketed as video. (And most likely the Disney Studio decided to capitalize on this popularity by producing its animated version of *Beauty and the Beast* along with a bestselling book in 1991.) Various fairy-tale films like *The Princess Bride* (1987) based on William Goldman’s novel, have been popular in the theaters. Terri Windling began editing a series of novels that retell classic fairy tales at Ace Books in 1986, and six works by well-known fantasy authors have been published thus far. Numerous innovative illustrated fairy-tale books for children are issued each year, perhaps the most famous by Maurice Sendak entitled *Mili* (1988), based on a letter written by Wilhelm Grimm, which has sold over 200,000 copies. Moreover, the classical Grimm and Perrault fairy tales such as *The Frog Prince, Little Red Riding Hood, Snow White, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty*, and others are newly illustrated and published in the thousands each year, often with cassettes or records. Finally, there are various fairy-tale imports from England and the Continent like the works of Michael Ende, Angela Carter, and Tanith Lee that are avidly read and seen.
by American audiences. For instance, Ende’s *Neverending Story* (1984) was made into two films just as Carter’s story “The Company of Wolves” from *Bloody Chamber* (1979) was adapted for the cinema.

In sum, the fairy tale has assumed many guises in America and is alive and well. That is, it is certainly immensely popular, but is it popular for the wrong reasons? Is the hope it promises perverse? Does it offer temporary escape from the hard times of the present? Is there anything of substance in the fairy-tale experimentation that sets a foundation for essential cultural transformation?

There are no definitive answers to these questions, and it is extremely difficult to provide a comprehensive picture of the different types of fairy-tale experimentation that are presently being undertaken in different medias today. Nevertheless, some key works—Maurice Sendak’s *Mili* (1988), the TV series *Beauty and the Beast*, William Goldman’s *The Princess Bride*, Raymond E. Feist’s *Faerie Tale* (1988), Wendy Walker’s *The Sea-Rabbit, or The Artist of Life* (1988), Jane Yolen’s *Tales of Wonder* (1983), six fairy-tale novels by Steven Brust, Kara Dalkey, Charles de Lint, Patricia C. Wrede, Pamela Dean, and Jane Yolen in Terri Windling’s series, and Robert Coover’s “The Gingerbread House” (1970)—can help us at least address some of the questions I raised, for they are representative of both regressive and progressive tendencies to make the genre play a vital role in the development in American culture.

The history behind *Mili* is highly significant because it reveals something about the connections between production, reception, and form of children’s fairy tales in the late 1980s. In 1983 Justin Schiller, a well-known New York bookseller, auctioned off a letter written by Wilhelm Grimm that contained a trite and sentimental tale. When the bidding contest was over, Michael di Capua of Farrar, Straus and Giroux boasted that he had paid well over the $26,000 asking price. In order to recoup his money di Capua an-
nounced to the press that the unknown alleged “magnificent” tale would be translated by the gifted Ralph Mannheim and illustrated by the famous Maurice Sendak. Now, this tale was written by Wilhelm in a letter to a girl named Mili, evidently to give her some solace during the Napoleonic Wars. The tale itself was not original but part of a didactic religious tradition and was fully developed by Wilhelm in a different way in “St. Joseph in the Woods” in the second edition of the Grimms’ Kinder- und Hausmärchen (1819). The fact that Wilhelm never felt the need to refer to the “Mili tale” later in his work on folk tales is indicative of his low opinion of this trite piece. The plot is simple: a mother sends her daughter into the woods in order to save her from an encroaching war, and she tells her to trust in God. The obedient and pious child does as she is told and is protected by a guardian angel. In the woods she finds an old man who is actually St. Joseph, and she shows how domesticated she is by performing various humble acts. After thirty years of dutiful behavior, which the girl perceives as only three years, she is sent home by St. Joseph, who gives her a rose to carry to her mother. When the girl is reunited with her, they go to sleep and are found dead the next morning with St. Joseph’s rose in full bloom.

