Points of Convergence, Divergence and Departure in Graphic Adaptations of Kinder- und Hausmärchen: A Case Study of Hansel & Gretel.

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Abstract/Introduction

In what follows, I will analyze and interpret Neil Gaiman and Lorenzo Mattotti’s illustrated version of the classic folktale, Hansel & Gretel, according to a model of adaptation that attempts to explain convergences, divergences, and departures between source text and adaptation.

Hegel’s concept of “Aufhebung” is employed as a means of explaining the dialectical tensions between source and adaptation as they emerge in the form of narrative, visual, and psychological transformations.

Ultimately, I propose a basic theory of identification with the story based on Jung’s archetype of Self, which attempts to reconcile the evolution of the folktale with its psychological use-value for development and individuation.

Summary from the Definitive Version of 1857

The story of Hansel and Gretel begins with a woodcutter who lives in poverty with his wife and two children.

When famine strikes, stepmother demands that the children are brought out and left in the woods. Father grudgingly agrees and they are abandoned. However, because Hansel and Gretel have overheard the plan, they’re able to find their way home by following a trail of pebbles that Hansel leaves behind.

Soon after they return, though, hunger sets in once more and Hansel and Gretel are brought out again. But this time, Hansel is unable to gather stones, so he leaves a trail of breadcrumbs.
But the birds of the forest eat the breadcrumbs, so they can’t find their way home.

Hansel and Gretel get lost, but are led by a beautiful white bird to a house made of bread, cake, and sugar, and they begin to eat away at it.

The old woman who lives there takes them in, but the next morning she reveals herself to be a witch who has plans of fattening, slaughtering and eating Hansel, while Gretel must help her prepare the meal.

In the climactic scene, Gretel shoves the witch into the oven.

Having escaped from the clutches of the evil witch, Hansel and Gretel gather treasures from the house and cross a river on the back of a white duck to return home to their father. In the meantime, stepmother has died and the three live happily ever after.

History of Changes

Over the course of the seven editions of Kinder- und Hausmärchen, many interesting changes have been made to the story of Hansel and Gretel, but for the present purpose, it’s important to make note of two general trends:

First, the increasing distinction between father and mother. In the original manuscript from 1810, both parents plot together to abandon Hansel and Gretel. From 1812 – 1840, the plan is mother’s alone, and from the fourth edition onward, “mother” became “stepmother.”

Second, the gradual inclusion of mythological creatures in the story, specifically: (1) “a white duck” (1815) and (2) “a beautiful snow-white bird” (1843).

Gaiman & Mattotti’s Adaptation of 2014

Karen Coats (2014) offers a succinct characterization of Gaiman’s version of the story in the publication Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books:

“In this measured, forthright retelling of the familiar tale, Gaiman draws on the features originally told to the Grimm brothers by Dortchen Wild, who later became Wilhelm Grimm’s wife. That means that there is neither stepmother nor witch; instead, Hansel overhears his mother presenting her logical argument to abandon the children in the forest so that she and her husband might have some
hope of surviving the famine caused by the war. He reluctantly agrees, but he is happy when the children outsmart the plan. However, as conditions worsen, their mother persuades their father to abandon them a second time, this time without sufficient warning to collect the stones that will lead them home.

Happening upon the gingerbread house, they are fooled by the benign appearance of the old woman who lives there, and she drugs and enslaves them, fattening Hansel in a cage and chaining Gretel to a table leg while forcing her to cook and clean for her. The two escape in the usual way, returning home to find their mother dead and their father quite happy to see them (and the riches they have brought from the old woman’s home). Gaiman’s text eschews any sort of theatrical embellishments in the telling, leaving the grim story to play out its own horrors in a smoothly understated way, but his quiet, sure-footed prose makes for a haunting tale nonetheless. Every other opening is a full-bleed brush ink illustration that hints at the action while more fully evoking the gloomy atmospherics of the tale.”

