

”IN MEMORY OF *THE SNOW QUEEN*” –
HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN RECALLED
AND RETOLD

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ABSTRACT. The main focus of the present paper is the so-called ”intertextual revision”, explored as one of the most recent and innovative strategies employed while reviving the legacy of the Danish fairy-tale classic Hans Christian Andersen. In order to illustrate this practice, I discuss a short story entitled *Travels with the Snow Queen* (2001), by an American writer Kelly Link, which is a reworking of Andersen's world-famous fairy tale *The Snow Queen* (1844). Link's take on Andersen's tale represents one of the leading directions within revisionary fairy-tale fiction, inspired by feminism and gender criticism. The analysis is centered around the narrative strategies employed by the author in order to challenge the gender logic incorporated into Andersen's account, as well as the broader fairy-tale tradition it belongs to.

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1. RECALLING CLASSICS

While looking into the so called ”Scandinavian-moments¹” in the history of world literature, it is hardly possible to pass over the legacy of Hans Christian Andersen, the Danish master of the literary fairy tale, whose unprecedented take on the fairy-tale genre still cannot be overestimated. The fairy tales, which granted Andersen his worldwide renown, appear as illustrative examples of what lies behind the notion ”classic literature”, encompassing works with a timeless, universal appeal. No matter how well-versed in the realms of literature we are, the name ”Andersen” surely

¹ The expression refers to the title of a research project *Scanmo (The Scandinavian moment in world literature)*, carried out at The Arctic University of Norway. The project examines ”how a significant Norwegian, and more generally Scandinavian, literature arose in the last few decades of the nineteenth century, and how the foremost contributions to this literature became world literature”. https://uit.no/prosjekter/prosjekt?p_document_id=325986. Accessed 18 May 2018).

is one of those that "ring a bell" on a global scale, along with such titles as *The ugly duckling*, *The Snow Queen*, or *The little mermaid*. Thus, just like any other works considered to be universal and classic, the fairy-tale oeuvre of Hans Christian Andersen can be seen as a part of the global cultural memory, defined by Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka as "a collective concept for all knowledge that (...) obtains through generations" (Assmann/Czaplicka 1995:126).

Besides being able to stand the test of time, works considered as literary classics exhibit the potential to be revised, reinterpreted and renewed by the succeeding generations of authors, who get inspired by the tradition and revive it while drawing on it and integrating it into their own works. While confronting the changing realities, the relevance of classic literature can either be confirmed or disputed. In either case, however, its memory prevails. Hence, the literary heritage of the past is continuously carried forward by means of what can be called "intertextual recollection". In the present paper, I discuss the way, in which intertextuality is used by contemporary fairy-tale writers aimed at reviving the legacy of Hans Christian Andersen. As an illustrative example of this approach, I examine a piece of American short fiction *Travels with the Snow Queen*, from the collection *Stranger things happen* (2001) by Kelly Link, which is a modernized version of *The Snow Queen* (1844), one of the most acknowledged and most vastly reimagined among Andersen's fairy tales. Transforming the nature of Gerda's relationship with Kay, questioning the purpose of her heroic quest to save him, as well as challenging the traditional fairy-tale imaginarium, Link's reworking appears to be highly representative of what does and does not prove worth remembering about Andersen's original story, as well as his concept of the fairy tale as such.

2. FAIRY TALES AS INTERTEXTS

"Although the fairy tale is difficult to define", as stated among all by Rhonda Nicol, "we tend to know a fairy tale, or a text that takes its cues from fairy-tale patterns – when we see one" (Nicol 2014:165). Without going into detail about the different theoretical distinctions within the generic field of the fairy tale, in this article, the term "fairy tale" is used with regard to what it connotes for the target audiences, which is literary appropriations of oral folktales, as well as tales of literary origin, drawing on the folktale patterns.

Speaking of *how* fairy-tale intertexts are utilised in other works of fiction, one can distinguish two overall approaches, which differ with regard to their purpose. The first approach involves employing the fairy tale as an interpretative supplement. Ingrained in the world of literature, fairy-tale plots, figures and topics constitute a frame of reference, which is easily recognizable for readers of various backgrounds. Hence, in most cases, they are reused as illustrative metaphors, reinforcing the appeal of the works that relate to them.