Anyone familiar with Sendak’s work, particularly Where the Wild Things Are, can perhaps understand why he was drawn to this tale. He has never tired of illustrating the flight and return of the child, who reconciles himself to a mother or home. However, rarely in his career has he ever illustrated a text so dripping with religious sentiment as this one. Where, then, is the book’s salvation if there is one? In reading it as my daughter did when she could not read. That is, to ignore the text and look at Sendak’s playful pastel illustrations that recall the odyssey of a courageous girl who survives on her own in a mysterious forest. In fact, Sendak unconsciously or consciously re-illustrates the history of Little Red Riding Hood in a fascinating way.
Sendak’s girl, who cannot be more than eight, is adorned with a red frock, and throughout the illustrations Sendak uses all sorts of hues of red to play upon the theme of courage and/or sin. Clearly, his little girl, who loses her red shoes in the woods and who will return barefoot to her mother with a red rose, blossoms as the images of the woods are transformed from wilderness to garden of Eden. As usual, Sendak has his fun with his viewers by introducing personal themes and motifs from his other works. For instance, Mozart, also dressed in a red jacket, conducts a choir of Brooklyn school kids in one scene. In another, St. Joseph, who looks more like an old wise rabbi than a Christian saint, gives the rose to the girl as a sign of redemption. The man in the woods is not a wolf but a spiritual guide, who looks after her during a period of trial and separation.

Unfortunately, most of the illustrations are derivative and bland. In the final analysis, the text of *Dear Mili*, seen through the eyes of Maurice Sendak, is transformed into another story that has something to do with Maurice Sendak’s personal odyssey and sentimental old age. Gone is the rebellion of his early period. Gone are the weird disturbing figures of *The Juniper Tree*. Sendak has tamed himself, and though *Dear Mili* may be sweet and tender, it reflects a restorative tendency of the contemporary American fairy tale for children. Obedience to the mother, diligence, submission to male authority, reward by divine powers—these are the dominant motifs in a fairy tale that does not show respect for the autonomy of a child or encourage her to develop her creative powers. Such a tale is perfectly in accord with the present ideological atmosphere in America, and it is not much different from most of the reprints of the Grimm’s classical tales. Of course, there are numerous endeavors to rewrite and re-illustrate the traditional tales such as Shirley Climo’s *The Egyptian Cinderella* (1989), Charlotte Huck’s *Princess Furball* (1989), and Margot Tomes’s *Tattercoats* (1989). Most of these tales depict a strong heroine who actively
determines her own destiny. Yet, despite the strong feminist component in many of the new and revised fairy tales for children, the emphasis on closure, harmony, happy end, and a well-ordered world remains the governing principle so that the tales rarely hold a critical mirror to the ossified reality of our times. In the case of fairy tales for children, the harmonious ends may be justified as long as they motivate children to believe that sex roles can be altered. But, given the vast problems confronting women in American society—teenage pregnancy, pauperization of single women with children, inequitable wages—these fairy tales also conceal reality and give children a false impression of what awaits them as they mature.

This is not to say that there have not been revisions of classical fairy tales for children that compel readers to confront the harsh realities of the 1980s. Martin Waddell’s *The Touch Princess* (1986) and Babbette Cole’s *Princess Smarty-pants* (1986) are superb examples of how writers and illustrators can revise the classical tradition in a way that can contribute to the autonomy of children. Both are parodies of *King Thrushbeard* or *The Taming of the Shrew* and present young women who resist the will of their parents who want them to marry the perfect prince. These tales, told with delightful and unorthodox images, are open-ended and provoke readers to reconsider their gender identity with the hope that they can become who they want to be. There are, however, radical revisions of fairy tales that leave shockingly little hope. For instance, the theme of violence, the violation of a child’s will, is treated in a more somber way in Sarah Moon’s remarkable *Little Red Riding Hood*. Using Charles Perrault’s 1697 text with her own stark, contemporary photographs of a young girl on her way to her grandmother’s house at night in an urban setting, Moon addresses the topic of violence in our society and shifts the blame for the girl’s rape and/or death to the predators or to social conditions. This revised version of *Little Red Riding Hood* is a haunting
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photographic essay about the danger girls face in our streets. Not only do the photos demand that we reexamine Perrault's text carefully, they also make us aware of the insidious threatening climate in which young girls grow up with dread.