Method of Analysis

The purpose of the present analysis is to compare Gaiman & Mattotti’s 2014 adaptation to the Grimms’ definitive source text of 1857 in light of its prior narrative incarnations. Such a direct attribution of this specific source text is justified by the short section at the conclusion of the 2014 adaptation, which credits the present work to the various editions of Grimms’ Kinder- und Hausmärchen. A parallel reading of these texts was performed for the purpose of identifying convergences, divergences, and departures between the definitive source text and Gaiman’s 2014 adaptation within the framework of a Composite Model of Adaptation assembled from the literary theories of adaptation proposed by Robert Stam (2000), Kamilla Elliot (2003), Brian McFarlane (1996), and Dudley Andrew (1984). For more details about the Composite Model of Adaptation used, see Jones (2008, pp. 104-188): http://mattsmediaresearch.com/pdfs/FinalDissertation.pdf

Operations & Effects

I will elaborate upon four operations that were prominently used in Gaiman & Mattotti and attempt to explain how the resulting changes in content and style alter the narrative.
“Selection” is defined as “choosing events from the source for inclusion in the adaptation.”

By implication then, “Non-Selection” is the omission of events in the source text from the adaptation.

“Condensation” is defined as “reducing components from the events that are selected for inclusion in the adaptation,” for example: characters, actions, objects, settings.

“Extrapolation” is defined as “adding new components to the events that are selected for inclusion in the adaptation.”

“Fabrication” is defined as “the creation of new events specifically for inclusion in the adaptation.”

Selection, thus, represents a “convergence” with the source insofar as it reproduces events from the source text, whereas condensation and extrapolation represent “divergence” from the source in the sense that they respectively reduce or add components of the events selected for inclusion in the adaptation. “Non-selection” and “fabrication,” however, represent “departures” from the source text to the extent that events are either omitted from, or created specifically for, the adaptation.

So, what are the consequences of “convergence, divergence, and departure” and why are they useful in the context of Gaiman & Matotti’s 2014 revision of the timeless Hansel and Gretel folktale?

Let’s begin with convergence and divergence.

The adaptation is convergent with the Grimms’ source text because it’s adapted structurally, borrowing (or, rather, selecting) events from the source to reconstruct the same essential narrative arc that we’re familiar with from Children’s and Household Tales and Kinder- und Hausmärchen stretching all the way back to 1812. If the adaptation used only the basic characters and/or conflicts of the original, then the adaptation would be thematic, instead. For example, Sara Buttsworth (2016) suggests that Suzanne Collins’ Hunger Games belongs to the thematic tradition of Hansel & Gretel. More directly, films like
Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters (2013) or even the long running TV Series Grimm represent thematic adaptations of the source text.

The adaptation is also divergent in the sense that selected events are condensed (that is, some elements are removed) and/or extrapolated (some elements are added).

Gaiman uses condensation to purge mythological elements from the story and give it more perceptual realism. Animals, for example, have no anthropomorphic characteristics in the retelling. Whereas the Grimm versions (at various points) include: (1) A white kitten and pigeon who respectively bid farewell to Hansel as he and Gretel are led into the woods, (2) A singing bird who leads the children to the gingerbread house, and (3) a duck who carries the children across the river on their way home, Gaiman’s version includes none of these.

Conversely, extrapolation is used to enhance the social realism and vividness of the tale.

The most drastic example of extrapolation for the sake of social realism comes right at the beginning of the story as the stage is set.

The following is my translation from the 1857 edition of Kinder- und Hausmärchen:

Before a big forest, their lived a poor woodcutter with his wife and two children; the boy was called Hansel and the girl, Gretel. He had little to bite and to break, and once, as great struggle came to the country, he also couldn’t manage the daily bread.

Gaiman extrapolates from the phrase “as great struggle came to the country.”

War came, and the soldiers came with it – hungry, angry, bored, scared men who, as they passed through, stole the cabbages and the chickens and the ducks. The woodcutter’s family was never certain who was fighting whom, nor why they were fighting, nor what they were fighting about.

But beyond the forest, fields of crops were burned and barley fields became battlefields, and the farmers were killed, or made into soldiers in their turn and marched away. And soon enough the miller had no grain to
mill into flour, the butcher had no animals to kill and hang in his window, and they said you could name your own price for a fat rabbit.

Soon enough, the root vegetables rotted in the fields, all the turnips and carrots and potatoes, for there were fewer and fewer people to dig them up. And it rained and it rained, so the only things to eat their fill, in those fields, were the slugs.