Transposed into a new context, traditional fairy tale motifs acquire new meanings. Nevertheless, the primary focus of this practice is not to reenvision the tale being evoked, but employ it as a template, by which the reader can interpret the new story in question. The strategy outlined above was considered mainstream in the intertextual use of the genre up until the breakthrough of the postmodern era, where traditional fairy tales began to acquire a whole new status as intertexts. In his study devoted to the postmodern fairy tale, Kevin Paul Smith reports the change as follows: "In last three decades (1975-2005), however, there has been a perceptible shift in the use of fairytales by novelists and filmmakers. Rather than being something that underlies the narrative and informs its structure, or a handy metaphor, the fairytale has become central to the work" (Smith 2007:1). In other words, the arrival of postmodernism gave rise to a new approach within the intertextual use of fairy tales, where the tale itself becomes the actual subject matter, evoked in order to be examined within the framework of the new text that draws upon it.

It can be argued that fairytales have always been open to variation, especially throughout the oral era, when they were passed on along with the alterations introduced freely by the subsequent retellers, but also while making their way into the literate culture, where they were "polished and embellished" in order to comply with the nation-building ideas of the romantic period (Warner 2014). Correspondingly, the majority of fairy tale collections published nowadays are labelled as either retellings, reworkings or revisions, a good example of which are the numerous volumes of "fairy tales retold" co-edited by Terri Windling throughout the 1990's to the present day. Versatile as it is, the postmodern exploration of traditional fairy tales follows a consistent direction, aiming specifically at reinvestigating the fairy tale and transforming it in accordance with the social norms and needs of today.

Owing to reworkings, the fairy tale has recently marked its presence as "grown-up literature", explicitly aimed at older readers: adults and young adults. From the historical point of view, this takes the genre back to its roots, which is away from "the children's playroom" it was "banished to" in the nineteenth and early twentieth century (Winding 1993:2f.). The fact that most fairy tales were not originally intended as nursery stories, applies both to them originating in the oral and the literary tradition. Interestingly enough, Andersen too was full of doubts as for the actual appeal of his tales published initially as "told for children" (1835-1842), until he finally decided to skip the addressee label completely.

While restored to the mainstream of adult literature as intertexts, classic fairy tales lose their didactic authority, but in return, they regain their uncanny side, suppressed and sanitized in the versions intended for children. Consequently, the fairy-tale heritage assumes a new dimension in terms of function,

turning into a fertile field of aesthetic and ideological critique. Rather than just retold in a fresh, more accessible manner, fairy tales nowadays tend to be revised with all the implications inherent to the term itself. As observed by Jack Zipes, one of the most acknowledged experts in the area of fairy-tale studies, the practice of revision is driven by the assumption that "there is something wrong with an original work and that it needs to be changed for the better" (Zipes 1994:9f.). Regardless of the approach, which "range from the playfully or critically humorous, through the ponderously serious, to the genuinely profound" (Altmann/de Vos 2001:XXI), literary revisions of traditional fairy tales are produced in order to trigger critical reflection on their sources, especially in terms of how they do or do not resonate with the modernized 21st century society.

Speaking of sources one must emphasize that the majority of works labelled as fairy-tale reworkings operate within the domain of the folktale rather than the literary fairy tale. In comparison with the folktale, the literary fairy tale tradition is much less long-standing and not as widely recognized (Zipes 1988). In terms of international renown, the name "Andersen" serves here rather as an exception than a general rule. Contrary to the folktales, regarded as "a common property of many tellers" (Altmann/de Vos 2001:XX), literary fairy tales have original versions invented by identifiable authors, and hence, they are not as prone to interpretation by other writers. On the other hand, reworkings of literary fairy tales exhibit an even stronger critical appeal, as they derive from a deliberate intention to dispute something definitive, something which per se is not meant to be altered. And yet, while looking for contemporary reworkings in this area, it is difficult to find examples other than those drawing upon a selection of internationally known tales written by Andersen. As Terri Windling puts it, this can be due to the fact that Andersen's tales have "so thoroughly seeped into our culture that the average reader is likely to think these are anonymous tales, too" (Windling 1993:7).

Compared to the wide range of folktales revised repeatedly by different English-speaking authors, the overall number of reworkings based on stories written by Andersen is still scarce. On average, it ranges from one to three tales per anthology, such as those edited by Terri Windling and Ellen Datlow. Interestingly enough, the same tendency can be observed in Denmark. Here as well, except for the works of Rune T. Kidde and Manu Sareen, the writer's fairy-tale heritage is reexamined selectively rather than comprehensively. Nevertheless, while staying on the margins of the folk-tale mainstream, the tales written by Andersen are consistently evoked in the majority of works collecting revisionary fairy-tale fiction. Hence, revision should be considered as a significant trend in the recent reception of the writer's literary heritage, stimulating the readers to rethink, what Andersen's fairy tales are like and what they actually are about.