Apparently this was also the intention of the TV series Beauty and the Beast, conceived in 1986 by Ron Koslow and adapted as a fairy-tale novel by Barbara Hambly in 1989. The plot tells all: Catherine Chandler, daughter of a wealthy corporate lawyer, has followed her father's footsteps, and after graduating Radcliffe and Cornell Law School, she works in his New York office as an associate. Though not satisfied with her work, Catherine enjoys the glitter of New York and lives the life of a professional Yuppie. She mixes mainly with the rich, and her lover, Tom Gunther, an ambitious real estate developer, is concerned primarily with prestige and money, values that Catherine appears to share. Indeed, she could be described as a spoiled New York princess, who has no awareness of the social problems in New York. However, one night she is kidnapped, raped, and beaten. Left for dead in Central Park, she is found by a strange beastly creature named Vincent, who is from an underground world. A cross between a lion and human, Vincent was found as a baby by an extraordinary man named Father, who raised him in the underground tunnels of New York, where numerous homeless people and outcasts live. These people are the "different" ones, the nonconformists with a heart, who have rejected the capitalist society of New York and are content to live in the tunnels from the remnants discarded every day by the New Yorkers.

After Catherine spends ten days with Vincent, who helps her recuperate from her attack, she returns to the city with a completely different consciousness. She leaves her father's firm and begins working for the district attorney's office to help the victims of social injustice. Moreover, she breaks her relationship with Tom and feels a deep bond of affinity and
love for Vincent, who is dedicated to preserving the underground world that has a precarious existence. Though Catherine and Vincent rarely see each other, they feel each other’s presence all the time. Finally, when Catherine, who has learned self-defense, tracks down her kidnappers, who run a prostitution and blackmail racket, she valiantly fights them but appears to be doomed. Suddenly, Vincent appears out of nowhere to kill the thugs and rescue Catherine. Though they must part again, Catherine “had no idea where this would end, no idea where it might lead her. She only knew that they were bound together, she and this strange and beautiful soul, and the thought, rather than uncertainty, brought her peace.”

This fairy-tale novel is based the two-hour TV pilot that introduced the series in 1987. The ending of the novel, like the TV pilot, had to be inconclusive so that Catherine and Vincent could have many adventures for the next two TV seasons with the pair taking turns saving each other and developing a more passionate love. Both the novel and TV series are based on sentimental and predictable plots. The appeal of both, however, can be attributed to the fact that Koslow employed a well-known fairy-tale scheme to address immediate problems of American society, ranging from drugs to white collar crimes. Moreover, here it is the princess who is converted into a more humane person by the beast, who remains a beast and true to his outsider state. Another appealing factor was the unconsummated love between Catherine and Vincent. Unfortunately, the series quickly succumbed to the stale formula of most crime shows on American TV and did not develop the fairy-tale form in a new way, and the novel is written in a trite, traditional manner that leaves little room for the reader’s imagination.

William Goldman’s *The Princess Bride*, published as a novel in 1973 and produced as a film in 1987, is a mock fairy tale that plays with traditional motifs and themes and that challenges the reader/viewer to consider whether fairy tales
have any value for us today. In the comic introduction to the
book, Goldman tells the reader how his father, a European
immigrant, used to read S. Morgenstern’s classic fairy tale,
The Princess Bride, with the boring parts left out. Since it was
his favorite book, Goldman writes his own adaptation for
contemporary readers and retells the tale, constantly inter­
rupting the flow of the narrative with droll comments.

