Discourse & Literacy Home Assignment 1

Genre analysis: fairy tale

Read ‘The Tale of the Shoe’ as a representative of the fairy tale genre, and think about the following questions:

* What expectations do you have about texts in this genre?
* Which conventions of the genre are recognised in the text?
* To what extent does the text stretch the conventions of its genre?
* Which conventions seem more like those of a different genre?
* What purposes does the genre serve?
* What ideological assumptions and values seem to be embedded in the text?
* Do you feel ‘critical or accepting, resisting or validating, casual or concentrated, apathetic or motivated (and why)’ while reading the text?
* What sort of audience is the text aimed at? What assumptions does it make about the reader’s age, gender, class and ethnicity?
* What relevance does the text have for its readers?

Write a short essay (c.1500 words) in which you discuss the most relevant aspects of genre for this text (you do not have to answer all of the questions in your essay; you can also bring in themes and questions that arise from your reading). Your own analysis and original thinking is encouraged; however, if you feel the need for outside sources, make sure they are relevant, and remember to cite them correctly (including any Internet sources you might use)[[1]](#footnote-1).

Email your essay by 18 January to karppinen.anne.m@gmail.com

The Tale of the Shoe

Emma Donoghue

*Kissing the Witch,* 1997

Till she came it was all cold.

Ever since my mother died the feather bed felt hard as a stone floor. Every word that came out of my mouth limped away like a toad. Whatever I put on my back now turned to sackcloth and chafed my skin. I heard a knocking in my skull, and kept running to the door, but there was never anyone there. The days passed like dust brushed from my fingers.

I scrubbed and swept because there was nothing else to do. I raked out the hearth with my fingernails, and scoured the floor until my knees bled. I counted grains of rice and divided brown beans from black.

Nobody made me do the things I did, nobody scolded me, nobody punished me but me. The shrill voices were all inside. Do this, do that, you lazy heap of dirt. They knew every question and answer, the voices in my head. Some days they asked why I was still alive. I listened out for my mother, but I couldn’t hear her among their clamour.

When everything that could possibly be done was done for the day, the voices faded. I knelt on the hearth and looked into the scarlet cinders until my eyes swam. I was trying to picture a future, I suppose. Some nights I told myself stories to make myself weep, then stroked my own hair till I slept.

Once, out of all the times when I ran to the door and there was nobody there, there was still nobody there, but the stranger was behind me. I thought for a moment she must have come out of the fire. Her eyes had flames in their centres, and her eyebrows were silvered with ash.

The stranger said my back must be tired, and the sweeping could wait. She took me into the garden and showed me a hazel tree I had never seen before. I began to ask questions, but she put her tiny finger over my mouth so we could hear a dove murmuring on the highest branch.

It turned out that she had known my mother, when my mother was alive. She said that was my mother’s tree.

How can I begin to describe the transformations? My old dusty self was spun new. This woman sheathed my limbs in blue velvet. I was dancing on points of clear glass.

And then, because I asked, she took me to a ball. Isn’t that what girls are meant to ask for?

Her carriage brought me as far as the palace steps. I knew just how I was meant to behave. I smiled ever so prettily when the great doors swung open wide to announce me. I refused a canapé and kept my belly pulled in. Under the thousand crystal candelabras I danced with ten elderly gentlemen who had nothing to say but did not let that stop them. I answered only, Indeed and Oh yes and Do you think so?

At ten to twelve I came down the steps and she swept me away. Had enough? she asked, lifting a hair off my long glove.

But she was old enough to be my mother, and I was a girl with my fortune to make. The voices were beginning to jabber. They each told me to do something different. Take me back tomorrow night, I said.

So she appeared again just when the soup was boiling over, and took a silver spoon out of her pocked to feed me. Our fingers drew pictures in the ashes on the hearth, vague shapes of birds and islands. She showed me the sparkle in my eyes, how wide my skirt could spread, how to waltz without getting dizzy. I was lithe in green satin now; my own mother would not have recognised me.

That night at the ball I got right into the swing of things. I tittered at the old king’s jokes; I accepted a single chicken wing and nibbled it daintily. I danced three times with the prince, whose hand wavered in the small of my back. He asked me my favourite colour, but I couldn’t think of any. He asked me my name, and for a moment I couldn’t remember it.

At five to midnight when my feet were starting to ache I waited on the bottom step and she came for me. On the way home I leaned my head on her narrow shoulder and she put one hand over my ear. Had enough? she asked.

But I didn’t have to listen to the barking voices to know how the story went: my future was about to happen. Take me back tomorrow night, I said.

So she came for me again just when the small sounds of the mice were getting on my nerves, and she told me they were coachmen to drive us in state. She claimed her little finger was a magic wand, it could do spectacular things. She could always make me laugh.

That night my new skin was red silk, shivering in the breeze. The prince hovered at my elbow like an autumn leaf ready to fall. The musicians played the same tune over and over. I danced like a clockwork ballerina and smiled till my face twisted. I swallowed a little of everything I was offered, and then leaned over the balcony and threw it all up again.

I had barely time to wipe my mouth before the prince came to propose.

Out on the steps he led me, under the half-full moon, all very fairy-tale. His long moustaches were beginning to tremble; he seemed like an actor on a creaking stage. As soon as the words began to leak out of his mouth, they formed a cloud in which I could see the future.

I could hardly hear him. The voices were shrieking, Yes yes yes say yes before you lose your chance you bag of nothingness.

I opened my teeth but no sound came out. There was no harm in this man; what he proposed was white and soft, comfortable as fog. There was nothing to be afraid of. But just then the midnight bell began to toll out the long procession of years, palatial day by moonless night. And I leapt backward down the steps, leaving one shoe behind.

The bushes tore my dress into the old rags. It was perfectly silent on the lawn. She was waiting for me in the shadows. She didn’t ask had I had enough.

I had got the story all wrong. How could I not have noticed she was beautiful? I must have dropped all my words in the bushes. I reached out.

I could hear surprise in her breath. What about the shoe? she asked.

It was digging into my heel, I told her.

What about the prince? she asked.

He’ll find someone to fit, if he looks long enough.

What about me? she asked very low. I’m old enough to be your mother. Her finger was spelling on the back of my neck.

You’re not my mother, I said. I’m old enough to know that.

I threw the other shoe into the brambles, where it hung, glinting.

Then she took me home, or I took her home, or we were both somehow taken to the closest thing.

1. Wikipedia is still NOT a relevant source! [↑](#footnote-ref-1)