3. *THE SNOW QUEEN* AS A QUEST STORY

The Snow Queen is a literary fairy tale written originally by Andersen, and yet it shares many properties of a paradigmatic quest tale, as defined by Vladimir Propp in his famous study *Morphology of the Folk tale* (1928, English 1958, 1968). In the light of Propp's analysis, a regular quest tale is driven by the experience of lack and the desire to retrieve something missing. It begins with some sort of initial harmony disrupted by the villain's deceitful abduction of the victim, and progresses as an adventurous search for the missing object or person. Away from home, the seeker undergoes a series of tests and trials, meets helpers and acquires magical items, all of which lead up to the final recovery of the victim. When the misfortune is liquidated, the hero returns home and gets a reward for resolving the task (Propp 1968:25ff.). From the general point of view, the storyline in *The Snow Queen* follows the same basic pattern, as it depicts a pursuit undertaken by a young girl named Gerda in order to find her missing childhood friend Kay. The journey is interrupted by several magical encounters featuring a witch, a couple of ravens, a prince and a princess, a robber girl and her reindeer, a Lapland woman and a Finland woman, it culminates in Gerda's successful arrival at the Snow Queen's ice palace, and ends with both protagonists safely returning home.

Published for the first time in 1845, *The Snow Queen* is a part of a series of fairy tale collections defined by Andersen as "new fairy tales" ("nye eventyr"), instead of "fairy tales told for children". According to the Danish Andersen expert Johan de Mylius, the new term used by the author from 1843 and onwards marks an attempt to detach his work from the genre "children literature" (de Mylius 2016:352ff.).

In spite of their dual appeal, considered as one of the most distinctive characteristics of the author's revolutionary approach to the genre, the majority of fairy tales written by Andersen have survived as children's literature and are still retold, or, as some scholars suggest, at times rather paraphrased, for children being the primary target (Pedersen 1990). In children's literature, clarity and simplicity are valued more than complexity and ambiguity. Thus, while adapting Andersen's fairy tales to be read for or by children, the editors tend to guide the readers towards a specific understanding of the story, typically incorporated into the plot summary provided on the book cover. Owing to this approach, the tales become more straightforward and hereby also more accessible, but, on the other hand, their original interpretative dimension is considerably flattened.

Drawing upon the narrative frame of a quest tale, the plot dynamics in *The Snow Queen* rests upon the distribution of functions among its characters. In order to be able to interpret the story, it is necessary to identify the villain, the victim and the hero, as well as specify the mutual relations between them.

Regardless of the language, English or Danish, in most contemporary editions of *The Snow Queen* aimed at children, age three and up, the functions stated above are allocated in the same way. Typically, the Snow Queen herself is the one described as the villain: "chillingly beautiful", but, above all, "wicked" and "evil"/"ond". In quite an emotive manner, Kay tends to be presented as a defenceless victim, who gets "lured away, "abducted"/"bortfört", "bewitched" and "imprisoned" as a "slave" in the Snow Queen's icy palace, whereas Gerda appears as the actual hero, embarking on a "nightmarish journey" to save Kay from the villain's "icy clutches". Last but not least, most children's editions of the tale are consistent in depicting the relationship between Gerda and Kay as pure friendship all the way through. The characters tend to be referred to as "playmates", "friends", "best friends"/"bedste venner", and, at times, even "brother" and "sister"². The latter is, however, a clear distortion of the original, where the narrator states openly that "They were not brother and sister (...)" (Andersen 2009:270). In the light of the guidelines provided for children audiences, *The Snow Queen* is supposed to be read as a tribute to the virtues of childhood and the power of friendship, which complies with the message conveyed through the surface narrative of the story. At the same time, however, the reading outlined above does not pay regard to the gaps and ambiguities, which can be spotted by a more discerning reader, and by means of which the author raises questions about the meaning of the different parts of the heroine's quest.

First of all, having taken a closer look at Kay one can debate, how much purpose there actually was to Gerda's journey. After all, Kay hooked his little sled behind the Snow Queen's sleigh all by himself, which speaks against the theory of abduction. Prior to that occurrence, his attitude towards Gerda changed drastically. Suddenly he became rude, disdainful and distant. Whether that was due to the enchantment alone is another debatable issue. On the way back from the Snow Queen's palace, Gerda and Kay meet the little robber girl, eager to find out, whether Gerda's sacrifice was worth the cause: "I should like to know if you deserve that one should to the end of the world after you?" (Andersen 2009:301). The question is asked after the spell has been broken and Kay's compassion, at least seemingly, restored. Nevertheless, Gerda clearly evades the answer and hereby she suggests that Kay might not have been worth saving at all: "But Gerda patted her cheeks and asked after the Prince and the Princess" (Andersen 2009:301).