The story concerns the beautiful Buttercup in the land of
Florin somewhere between Sweden and Germany some time
long ago. Buttercup is a feisty village maid who always or­
ders the farm boy Westly to do all the chores, until she
reaches eighteen and realizes she loves him. However, he
decides to go to America and find his fortune there to be
worthy of her love. While he is gone for three years, But­
tercup is forced to become engaged to Prince Humperdinck of
Florin, who eventually wants her murdered by three unusual
villains, Inigo the greatest swordsman in the world, Fezzik
the strongest man in the world, and Vizzini, the cruelest
man in the world. However, Westley returns in disguise and
outsman these villains, and later two of them join him and
help him rescue Buttercup from the evil designs of the
prince. Nobody is what he or she appears in this fairy tale.
The characters speak in contemporary American slang. The
impossible is always possible. In the end, Goldman leaves
the reader up in the air as to whether Buttercup and Westley
will live happily ever after. In his opinion, after they es­
caped, “they squabbled a lot, and Buttercup lost her looks
eventually, and one day Fezzik lost a fight and some hot­
shot kid whipped Inigo with a sword and Westley was never
able to really sleep sound because of Humperdinck maybe
being on the trail. I’m not trying to make this a downer,
understand. I mean, I really do think that love is the best
thing in the world, except for cough drops. But I also have
to say, for the umpty-umpth time, that life isn’t fair. It’s just
fairer than death, that’s all.”

Entertaining and bizarre, this novel parodies all the con-
ventions of the fairy tale but not with the intention to dismiss the value of the genre. Goldman recreates himself as the fictitious author of this work; that is, he uses a mask in the tradition of eighteenth-century novels and recalls how his father’s telling of Morgenstern’s fairy tale introduced him to a new world of fantasy that cured him of a sickness, somewhat like Michael Ende’s *Neverending Story*, and that this imaginative story remained with him because it changed his life. In other words, the power of the imagination can cause changes in reality and alter one’s life.

However, imagination and creativity have been on the defensive for some time now, and most of the recent fairy-tale novels record in some form of another the desperate fight of valiant heroes and heroines to save the imagination from being destroyed or wiped out by the instrumental forces of technology that seek to rationalize life in a sterile and exploitative manner. It is not by chance then that the series of fairy-tale novels edited by Terri Windling has as its major purpose to breathe new life into traditional material and show the diverse uses a modern storyteller can make out of the fairy-tale genre. The first six novels in the series appear to be manifestoes in defense of the power of the imagination.

Steven Brust’s *The Sun, the Moon, and the Stars* (1987) is based on a Hungarian folk tale and set in contemporary America. A group of artists work together in a studio and appear doomed to obscurity. However, they fight against odds to arrange for an exhibition and gain respect for their imaginative endeavors. In Charles de Lint’s *Jack the Giant Killer* (1987), he borrows from folk tales about cunning tailors and tricksters to weave together his own fantastic narrative about a young woman, named Jacky, whose mundane life is suddenly transformed in an extraordinary way. She witnesses the mysterious murder of a tiny man called a hob in the city of Ottowa. Soon she feels compelled to explore this mystery, and before Jacky knows it, she becomes...
the only hope of a fairy realm called Kinrowan threatened by savage hordes. With the help of her best friend Kate (Crackernuts) Hazel and a swanlike prince, she demonstrates that force and violence are not necessary to overcome brutality if one has faith in the imagination. This message is also stressed in Pamela Dean's *Tam Lin* (1991), which is actually a fairy-tale adaptation of an old Scottish ballad. She, too, updates the ballad to the Vietnam era and sets the action at a Midwestern college, where Janet, her pregnant heroine, must make a difficult decision about “keeping the heart of flesh in a world that wants to put in a heart of stone.”

In contrast to the contemporary settings of Dean, Brust, and de Lint, Kara Dalkey’s *The Nightingale* (1988) and Patricia C. Wrede’s *Snow White and Rose Red* (1989) take place in the past. Dalke’s revision of Hans Christian Andersen’s tale is set in medieval Japan and concerns Uguisu, who uses her extraordinary talent as a flutist, to save the emperor’s life and bring about peace and harmony in his kingdom. Wrede’s adaptation of Wilhelm Grimm’s *Snow White and Rose Red* takes place in Elizabethan England. Unlike Grimm’s version, the Widow Arden and her two daughters, Blanche and Rosamund, are active and creative characters, who help the queen of faerie and her two half-mortal sons, Hugh and John, to keep the ties alive between the fairy realm and mundane society.

