



A Child's Reading of "Cinderella": Iser's Act of Reading, Grimm's "Cinderella" and the Juvenile Reader

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 22 February 2024

Accepted 18 March 2024

Available online 31 March 2024

Keywords:

Reading

Meaning-making (plot level
gestalt formation)

Folklore/fairy-tales

Different readings

ABSTRACT

The paper is an exercise in the Reader Response approach to literature. It applies the German critic Wolfgang Iser's (1926 – 2007), of the Constance school of reception aesthetics, theory as delineated in his magnum-opus *The Act of Reading* (1978) to the fairy tale of "Cinderella" or "Ashputtel" by the brothers Grimm (1812), to understand how the child reader reads or responds to this seminal work of Children's Literature. It reaches the conclusion that the reading that Iser describes in his work is that of the adult or the erudite critic, whereas the child reader reads (or responds to literature) rather differently. This different reading of the child's is not a deficient reading, but simply one of the many ways of responding to a text of literary fiction. The paper argues in favour of recognising the child's different reading of literature, as this will be an acknowledgement of the child's intelligence, intentionality, agency and autonomy.

Consciousness is defined as a “unified intentional act” (Abrams 220). By intentional is meant a directedness or aboutness; to be conscious is to be conscious of something; and, that towards which intentionality is directed is the object, and that from which this intentionality stems, is the subject. Only when all these three constituents come together is consciousness formed. This is why consciousness is described as a “unified intentional act.” Wolfgang Iser quotes Edmund Husserl to bring to light another significant and related fact about consciousness:

Every originally constituent process is inspired by pretensions, which construct and collect the seed of what is to come, as such, and bring it to fruition.

(Iser 110-111)

This is to say that a piece of consciousness once formed, always has a tendency to extend beyond itself. In other words, once an intentionality has found its subject and object, it does not remain confined rigidly within that premise, but seeks to reach out and beyond to another object. This new, still non-existent object that the intentionality from a formed piece of consciousness seeks to reach out to is called “protensions” by Husserl and “expectations” by Iser (ibid). The consciousness from which an expectation arises, in being the formed piece of consciousness, is the familiar or the determinate consciousness. So, what follows from this is that familiarity raises expectations. The mode of writing employed in literary fiction, plays upon familiarity and expectations, in varying degrees. The expectation raised by an extant piece of consciousness can be either confirmed or thwarted by the subsequent piece of consciousness formed. If confirmed, the entire trellis of other pieces of consciousness which support the consciousness that launches the expectation, remain intact and get strengthened. But if thwarted, this trellis undergoes a restructuring. Gaps or blanks, inasmuch as they are the asymmetry between two pieces of consciousness, will be wider or abundant if the expectations are frustrated, and narrower if the expectations are confirmed. Iser shows that the didactic works or the *roman a these* have the fewest blanks (or meet expectations the most) and the modernist works have the largest number of blanks as they deliberately seek to frustrate the raised expectations (Iser 189-195). Iser favours those readings in which the expectations are frustrated, so that a restructuring of the entire web or trellis of signifiers (extant pieces of consciousness) bolstering the expectation raised gets modified.

As expectations can only be raised from the familiar or extant consciousness, the familiar has a very significant role in conditioning the text – reader interaction or reading. The familiar is the take-off ground or the launch pad of expectations which the text either upholds or foils. Therefore, manipulation of the familiar (and thereby the expectations it raises), forms a central point in Iser. In the reading of the literary fiction, the two pieces consciousness involved are of the reader and of that of the author contained in the text. The familiar consciousness of the reader refers to the social or extra textual awareness of the reader with which he approaches and engages in the text. This is what Iser has called the “repertoire” of the text (Iser 53). What Iser calls the “strategies” are the narrative techniques that manipulate the familiar (Iser 86-87). Therefore, the background which the reader brings to the text – that formed consciousness in his mind with which he is familiar – and whether the expectations arising from this are met or foiled by the text, have a significant impact on the uptake or reading.

1. Familiarity and Expectations of the Modern Child

I think the three things that a child reader approaching a book, within the modern times – that is, within the institution of childhood of the urban English-speaking section of people of the contemporary times – is most familiar with are:

1. that stories insinuate sequentiality
2. that stories are about people and what they do
3. that stories are predominantly about the good gaining over the bad; or more particularly, stories are about a good person triumphing over the bad.

While the first familiarity, I think, is the intrinsic human sense of the narrative and/or the phenomenological sense of time, the remaining are culturally deduced. What I am trying to say is that humans are innately familiar with the story. This familiarity has a cognitive and phenomenological resonance, which makes it a meaning giving phenomenon. And humans are inevitably meaning makers. We cannot do without meanings and making meanings. Though we still do not know whether the story is chronology or causality or both, that it has some deep archetypal connection with humans, is proved by its universality. All cultures, across all times, have had their stories. The cultural factors producing a sense of stories being about the triumph of good are all attempts to use the innate sense of narrative to discipline men to some “good” end which might be ideological.