² In this passage, I refer to a selection of contemporary English- and Danish-language editions of *The Snow Queen* adapted for children, such as: *The Snow Queen*. 2004. Usborne Publishing Ltd; *The Snow Queen*. 2013. Harpercollins Publishers; *The Snow Queen*. 2014. Auzou; *The Snow Queen*. 2014. Minedition; *The Snow Queen*. 2015. Pushkin Children's Books; *The Snow Queen*. 2016. Barefoot Books Ltd; *The Snow Queen*. 2017. Caliber Comics.

Judging by the way in which Kay is portrayed in the story, it does not seem fully plausible to categorize him as a victim. On the other hand, the same can be said about Gerda, whose general attitude gives rise to reservations about her role as a hero. As noticed by Jacob Bøggild, the success of Gerda's mission is rather a result of coincidence than deliberate action³. To begin with, the fact that Gerda sets out on her journey is not something she agrees to or decides upon, but an accident that happens against her will, as the boat she gets into starts to drift away down the stream: "She noticed it, and hurried to get back, but before she reached the other end the boat was a yard from the bank (...)" (Andersen 2009:278). The quest continues in a similar manner, with Gerda relying preferably on others rather than herself: "Perhaps the river will carry me to little Kay (...)" (Andersen 2009:278). As far as trials are concerned, the only way in which Gerda is tested during her quest is by being tempted to give it up, either by choosing to stay with the woman skilled in magic, the prince and the princess or the robber girl. None of these encounters, however, puts the heroine in any real danger, quite the opposite, each of them offers an exciting alternative to the mental and physical strains of the journey ahead. In order to reclaim Kay, nor does she even get to face the villain, for when Gerda arrives at the palace, the Snow Queen is not even there.

Contrary to Propp's findings about the hero function, Gerda's recognition as a hero does not rely on any acquired skills, but the power of her feelings for Kay: "I can give her no power than she possesses already (...)" (Andersen 2009:297). Due to her unconditional devotion, Gerda was still bound to complete the mission she had been entrusted, even if unaware of the means she had at her disposal. Based on a several passages from the story, Gerda's affection for Kay has made its way into the popular reception as love of friendship, which only an innocent child like her is capable of. In modern reworkings, however, Gerda and Kay are typically made into lovers experiencing difficulties in their relationship. At first glance, this seems to be a major change to the original, introduced in order to attract older audiences, but in fact, the original Snow Queen does have the potential to be read as a romance, too.

Fifteen years before *The Snow Queen* came out in a fairy-tale form, Andersen published a poem under the same title: *Snee-dronningen* (The Snow Queen, 1829). The story it tells is a full-blown romance featuring a young girl awaiting her sweetheart, as he gets seduced by the Snow Queen on his way back from the mill nearby. In order to keep the young miller, the Snow Queen lures him into a bridal bed made of ice and snow, where he eventually dies. Even though Andersen's Gerda and Kay are still children on the onset of their journeys, they both come back home being adults, "children in heart", but

³ <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/hans-christian-andersens-fairy-tales/0/steps/9626>. Accessed 18 May 2018.

”grown up” (Andersen 2009:302). The scene, in which Kay disappears with the Snow Queen brings to mind seduction rather than abduction, triggered by intense physical attraction on both sides: ”’Now you shall have no more kisses’, said she, ’for if you did I should kiss you to death’. Kay looked at her. She was so beautiful, he could not imagine a more sensible or lovely face” (Andersen 2009:277). Correspondingly, in her initial attempt to retrieve Kay, Gerda strives to make herself look appealing in his eyes: ”’I will put on my new red shoes’, she said one morning, ’those that Kay has never seen (...)’” (Andersen 2009:277). In the light of the above, *The Snow Queen* indeed unfolds as a romance depicting the struggles of adolescence, both with regard to two main characters individually, as well as their mutual relationship.

Remarkably enough, the transition from childhood to adulthood looks different for each of the two characters. For Kay, it takes the form of a regular teenage rebellion. Hence the disconnection from the world of childhood, the increased drive to risk-taking, the newly-awakened sexual interests, as well as susceptibility to negative influences, all of which prove to be self-destructive. During her journey into adulthood, Gerda faces the same opportunities as Kay. Just like him, she goes through a sexual awakening, marked by the already mentioned resolution to lure Kay back by making herself look desirable in his eyes. The invitations she receives from the old woman with the garden, as well as the prince and the princess, put her at risk of falling into the same narcissistic withdrawal from the world outside as the one experienced by Kay at the Snow Queen’s ice palace: ”’And as the ancient dame combed her hair, Gerda forgot Kay more and more” (Andersen 2009:279). Contrary to her companion, however, Gerda is able to resist the temptations she faces, and stay true to what she eventually accepts as her duty: ”’Oh, how I have been detained!’, said the little girl. ’I wanted to seek for little Kay!’” (Andersen 2009:281).