The most recent of the fairy-tale novels in the Windling series, Jane Yolen’s *Briar Rose* (1992), is by far the most experimental. It moves through memory, flashbacks, and a retelling of “Sleeping Beauty” from the present to the horrors of the Holocaust. In her haunting narrative that reads somewhat like a mystery novel, Yolen demonstrates that fairy tales can be used to address the most atrocious crimes of the Nazi period in a manner that generates hope in readers who, Yolen believes, must come to terms with Auschwitz and its consequences.
Though the plots of each one of these novels that I have discussed are certainly very different, there is a common thread that unites them, a thread that can be traced back to German romanticism and especially the works of E.T.A. Hoffmann: there is a secret humane and imaginative world, the realm of faerie, that is threatened by powermongers, rationalists, materialists, scientists, and the like. Without this world, i.e., without imagination, life would become drab and monotonous, and people would become like automatons. Somehow a balance must be struck between the inner and outer worlds of human beings, between the creative forces of the imagination and the reality principle of the world.

This message is at the heart of a bestseller entitled simply *Faerie Tale* by Raymond E. Feist. The plot concerns a successful screenwriter by the name of Phil Hasting, who moves into a huge house in rural upstate New York with his wife and three children. However, it turns out that the house is the seat of magic powers, and a magic black force is accidentally unleashed by Hasting and his friends. The Queen of faerie and her realm become endangered, and Hasting’s twin sons are on the brink of death because an agreement between the guardians of faerie power has been broken by one of its members. Fortunately, the sons, who believe in the faerie power, have the courage to resist the evil forces, and they are all saved by the intervention of the guardians of the faerie realm.

Feist’s novel contains long-winded expositions about magic, Celtic tradition, and fairies and has a secondary plot concerned with Hasting’s teenage princess daughter, a rich heiress, who falls in love with an All-American graduate student writing his dissertation on a topic related to the occult and magic. Like the other fairy-tale novels, this plot is strained and at times preposterous and pretentious. The best that one can say about the lot of them is that they want to find an adequate form for the fairy tale so that it can
maintain its critical and utopian function—to hold a mirror to ossified reality and to suggest imaginative ways to alter our lives.

Whereas the longer narrative forms of the fairy tale, i.e., the fairy-tale novel, tend to be too predictable and unimaginative in their endeavors to protect the imagination from the encroachment of rationalism, the contemporary writers of short fairy tales appear to be more effective in their experiments. Here the works of Wendy Walker, Jane Yolen, and Robert Coover are good examples of the different ways contemporary American writers are experimenting with short prose fairy tales.

In *The Sea-Rabbit, or The Artist of Life* (1988) Walker has rewritten six tales from the Grimms’ *Children’s and Household Tales*, composed two new stories about Samson and Delilah and the woman who lived in a boot, and invented a parable about the cathedral of Notre Dame, all with the purpose of altering our customary notions about the classical fairy-tale tradition and the real-life conflicts within it. She accomplishes her modernist goal of restoring the unspoken of the traditional tales by fleshing out the lives of the original characters, probing their psyches, and altering narrative perspectives.

In the title tale of the book, “The Sea Rabbit,” based on the Grimms’ “The Little Hamster from the Water,” she presents an unlikely protagonist who refuses to accept the role of hero, for he is not particularly enamored of the cruel and haughty princess, who takes pleasure in cutting off the heads of her suitors if they are not smart enough to deceive her and find a hiding place that she is unable to discover. Despite the fact that he outwits her and “wins” her, he is not optimistic about the future, given the princess’s former predilection. In “Ashipattale,” Walker’s version of “Cinderella,” the prince expresses his disappointment after marrying Ashipattale, who becomes concerned mainly with building a bird-castle for her beloved birds. Walker’s other characters, Clever Elsie,
Jack My Hedgehog, the discharged soldier from "The Worn-Out Dancing Shoes," and Arnaud, the hunter from the Grimms' tales, also have strange fates that alienate us from our typical expectations, for they refuse to settle for material wealth and superficial happiness.