The woodcutter’s cottage was far from the battles, but the woodcutter, and his wife, and Gretel, and Hansel, all felt the war’s effect. They ate soup made from old cabbage leaves, into which the children would dip their stale bread, now hard as a stone, and the family went to bed hungry and woke up hungrier.

Extrapolation is also used to add vividness as in the following passage that describes the family’s modest bounty prior to the war:

When the wood sold well, the father would buy meat for the family at the market: a fat-tailed sheep or a goat, which he would bring back trotting behind his hand-drawn cart; or even a hunk of raw beef, dripping with blood, black with flies or yellow with wasps, and the family would feast that evening. There were rabbits in the forest, there were ducks in the woodcutter’s pond, there were chickens scratching in the dirt behind the woodcutter’s tiny house. There was always food.

As I examined the adaptation for ways that it departed from the source, I ran into a problem with the composite model of adaptation.

Despite the fact that Gaiman & Mattotti’s adaptation is structurally identical to the original, that is to say, for every event in the original, there is a corresponding event in the adaptation which essentially performs the same function, I continued to notice differences that nonetheless seemed familiar to me.

These “familiar differences” ranged from subtle to transformative, and didn’t fit neatly into the categories of the Comprehensive Model of Adaptation, which defined differences based only upon the selection or non-selection of events from the narrative, the condensation, extrapolation, and/or reorganization of selected events, and the fabrication of new events.
While these operations give the appearance of accounting for all potential differences between source and adaptation the internal dynamics of the narrative as it transitions across form and style prove to be too complex for the existing set of operations.

Aufhebung as Adaptive Operation

To remedy this, I apply Hegel’s concept of “Aufhebung,” which has previously been used to study the resolution of contradictions as they occur within the framework of dialectical transitions. In German, “die Aufhebung” alternately means “the lifting up,” “the preservation,” or “the elimination.” Christian Fuchs interprets the term in the context of social change: “Hegel used this notion as a language game to express [that] (a) the current state is eliminated, (b) some aspects of the old state are preserved in the new state and (c) a new quality emerges in the new state” (Fuchs, 2014, p. 15).

The broad application of this term to the study of adaptation is readily apparent. Adaptations are Aufhebungen (plural of Aufhebung) of their source texts insofar as they eliminate (or, rather, replace) the source text at the moment of consumption, they preserve certain aspects of the source text (such as themes, events, or event components) and a “new quality” emerges through the transformation of latent narrative, semiotic, or aesthetic components.

It is this last function of Aufhebung (the emergence of a “new quality”) which holds the most promise for exploring these “familiar differences,” which do not depart from the source text, but nonetheless do not converge with it either.

Narrative Aufhebung

I will now elaborate two examples of “familiar differences” that can be explained by applying the Hegelian concept of Aufhebung to them.

First:

Throughout all seven editions of Kinder- und Hausmärchen, Hansel is heroic in the first half of the story just as Gretel is heroic in the second half.

In Gaiman & Mattotti’s adaptation, their relationship is more complex and realistic. For one thing, Hansel overhears his parents plans to abandon them in the forest alone, and doesn’t share the information with Gretel.
This results in a completely different psychological dynamic between the siblings, even if the selected events from the source text perform the same tasks within the context of the adaptation.

The following is an excerpt of my own translation from the version of 1857:

Due to hunger, the two children also couldn’t go to sleep and heard what the stepmother said to their father. Gretel cried bitter tears and said to Hansel: “now we’re doomed.” “Quiet, Gretel,” spoke Hansel, “don’t be troubled, I will save us.”

And as the parents had gone to sleep, he stood up, pulled on his little coat, opened the lower door and crept outside. There, the moon shone very brightly, and the white pebbles that lay before the house, twinkled like nuggets of pure gold. Hansel bent over and shoved as many in his little coat pocket as would fit. Then he went back and said to Gretel: “Take comfort, dear sister, and sleep restfully. God will not abandon us,” and he laid down again in his bed.