In his extended reading of *The Snow Queen*, presented in *The kiss of the Snow Queen* (1986), Wolfgang Lederer puts the difference in the two character’s attitudes into an alternative, gender-related perspective. Instead of attributing Gerda’s heroism to the virtues of childhood, Lederer sees it as an indicator of her blossoming femininity, clearly contradicting the rough male identity developed by Kay. Reading the story onto Andersen’s life and his commonly mentioned angst of sexuality, Lederer concludes that *The Snow Queen* is a romance in disguise. Contrary to the conventional logic of the genre, Gerda and Kay never marry, they choose to remain ”’children in heart’”. Nevertheless, the tasks that define the roles they perform illustrate a certain model of a romantic relationship, based on the assumption that men are free to go astray, because they are sure to be redeemed by their women (Lederer 1986). Among the wide range of critical approaches to Andersen’s tale, the one suggested by Lederer resonates particularly well with the reworking created by

Link, which centers around the outdated gender norms defining the course of Gerda's quest.

4. IN GERDA'S FOOTSTEPS: KELLY LINK VS ANDERSEN

Kelly Link's reworking of *The Snow Queen* is a representative example of the approach favoured by the majority of postmodern writers revising the tale. The perspective adopted by Link fits within the prolific tradition of feminist fairy tale revisions, which goes back to Angela Carter's breakthrough collection *Bloody chamber* (1979).

Since 1970's, authors of the so-called revisionist feminist fiction have taken on the evolving concerns of the second and third wave feminism (Haase 2004). Despite differences, their works share a common focus, which lies on exposing and subverting the restrictive gender expectations prescribed within classic fairy tales for women. In *Travels with the Snow Queen*, Kelly Link reworks the gender logic of her source tale by applying a combination of several narrative strategies. The storyline of the revision replicates the narrative frame of the original. Nevertheless, the characters transposed into the reworking perform different narrative functions, as a result of which the expected outcome of Gerda's quest is altered. Another modification involves significant changes to the narrative perspective of the original: from the third- to the second-person narrative with an internal instead of external focalisation. Interestingly enough, in *Travels with the Snow Queen*, the narrative point of view lies with the female character, Gerda, and yet the story is written in the second-person narrative, "you". Last but not least, the author takes a different approach to the setting. In both texts, the setting is a merge of reality, where the story begins, and fantasy, towards which it evolves, as the main heroines continue their quests. In the original *Snow Queen*, the fairy-tale world is presented as a natural, inconspicuous part of reality. Contrary to Andersen, Kelly Link chooses to enhance the clash between these two dimensions, among all by transposing Gerda's quest into a contemporary context. By means of the modifications outlined above, the author challenges the original *Snow Queen* in two overall respects: first of all with regard to the message conveyed throughout Gerda's journey, but also as a part of the overall fairy-tale tradition, illustrating common truths about the genre.

4.1. TRAVELS WITH THE SNOW QUEEN AS A QUEST STORY

According to Vladimir Propp, the so-called "functions of the dramatis personae" constitute invariable elements of each fairy tale, fulfilled regardless of the characters who perform them (Propp 1968:21f.). At the same time, however, the question of who exactly stands for what in a given tale proves to

be crucial in terms of interpretation. As we shall see in the example discussed below, any modifications introduced within this area can change the overall appeal of the story, even on the assumption that the course of action stays the same.

As illustrated in section number 3, the distribution of narrative functions in *The Snow Queen* is a debatable issue, which makes the story open to various interpretations: either as a childhood fable or as a romance. In *Travels with the Snow Queen*, on the other hand, the functions performed by the main characters are redistributed in a way that encourages only one particular reading. To begin with, the author of the reworking clarifies the ambiguity concerning the relation between Gerda and Kay. In that respect, she compromises between the two perspectives suggested by Andersen and pictures the two characters as a couple of grown-up childhood sweethearts: "So this is the story so far. You grew up, you fell in love with the boy next door, Kay (...). (...) you moved in with him (...)" (Link 2001:100). The actual quest recreated in the reworking starts after a minor fight between the two, upon which Kay mysteriously disappears. Expectedly enough, Gerda takes it upon herself to go and look for her boyfriend, but the purpose of her journey is questioned all the way through, not in the least by herself. Right from the beginning, the heroine implies that her search is driven by self-deceit, by means of which she exposes the original Gerda's faith in Kay as an illusion:

The Snow Queen

"When Kay hears that I'm there he'll come out directly (...)" (Andersen 2009:287).