Although Walker sometimes remains too close to the original plotlines of the Grimms' tales, her terse style and use of different narrative voices produce haunting images that fuse the past with the present. She is relentlessly blunt when it comes to exploring the psychological truths of the old tales, as though she wants to expose the way we have been blinded by the traditional fairy tales. Her tales do not provide "happy" or cathartic relief for readers, rather they are startling and troubling, and in this sense they renew the fairy-tale tradition by undermining the authoritative voice of the Grimms' tradition and exposing problems that are directly related to our present troubled times and cannot be easily resolved.

Transforming the traditional fairy tales into problems without solutions has been a major goal of Jane Yolen, who has been writing unique fairy tales for children and adults for the past twenty years. The best examples of her work can be found in her book Tales of Wonder (1983) and Dragonfield and Other Stories (1985). She has consistently experimented with the fairy-tale genre in a twofold manner by revising traditional tales with an eye toward exploring their psychological undercurrents and by creating her own unusual tales that fuse motifs and themes from the fairy-tale tradition and fantasy literature. As Patricia McKillip has remarked, "her stories make no promises, guarantee no happy endings. They present worlds which alter under our eyes like the shapes of clouds. Image flows into image: the tree becomes a lover, the ribbon of gray hair becomes a silver road out of torment, the tears become like flowers, the old drunk on the beach becomes the god of the sea. Each image is a gift without explanation."
Among the best of her revised "classical" fairy tales are "The Moon Ribbon," "Brother Hart," "The Thirteenth Fay," "Happy Dens or A Day in the Old Wolves Home," and "The Undine," which are characterized by plots that compel readers to ponder their traditional expectations and by unique metaphors that give rise to startling images. For instance, in "The Undine" she emphasizes the notion of male betrayal and female autonomy in an implicit critique of Hans Christian Andersen’s "The Little Mermaid." Here the mermaid leaves the prince, who beckoned her, to return to her sisters in the sea that “opened to her, gathered her in, washed her clean.” 12 In “The Thirteenth Fey,” Yolen recalls the story of “Sleeping Beauty” through a first-person narrative of the youngest daughter of a family of fairies, who tells us, “we owe our fortunes, our existence, and the lives of our children to come to the owners of that land. We are bound to do them duty, we women of the fey, and during all the time of our habitation, the local lords have been a dynasty of idiots, fornicators, louts, greedyguts, and fools.” 13

What follows is an amusing parody of the decadent monarchy. The youngest fairy, who cannot stand the royal family, makes a mistake at the birth of Thalia, causing her to sleep a hundred years. But the fairy considers her mistake most fortunate for her family, for she has been studying history and has discovered that there will be a rise of a religion called Democracy which believes in neither monarchs nor magic. It encourages the common man. When, in a hundred years, some young princeling manages to unravel the knot of wood about Talia’s domain, I plan to be by his side, whispering the rote of revolution in his ear. If my luck holds . . . Talia will seem to him only a rustic relic of a bygone era whose bedclothes speak of decadence and whose bubbly breath of decay he will wed out of compassion, and learn Computer Science. Then the spell of the land will be broken. No royal wedding—no royal babes. No babes—no inheritance. And though we fey will still be tied to the land, our wishes will belong to us alone.14
The various narrative voices employed by Yolen have a definite feminist bias without being didactic or dogmatic. Like Angela Carter and Tanith Lee, one of her major achievements has been to subvert the male-discourse that has dominated the fairy tale as genre so that the repressed concerns of women are addressed, and the predictable happy ends that signify male hegemony and closure are exploded or placed into question. Thus, in "The White Seal Maid" and "The Lady and the Merman," she has her female protagonists seek refuge in their origins, the sea, which represent for Yolen the essence of restlessness, change, tenderness, and humanity.