In the West, particularly the English-speaking world, some of these ideologies eulogising literature as the purveyor or teacher of the good and noble are:

- the Christian (particularly Puritan) doctrine,
- the elitist concept of literature that existed in the Antiquity and described literature as that writing which delights and instructs and later the one developed in the nineteenth century by Matthew Arnold which thought of literature as a writing about all the best there is in the world
- development of the modern institution of childhood, which familiarised children with the idea of good as defined in terms of obedience to the adult caregiver.

The third of the points mentioned above, the commonly familiar view that stories are about the good embodied in the people of the stories, has created the image of the hero. We are all very familiar with the idea that stories have a hero. Stories are about people who are good and in stories, the goodness of the hero triumphs. This familiarity is not natural but culturally produced as per the dynamics of the society. Often, this familiarity is ideological in the sense of being dictated by the dominant group in the society like the clergy, men, the West or adults.

2. Familiarity and Gestalt Formation/Meaning Making

Iser says that stories are so written by the author so as to confirm or frustrate the expectations arising from the familiar (Iser 110-111). Consequences of frustrated expectations are a conscious clash of images, which resist being integrated into a gestalt, for in the words of Iser himself:

A gestalt closes itself in proportion to the degree in which it resolves the tensions between signs that are to be grouped.

(Iser 124)

Therefore, gestalt formation, which forms the core of meaning, is dependent on how expectations are tackled. And as expectations arise from the familiar, and the two of our strongest familiarities being, first, our sense of a story and second, that stories are about a central character who is heroic, not finding these confirmed by the text, becomes an impediment to meaning making or gestalt formation. Recognising this, Iser lists four narrative techniques which frustrate expectations and therefore obstruct gestalt formation. These are:

1. the absence of a protagonist
2. the untrustworthiness of the traditionally reliable narrator.
3. an interpolation of a subplot running counter to the main plot.
4. the continued negation of one perspective by the other so that nothing can be integrated. (Iser 130-131)

In these pages, my endeavour is to see how “Cinderella” a seminal text of Children’s Literature, answers the child reader’s expectations premised on two familiarities – the sense of a story, that is the sense of a chronology; and, the belief that stories are about heroes, or more precisely, a story is about a hero. In other words, I will be examining whether this major work has a character who qualifies as a protagonist or not, and whether this protagonist qualifies to be called a hero or not. I will also examine the ordering of the events in the story and the role of the narrator to find if the ordering is sequential and the narrator authoritative or not. To put it succinctly, I will examine Grimm’s “Cinderella” in light of Iser’s aforementioned four points that impede the plot level gestalt or the making of meaning to see whether the text of “Cinderella”, much loved and perused by children, helps the making of meaning by the young reader or obstructs the same.

3. Folklore

Folklore refers to beliefs, practices, art, customs of a group transmitted from generation to generation by word of mouth or by way of actual behavioural example. Besides orality, small group size remains the other hallmark of what constitutes folklore. In a broader sense, as defined above, folklore refers to the entire culture of a small group of people independent of literacy. However, in a narrower sense, folklore refers to three types of narratives, usually in verse but also created in prose – myths, legends and fairy tales. Of these, myths and legends were believed to be true; myths were the narratives believed to be true about a people beyond historical time, while legends were the same within historical time. Often groups are found to derive their ancestry from the characters, times and events in some myths. Fairy tales, on the other hand, had no claims to veracity or history; they were created only to entertain and/or relate a moral.

3.1. Fairy Tales

Folklore exercises a considerable influence on Children’s Literature. A significant amount of the literature for children is folklore. Though all the three main varieties of folklore – myths, legends and fairy tales – are part of Children’s Literature, of these, it is the fairy tales which are loved the most. Produced in the extremely successful format of the Picture Book, fairy tales are an indispensable part of a child’s readings.

The term fairy tale originated in the French expression *contes des fées* and gained currency in common parlance in the eighteenth century (Stableford 142-143). It means “folktales adapted for use as children’s fiction” (ibid).

From time to time, many collections of fairy tales have been compiled and brought out in print. Charles Perrault’s (1628-1703) *Tales of Mother Goose*, translated in English from the original French *Histoires ou contes temps passes* (1697), were very well received. However, no name in fairy tales is as weighty as the name of the brothers Grimm. Jacob Ludwig Karl Grimm (1785 – 1863) and Wilhem Karl Grimm (1786 – 1858) were German professors. In 1812, they published a compilation of many fairy tales that they had collected from ordinary Germans living on farms in central Germany. This collection was titled *Kinder und Hausmarchen* in German and was translated in English as *Children’s and Household Tales*. This is considered a landmark in the study of folklore. Another volume was brought out by the brothers in 1815. That the brothers went a long way towards shaping Children’s Literature as it is recognised today, can be judged from another of their work, *German Popular Stories* which appeared in 1824 or 1826 and has the credit of being the first significant illustrated work for children. Illustrations had long accompanied writing, however, in the present work, the illustrations were of much finer quality. These illustrations were created by a self-taught Englishman, George Cruikshank (Zipes 115-118).