"Poor little Kay had also received a splinter just in his heart, and that will now soon become like a lump of ice." (Andersen 2009:274).

Travels with the Snow Queen

"You thought he loved you, maybe he thought he did, too" (Link 2001:100).

"You told yourself that the woman in the sleigh must have put a spell on him, and he was probably already missing you. (...) This is what you told yourself" (Link 2001:102).

What Gerda suspects, is confirmed by every creature she meets on her way: the raven, the princess, the robber girl and the reindeer. All of them perform their role as helpers in a subversive way, which is by discouraging the heroine from continuing her quest instead of facilitating its progression: "The raven opens its big beak and says, 'He doesn't love you, you know'" (Link 2001:103); "He doesn't love you', Bae says (...)" (Link 2001:112).

Among all the helpers that Kelly Link's Gerda meets during her quest, the only one she becomes truly fond of is the robber girl. While depicting their encounter, the author enhances the ambiguities of Andersen's account, on the basis of which the bond between the two can be considered as bearing erotic

undertones: "(...) the little robber girl laughed, and drew Gerda into bed with her" (Andersen 2009:293); "(...) the robber girl puts her arms around you and squeezes you roughly (...); "She turns to you and gives you a smacking wet kiss on the lips (...)" (Link 2001:111). In both versions, the robber girl's attitude towards Gerda is portrayed as highly intrusive, both physically and verbally: she makes the heroine share her bed, overwhelms her with hugs and kisses, as well as poses allusive threats, such as the one involving "thrusting her knife into Gerda's body" (Andersen 2009:293). What is more, in both versions, Gerda submits to the robber girl's advances, but she does it for different reasons: either out of fear, which is the case in the original version, or infatuation, as indicated in the reworking: "You should be afraid, but instead you are strangely exhilarated. Your feet don't hurt anymore, and although you don't know where you are going (...), you are almost flying (...)" (Link 2001:109f.).

Both Andersen and Link make it quite obvious for the reader that what Gerda finds appealing in her new acquaintance is her demeanour of a "bad", or, as Andersen puts it, "spiteful and naughty girl" (Andersen 2009:291). In Andersen's version, the robber girl's rough attitude goes hand in hand with a selection of physical traits perceived traditionally as masculine. In this way, the author seems to counteract the possibility to consider Gerda's encounter with the robber girl in lesbian terms, which Kelly Link clearly encourages by depicting the latter as a deeply sexualised incarnation of femininity:

The Snow Queen

"The little robber-girl was about the same size as Gerda, but stronger; she had broader shoulders and a darker skin; her eyes were quite black, and she had a mournful look." (Andersen 2009:291f.).

Travels with the Snow Queen

"She looks like one of the bad girls who loiter under the street lamp by the corner shop, the ones that used to whistle at Kay. She wears black leatherette boots laced up to her thighs, and a black, ribbed T-shirt and grape-colored plastic shorts with matching suspenders" (Link:110).

Given the feminist perspective of Link's reworking there is a good reason to presume that Gerda's attraction to the robber girl expresses an appreciation of the sexual empowerment of women. In her experience of the character, however, Link's heroine applies a purely objectifying perspective, which, by the way, is not her own, but a projection of men's perception of women as sexual objects. In other words, the reason why Gerda finds the robber girl appealing is because women like her are considered to be appealing to men. That very same point of view is reflected in Gerda's judgement of other female helpers on her way, such as the woman of Lapmark and the woman of Finmany. Due to the lack of attributes considered as sexually attractive, the heroine approaches both of them with dislike, even though none of them

proves to be any less of a helper than the robber girl does: "The old woman of Lapmark is stooped and fat as a grub" (Link 2001:113); "The Finmany woman is smaller and rounder than the woman of Lapmark. She looks to you like a lump of pudding with black currant eyes" (Link 2001:114). As it turns out, the way in which Kelly Link's Gerda approaches other women during her journey contradicts the gender-critical standpoints promoted within the tale. Whether by oversight or intention, her judgements illustrate how deeply imprinted the female objectification is, not in the least among women themselves.