Overall, Yolen's tales have been strongly influenced by contemporary social, political, and aesthetic movements. In fact, her experiments with the fairy tale seem to reflect the manner in which Americans have been struggling for more equitable sexual and social relations. On the aesthetic level, her fairy-tale revisions may be associated with what Cristina Bacchilega has defined as "the strategies post-modern writers engage in to expose, question, and re-create the rules of narrative production." According to Bacchilega, the characteristic features of postmodernism are "the pastiche, the schizophrenic de-realization and intensification of the world, the fragmentation and flatness of representation, the ensuing suspicion of concepts such as truth and identity, the immersion in a fast-paced, city-world of consumerism, and the lack of a positive or negative norm to refer to."

These elements can be found in the works of Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, and Angela Carter, who break down the conventions of the classical fairy-tale narrative, in order to alter our readings of the privileged narratives that have formed a type of canon in Western culture. The postmodern revisions, however, do not reassemble the fairy tales that they break down into fragments into a new whole. Instead, they expose the artifice of the fairy tale and make us aware that there are different ways to shape and view the stories. The end goal of the postmodernist fairy tale is not
closure but openness, not recuperation but differentiation, not the establishment of a new norm but the questioning of all norms.

A good example of this type of writing is Robert Coover’s “The Gingerbread House” which appeared in Pricksongs and Descants in 1970 and is a revision of the Grimms’ “Hansel and Gretel.” Coover breaks down the narrative into forty-two frames and begins the story in media res: “A pine forest in the midafternoon. Two children follow an old man, dropping breadcrumbs, singing nursery tunes. Dense earthy greens seep into the darkening distance, flecked and streaked with filtered sunlight. Spots of red, violet, pale blue, gold, burnt orange. The girl carries a basket for gathering flowers. The boy is occupied with the crumbs. Their song tells of God’s care for little ones.” What ensues is a trip through the woods filled with tension but never explained. For instance, in the seventh frame, we read that “the old man’s gaze is straight ahead, but at what? Perhaps at nothing. Some invisible destination. Some irrecoverable point of departure.” Only one thing is clear: this is a tale in which the introductory song and the Grimms’ paradigm no longer hold true. There will be no God’s care for little ones, nor will there be a happy reconciliation with the parents.

As the children move through the woods, they fight over an injured dove and are abandoned by their miserable father. Meanwhile the witch, who has torn out the heart of a dove, awaits them. Images of dread and doom are contrasted with the bright and appealing gingerbread house. In the end, we are left at the entrance to the house: “But the door: here they pause and catch their breath. It is heart-shaped and bloodstone-red, its burnished surface gleaming in the sunlight. Oh, what a thing is that door! Shining like a ruby, like hard cherry candy, and pulsing softly, radiantly. Yes, marvelous! insuperable! but beyond: what is that sound of black rags flapping?”

Coover takes away the hope of the traditional “Hansel
and Gretel,” and leaves us as he began—in media res. To understand the voyage we must go back and reread or follow the footsteps of the two children. We are left paused on a threshold. Are the children going to be treated like the two doves in the story? Is there no hope for the doves? We know what happens in the old narrative, but will it be possible, once the two unnamed children cross the threshold, to escape and return home? Why return home? Unlike the classical fairy tale, we are left with questions and a state of uncertainty. What was once the primary function or the utopian function of the fairy tale—to provide hope—has been undermined. Here its main purpose is to hold a cracked mirror up to the old fairy tales and reality at the same time.

However, Coover’s postmodern fairy tale and those by Bartheleme, Carter, Yolen, Atwood, and others are not typical of the major endeavors of contemporary American writers. Most provide closure of one kind or another; most retain a strong element of hope, especially the longer fiction. Nevertheless, more than the other contemporary types, the postmodern fairy tale does bring out the major characteristic of the best of contemporary American fairy tales: the self-reflective search for a fantastical form that will recuperate the utopian function of the traditional fairy tale in a manner that is commensurate with the major social changes in the postindustrial world.