Compare this to how Gaiman transforms the same event (i.e. Hansel gathering pebbles) in the adaptation:

Gretel woke Hansel the next morning. “It is going to be a good day,” she said. “Our father is going to take us into the forest with him, and he will teach us to cut wood.” Their father would not ordinarily take them with him deep into the forest. He said it was too dangerous for children.

Hansel went down to the little stream that splashed and sang behind their cottage and he filled his pockets with the tiny white stones that lined the stream bed.

“Why are you doing that?” asked Gretel.

Hansel looked up and saw his parents standing by the doorway, and he said nothing to his sister.

A parallel reading of this event as it manifests in each respective version reveals how Aufhebung is a useful concept for exploring the “familiar differences” that emerge from the intersection of narratives. In the most basic sense then, the act
of “gathering pebbles” is preserved, but the event is reframed to suggest secrecy and conflict between the characters.

Second:

This transformation, based on Hansel’s withholding information from Gretel persists until Gretel later sees the truth for herself in the events that follow. The emerging qualities of the adaptation vis-à-vis the source text is evident in these contrasting passages:

Again, my translation of the 1857 version:

The wife led the children deeper still into the forest, where they’d never been before. Again, there was a big fire lit, and the mother said “Just stay sitting there, children, and if you are tired, you can sleep a little: we are going into the forest to cut wood. We will come and pick you up this evening when we are finished. At noon, Gretel divided her bread with Hansel, who’d strewn his piece along the path. Then they went to sleep and the evening passed, but no one came for the poor children.

On the other hand, Gaiman writes:

But they plunged deeper into the forest.

Finally, their father said, “Wait here for me. I’ll be back for you,” and he turned, and he walked away. They heard him pushing through the thicket, and then they heard nothing more.

“He is not coming back for us,” said Gretel.

“No,” agreed Hansel.

In the place of an omniscient narration to explain that “no one came for the poor children,” Hansel and Gretel arrive at that realization by themselves and each in turn. Gretel, in particular, has come to her conclusion independently of Hansel’s suspicions, and they proceed through the story as equal partners.

Thus, in this particular narrative Aufhebung, abandonment in the woods is preserved even as Hansel and Gretel are transformed from passive victims to active and interdependent agents within the story.
Visual Aufhebung

The tendency to preserve residue of the source text in the adaptation is also apparent in Gaiman and Mattotti’s collaboration. Because Lorenzo Mattotti’s paintings came first (in 2007) and inspired Gaiman’s prose, the correspondences don’t match up perfectly.

If you look very closely at the bottom right corner on page 19, you can see the mother in the image, even though she never accompanies the children into the woods in Gaiman’s text.
Much more prominently, we see the Grimms’ “white duck” taking the children across the river on page 47.

In psychoanalytic readings of this folktale, the white duck bringing the children across the river at the end of the story is often interpreted as a reference to development and identity formation.

*Psychological Aufhebung*


According to Bettelheim, breadcrumbs and the witch’s house represent the “primary oral urge” of the child to have all of his needs met by the mother.

But as the story progresses, and the witch threatens the children with cannibalism, they are forced to adapt and rely upon their own resourcefulness to survive.
With this, a vital transformation has been made and the children have taken a step toward adulthood.

But it is possible to create an Aufhebung of this interpretation by reconsidering it from a Jungian framework and thus invite a wider variety of alternatives for interpreting the text.

If we examine the transformations of the story as reflecting a sort of psychological archeology, is it not reasonable to suppose that mother and father are two aspects of the same character that the reader identifies with? After all, in the earliest known version of the story, both parents (not just the mother) decide to abandon the children in the woods. The later distinction between the good father and the evil (step)mother would appear to correspond rather well to the Jungian duality of ego and shadow.

Also, Hansel and Gretel themselves seem to represent different aspects of the same consciousness. Thus, instead of interpreting the story exclusively as a journey to identify formation in which Hansel and Gretel are eternally separated, perhaps there’s room to consider Hansel and Gretel as internalized representations of gender, not unlike Jung’s archetypes of anima (man’s internal woman) and animus (woman’s internal man).

Whatever the case, the essential quality of the story itself, independent of its various versions, formats, and styles, like Jung’s concept of Archetype, can never be apprehended directly, but knowledge of its different incarnations can provide new avenues for interpretation.
References