Moving on to Kelly Link's take on Kay, the feedback Gerda receives on her way can still be seen as well-meant advice a fairy-tale hero can expect from her helpers. As revealed in the final scene, the author's revised version of Kay has nothing to do with the victimized hero Andersen made him be. By taking Gerda's sacrifice for granted, Kay discredits himself as a cynical, self-centered opportunist, which turns him into an actual villain: "What took you so long?!", Kay says. 'Where in the world did you get those ridiculous boots?'" (Link 2001:117). Thus, upon confronting him in the Snow Queen's ice palace, the heroine recognizes that her beloved does not love her indeed. Surprisingly enough, it is the Snow Queen that helps Gerda arrive at this conclusion, by means of which her original role is inverted too. Rather than as a villain, she appears as Gerda's ally, the one who evokes trust rather than fear: "The Snow Queen isn't how or what you'd expected. (...) Sure, she's beautiful, (...) but her eyes are black and kind, which you didn't expect at all" (Link 2001:118), and supports the heroine on her way to self-awareness: "So what happens now?', you ask the Snow Queen. 'Up to you', she says" (Link 2001:119).

Inspired by the Snow Queen's advice: "I wouldn't do it if I were you" (Link 2001:118), Gerda refuses to kiss Kay and set him free from the enchantment: "Sorry', you tell him; 'Sorry!', he says. 'You're sorry! What good does that to me?'" (Link 2001:119). Paradoxically enough, Gerda asserts her status as a hero by failing to fulfill the original purpose of her mission. Gerda's revised quest to find Kay can still be read metaphorically as an account of growing up, but this time around, the transition is purely psychological and it concerns only Gerda, not Kay. While Kay remains the same egocentric narcissist, Gerda, empowered by her feminine ally, eventually finds the courage to pursue her own will as an independent individual. As a result of this inversion, the story redefines the rise of Gerda as a female subject by liberating it from the gender-based redemption logic imposed by Andersen.

4.2 TRAVELS WITH THE SNOW QUEEN AS A METATEXT

As noted on the outset of this analysis, in her reworking, Kelly Link deploys quite a rare narrative technique, which is the second-person narrative. The effect of writing in the second person is two-fold. On the one hand, it

creates a sense of relatability between the reader and the protagonist, as well as invites the reader to imagine him- or herself as a part of the story. Given the fact that in *Travels with the Snow Queen*, the actual voice speaking through the narrator's account belongs to the female protagonist Gerda, the use of the narrative "you" is what highlights the sociocritical aspect of the story. By depicting the heroine's disillusionment with her partner as relatable for the anticipated female audience, the author implies that it is something that happens for women on a regular basis, but also something that women are empowered to overcome by choosing their own ways over the ones they are expected to follow.

On the other hand, the second-person narrative can indicate detachment from the story, an ironic distance acquired while reliving something that took place in the past, and putting it into perspective. In *Travels with the Snow Queen*, the actual course of Gerda's quest, except for the introductory passages providing the background, is rendered in the present tense. The author's choice of narrative tense implies that the events depicted in the story are rendered "in medias res", which is to say as they occur: "It is after sunset, and you aren't even half way into the forest (...)" (Link 2001:109). Simultaneously, the impression of immediacy is counterbalanced by a clear sense of temporal distance manifested in the comments provided by the narrator, which carry a confessional tone, full of retrospective judgements and insights.

When Gerda finds out that Kay has disappeared with a woman in a white sleigh, she says: "Oh her", as if she "wasn't surprised" (Link 2001:101). By making disillusioned comments like this, the narrator proves her foreknowledge of the story, obtained, as it turns, through reading experience. Remarkably enough, the same concerns Kay, who shares his expertise regarding the course of events even more explicitly: "'If you kiss me', he says, 'you break the spell and I can come home with you'" (Link 2001:117). As mentioned before, in her reworking, Kelly Link transposes Gerda's quest to the present day. By doing so, she legitimates the two characters', and especially Gerda's, extensive insight into the foregoing fairy tale tradition, which expands into a separate level of metatextual reflection. The world of the fairy tale, which Kelly Link's Gerda withdraws into as her quest progresses, is much more complex than the one pictured by Andersen. It abounds in recognizable fairy-tale objects, creatures and characters, serving as a point of reference for the heroine, as well as an area of metatextual scrutiny.