3.2. “Cinderella” or “Ashputtel”

The tale of Cinderella was included in the Grimm brothers’ 1812 collection as “Ashputtel”, but it was also printed in other compilations before the Grimm brothers’ came out. In English-speaking cultures it is better known as Cinderella. Essentially “Cinderella” is a story of the virtue of obedience being rewarded. Some variants of it are found in almost all cultures, be they of the East or the West. Fairy tales, like much folklore in general, are open to numerous interpretations. The Freudian, Jungian, the archetypal and feminist readings are particularly rife. The Cinderella story has found appreciation and criticism alike from feminists. Some see Cinderella as a resourceful character who fights her condition; others see her as a passive character waiting for the prince to rescue her. The latter interpretation is called the “Cinderella complex” referring to someone who is diffident and submissively accepts their fate with tears waiting to be helped out by others (Zipes 97).

In the version I refer to – the Grimm’s version of 1812 – though Cinderella does weep often and obey her evil stepsisters and stepmother rather unquestioningly, she is not the one who is not trying to improve things for herself. At the beginning of the story, she is asked by her dying mother to always be good and this is a promise she keeps. Being good, from the point of view of children, necessarily involves being obedient to the elders. Therefore, Cinderella’s obedience to her wicked stepmother only raises her as a heroic character in the eyes of the child reader and cannot be taken to be an act of passivity. We are told that she labours all day doing household chores like filling water, making the fire and making meals (Grimm 236). These bring her out as not just obedient, but also as very diligent. She is ridiculed and scolded by her stepsisters and stepmothers, not even given a bed to sleep on and has to sleep in the kitchen, near the hearth, so that she is covered with ash has her named Ashputtel. In other versions, it is her sleeping close to the cinders in the kitchen that gets her named Cinderella. These descriptions create sympathy for Ashputtel in the mind of the reader. That she is resourceful is first indicated when she asks for a twig from her father and plants it on her mother’s grave and waters

her with her tears. This plant grows into a tree that shelters many birds who are friends with Ashputtel (Grimm 237). She is able to approach and ask the ill-tempered stepmother permission to go to the prince's feast and is able to complete her impossible tasks with the help of the birds shows that she has not killed her desires, but wants to pursue her dreams with the due permission of the stepmother, whom she respects (Grimm 238-240). That she is bold and defiant enough to go to the feast despite her stepmother's refusal is her strongest defence against the charge of passivity (Grimm 240 – 241). What raises her in the eyes of the reader as the protagonist and the heroine, is the contrast between the good and evil characters in the tale. The stepmother and stepsisters are described as "fair in face but foul in heart" (Grimm 236). This device of binary contrasts between the good and the bad, between the kind and the cruel, between the industrious and the indolent, is a device common in folklore. It is this, more than how Cinderella fights her situation that makes her heroic. The narrator's comment that she looked so splendid in her rich clothes that the prince only wanted to dance with her and turned down requests from other men to dance with her, also aligns the reader on the side of Ashputtel (Grimm 241). Besides, the title "Ashputtel" itself gives a clear indication that the story is about a character called Ashputtel. This is the first device that foregrounds this character amongst the others. All this put together is enough to enable the young reader to look at Ashputtel as the heroic protagonist.

The tale is narrated from the third person omniscient point of view; the voice of the narrator is a single authoritative and reliable voice. Not only is there no subplot running counter to the main plot, but the tale is devoid of any subplot at all, with Cinderella's escapades with her step-relatives, magical pals and the prince being the only plot in the short story. The only perspective presented by the trustworthy narrator is that of Cinderella, who is the centre of focalization. As there are no other perspectives (even though there are other characters), there is no negation of one perspective by another. This clearly foregrounds the given perspective strongly and eliminates the complexity of accommodating multiple perspectives.

Thus, the four meanings obstructing the four points enumerated by Iser, are clearly absent in this seminal, well-loved tale for children. This indicates that this text written for children, or deemed fit for the perusal of children is structured in such a way from within, so as to assist, and definitely not impede, the formation of the plot level gestalt or the meaning. This implicitly implies that the assumption underlying the Grimms' "Cinderella" is that the child reader needs assistance in making meaning as he/she himself /herself is unable to form the plot level gestalt.

4. Conclusion

Employing Wolfgang Iser's description of the act of reading, I examined a seminal piece of Children's Literature – Grimms' "Cinderella". Iser's labour is intricate and inspiring, however it is a reading practised by seasoned adults and/or the critics. The child reader, whom I prefer to call the natural reader in contradistinction with the weathered adult reader, reads differently.

The child, perhaps is not able or not willing to read in the manner described by Iser. Nevertheless, he does read, and perhaps even responds copiously, for he does not have any meaning bias. When left to his own devices, he responds subjectively, without being weighed by finding the meaning of the text. In the bargain, he makes sumptuous plunges into his own subjectivity. These if allowed to continue, over a period of time, are likely to produce an introspective and interpretative

attitude. So, perhaps today the child is unable to find meaning of the text he reads, but there is hope that if he persists with his style of reading, he will be able to make meaning of his life in the future. Now, that is in the modern times, that the child has been credited with intentionality and agency, it is only proper that his own style of reading and responding to literature be examined. This would be the right acknowledgement of the child's intelligence and a salute to his/her autonomy.

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