What characteristics can be distinguished in the contemporary fairy tale in America and what tendencies can be expected in the future?

1. Continued re-production and duplication of the classical fairy tales for children and adults as a “natural” function of the culture industry that seeks to preserve the classical literary canon without questioning it. Here the Disney studio continues to exercise a great influence. Even with its “feminist” slant, the Disney Beauty and the Beast is basically a duplication of a traditional tale and follows the usual prescriptives of the Hollywood and Broadway musical.
2. Parodies and revisions of the classical fairy tale in various forms—TV commercials, films, literature—to provide entertainment, to question convention, and to signal something new through a familiar signifier. Here Tom Davenport’s cinematic productions “Ashpet,” “Soldier Jack,” and “Hansel and Gretel,” which have an Appalachian setting, are interesting experiments.\(^\text{20}\) In addition, Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling have edited an anthology entitled *Snow White, Blood Red* (1993), which contains twenty new versions with classical fairy tales, some highly provocative and some that are trivial.

3. Feminist fairy tales that subvert the male discourse and patriarchal ideology apparent in the traditional fairy tales by shifting the narrative voice, undoing plots, and expressing the concerns of women through new images and styles of writing. Here Robin Morgan’s *The Mer-Child: A Legend for Children and Other Adults* (1991) is a remarkable feminist subversion of Andersen’s *The Little Mermaid*. The tale concerns a little girl, who is the daughter of a black mother and a white father. Since she has been ostracized because of her race and because her legs are paralyzed, she spends a great deal of time alone by the sea, where she meets a green Mer-Child, an alien creature, whose otherness empowers the girl so that, unlike in Andersen’s tale, she learns to walk and take control of her life.

4. Straightforward utopian revisions of classical fairy tales and melanges that borrow from fantasy fiction and science fiction seek to *defend* the imagination and the humane spirit in a neoromantic protest against rationalization and instrumentalization in capitalist societies. Here Salman Rushdie’s *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990) is a good example of how a fairy-tale novel can incorporate a critique of tyranny with a utopian treatise about the meaningfulness of storytelling. There are also some interesting utopian tales in *Once Upon a Time: A Treasury of Modern Fairy Tales* (1990), edited by Lester Del Rey and Risa Kessler, but for the most part the authors demean utopia with hackneyed treatments of the fairy tale.\(^\text{21}\)

5. Postmodern experiments that interrogate the way the world has been presented in fairy tales and the way we read fairy tales by forming pastiches and abstractions, difficult to decipher and open to various interpretations. Coover’s latest fairy-tale novel,
Pinocchio in Venice (1991), a flawed tour de force, is a good example here.

Clearly, one cannot speak about the fairy tale in America today, or the American fairy tale. The most crucial question, however, for the genre as a whole, including all the different media types, is whether it can truly recapture its credible utopian function. And, of course, the answer to this question depends on whether we can realistically conceive of utopias in a world where chaos, poverty, war, and exploitation take precedence over our dreams, and when there is a danger that we will now conceive of false utopias after the momentous changes that have occurred in Eastern Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. Indeed, it has become apparent that the American concept of the “free world” cannot be easily exported, and peace and harmony cannot be easily attained. Yet, despite the fact that conflicts have continued at home and abroad, they serve a positive function, for they compel us to rethink the meaning of utopia and freedom in reality and in the realm of the fairy tale as well. And as we move into the twenty-first century and continue to talk about shaping a new world order, the utopian verve of the American fairy tale will certainly play a role in designating imaginative directions as correctives to the political shortcomings of our politicians and statesmen. In this respect, though there may not be an American fairy tale, American writers of fairy tales have already distinguished themselves by keeping alive alternatives for a better future in their innovative narratives that refuse to make compromises with the mythicization of the classical tradition.