Having recognized the nature of her mission as "fairy-tale-like", Gerda resorts to the well-known, trusted fairy-tale solutions in order to achieve her goal. Much to her disappointment, however, she finds most of them to be implausible. First of all, both Andersen and Link make it a priority to communicate the fact that Gerda sets out on her quest in bare feet, but they approach this condition in two different ways. In *The Snow Queen*, travelling

barefooted is depicted with recognition, as a sign of the unconditional devotion that determines the success of Gerda's quest: "Don't you see how men and animals are obliged to serve her, and how she gets on so well in the world, with her naked feet?" (Andersen 2009:297). While Andersen celebrates the symbolic significance of Gerda's travel, Link draws attention to its physical effects, providing graphic descriptions of bloody feet covered with scars left by the shards of the Snow Queen's broken mirror: "There is a map of fine white scars on the soles of your feet (...)" (Link 2001:100). On the one hand, the author insists that the strains experienced by fairy-tale heroines tend to be considerably undermined: "Ladies. Has it ever occurred to you that fairy tales aren't easy on the feet?" (Link 2001:100). On the other hand, she devaluates them as excessive suffering in vain: "Think about the little mermaid, who traded in her tail for love, got two legs and two feet, and every step was like walking on knives. And where did it get her?" (Link 2001:102).

Well-versed as she is in the realm of fairy tales, Kelly Link's Gerda recognizes the atrocity and absurdity of the women-related fairy-tale scenarios. Despite her expertise, however, the heroine feels compelled to follow in the footsteps of so many other female fairy-tale readers: "This is one of the things a woman can do when her lover leaves her" (Link 2001:102). What stands at the centre of Kelly Link's gender critique is thus not women's position in the world as such, but the way in which it is shaped by the world of fantasy. Her reworking of *The Snow Queen* unfolds as an exemplary piece of postmodern literature, marked by an explicit interest in the realm of fiction, which goes beyond *The Snow Queen* itself. The author's explicit comments on the portrayal of women in fairy tales lead up to a two-fold conclusion about the genre. On the one hand, Kelly Link's Gerda is pictured as one of a multitude of heartbroken women resorting to fairy-tale scenarios, only to find disappointment. In this way the author implies, that the genre still bears relevance in the contemporary context with regard to the conflicts it depicts. Nevertheless, the solutions it promotes are no longer acceptable due to the suppression of women imprinted into the "happily ever after".

CONCLUSIONS

With regard to the gender-related concerns addressed by the author, Kelly Link's reworking of *The Snow Queen* appears as a straightforward example of feminist revisionist fiction, challenging the acceptable codes of behaviour prescribed in the fairy tales for men and women. At first glimpse one could argue that Andersen's *The Snow Queen* is not the best starting point for this kind of criticism. As observed by Jack Zipes, the majority of traditional fairy tales tend to rely on a male character redeeming the female character, making her into an object that needs to be saved (Zipes 2002). In Andersen's tale, the one representing the sphere of action and achievement is Gerda, whereas the role of

the victimized hero in need is attributed to Kay. By articulating Kay's narcissism and cynicism, as well as Gerda's desperate determination to find him anyway, Kelly Link maintains that the reversal of stereotypical gender roles in *The Snow Queen* is though delusive, whereas the actual moral of the story upholds the idea that women should be self-sacrificing and unconditionally supportive of their male partners, whatever their actions may be.

As opposed to *The Snow Queen*, in *Travels with the Snow Queen* women are no longer expected to be at service for men, and nor are they bound to battle each other in order to win men's affection. At the same time, however, in *Travel's with the Snow Queen*, the author ends up subscribing to the unpopular idea that women's value equals their beauty. In Kelly Link's revision of *The Snow Queen*, a number of women-related fairy tale stereotypes are successfully deconstructed, while others are still carried forward, reconfirming the substantial role of the genre in disseminating the seemingly outmoded assumptions about gender.

In spite of the criticism articulated by Link through the heroine's metatextual reflections, denial is not the only response the author gives to tradition. As noted by Christina Bacchilega, postmodern revisions of traditional fairy tales are often two-fold, simultaneously rejecting and embracing the tales that inform them (Bacchilega 1997:50). In *Travels with the Snow Queen*, the author acknowledges the need to reinvent the relationship logic advertised in Andersen's *The Snow Queen*. In order to do so, she extracts the latent content of the tale, unexploited in the retellings adapted for children. Remarkably enough, the counternarrative created by Kelly Link relies on the hints provided by Andersen himself, by means of which the author offers the possibility to read the story as an adult romance, as well as reflect on the roles attributed to the characters participating in Gerda's quest. In her search of straightforward answers to the ambiguities of Andersen's account, Kelly Link restores the multivocality of her source tale, unknown to the mainstream of recipients familiar with its institutionalized versions. In this way, the author proves that revising fairy tales serves a double purpose. On the one hand, it sharpens the reader's gaze for the clichés inherent to the fairy tale tradition, with regard to which even the most canonised works of the genre need reconsideration. On the other hand, by bringing to notice the overlooked potential of the fairy-tale classics, it encourages the reader to further explore the parallels between the world of the fairy tale and the world of today.

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