
From the Instructor

Although WR courses focus primarily on academic writing, in WR 100: “Fairy Tales and Literature” I ask students to write their own versions of a traditional fairy tale. This assignment, an “alternative genre” second paper, allows students to understand how and why fairy tales are written from the inside, rather than simply from an outside scholarly perspective. It also reinforces the importance of narrative structure: students come to understand that just like a fairy tale, an academic paper must tell a story, although an intellectual one. The assignment has three components: an introduction to the fairy tale, meant to draw a reader into the project as a whole; the fairy tale itself; and finally an analysis in which students explain how and why they wrote their versions.

Hannah Levin’s “Bad Parenting: The True Villain of ‘Rumpelstiltskin’” is a powerful retelling of “Rumpelstiltskin” not only because it’s so emotionally engaging, drawing us right into the story of the boy who was bargained away, but also because it functions as a response to, and analysis of, the Grimm version on which it’s based. The most successful fairy tale retellings do just that: they talk back to their predecessors, allowing us to see the story differently. If we look at Hannah’s version the way a scholar would, we can see how subtly she’s responding to and reformulating themes found in the Grimm version, such as the importance of names. But now it’s the boy’s lack of a name that becomes central, marking his abandonment. In this tale, Hannah talks back to the Brothers Grimm, telling them what she thinks of their tale and creating a new one of her own, in clear, lyrical prose, that gives voice to a character who is too often forgotten.

— Theodora Goss

WR 100: Fairy Tales

From the Writer

When my classmates and I were presented with the task of writing our own version of a fairy tale, I knew that my biggest challenge would be doing something original. Adapting fairy tales is an extremely popular trend, with shows like *Once Upon a Time* and *Grimm* as well as the new wave of live-action Disney movies, and I wanted to examine a tale in a way that hadn't been done yet. That is why, upon deciding that I was going to adapt "Rumpelstiltskin," I decided to focus on the child that the miller's daughter wagers. The miller's daughter found out Rumpelstiltskin's name and won her bet mainly by luck, and it seemed to me that if only a few things had gone differently, the child would have been condemned to a horrible life with the man who stole him. I saw this as a huge risk on the part of the miller's daughter, but in all of the scholarly articles that I read, the potential consequences of the wager for the child were scarcely touched on, much less the morality of a deal. In this paper, I aimed to give the child a voice and bring to light the irresponsibility of the miller's daughter's actions, while giving insight into her character and plight as well. I had a lot of fun writing it, and I hope that I was able to make both the child and the mother complex, interesting, and sympathetic characters.

— Hannah Levin

BAD PARENTING: THE TRUE VILLAIN OF “RUMPELSTILTSKIN”

One of the many things about fairy tales that readers appreciate is that in the end, whether they are made to dance in iron shoes or turned into stone statues, the villains nearly always get their comeuppance. Afterwards, critics, folklorists, and psychoanalysts spend pages upon pages analyzing the implications of their crime and punishment. However, this is not the case in “Rumpelstiltskin.” Rumpelstiltskin receives his punishment in the form of a typically gruesome fairy tale death, but the tale includes several other characters that act selfishly or rashly: the miller’s lie lands his daughter in a potentially fatal situation, the King threatens to kill a helpless girl, and even the miller’s daughter disregards her child’s wellbeing when she promises him to Rumpelstiltskin. Yet they all live happily ever after, and readers ignore their transgressions.

My story attempts to highlight exactly how much damage the characters’ actions would have done if luck had not been on their side. What would have happened if the miller’s daughter hadn’t found Rumpelstiltskin’s name? Her son would have been given to a madman, forced to grow up without his parents, probably unloved and neglected. My story explores this scenario, showing events from the son’s point of view and exploring his feelings about his parents and the grief that they caused him. I attempt to hold those that did wrong responsible for their actions through the son’s thoughts on his mother and through his bitterness towards his life. In this new version of the tale, the miller’s daughter’s child is shown to be what he is: a person, not a bargaining chip.

Rumpelstiltskin's Prize

When he is seven years old, he discovers that he is one of Master's trinkets.

Ironically, he makes this discovery through one of Master's other trinkets. His room is full of Master's trinkets: scrolls and gold and state secrets and magic items are piled to the ceiling. He is not to touch them, ever, under any circumstances. Master is very strict about that. So he lives in that room for the first seven years of his life, but he never explores it, only ever touching the magic carpet that he sleeps on in lieu of a bed.

There is a Looking Glass that has been tucked into a corner ever since he can remember. One day the Looking Glass calls him over. None of the trinkets has ever spoken to him before. He is curious. So he goes over to the corner of the room where it lies and runs his fingers over the cool surface, heart pounding wildly in his ribcage.

"Child," says the Looking Glass, "Do you know why you are here? Do you know why you live in this place, in this room?"

He does not.

And so the Looking Glass tells him of a day seven years ago when a young miller's daughter was told to spin straw into gold or be executed, of a tiny little imp that offered her salvation, of her bargain, of her marriage. Of how the servant she sent to discover the tiny little imp's name never returned. Of how she lost.

And then the Looking Glass says, "Do you know why I am telling you this?"

He shakes his head.

The Looking Glass says, "Because you deserve to know what you are."

The boy blinks once, twice, three times. "I am the prince," he says slowly.

"No," says the Looking Glass. "You are a prize that he won, just like everything he keeps in here."

"I am a prize," he whispers. He hates that he knows that it's the truth. He hates how much sense it makes that he lives in a storage bin

rather than a room. He hates that when he says those words, it feels natural and fitting and right.

He is twelve when he starts teaching himself magic. He is good at moving silently, and Master hardly cares what he does as long as dinner is on the table when it should be, so the boy is not noticed when he starts following Master around the house, quietly taking note of his spells. He talks to the Looking Glass sometimes, and it teaches him about the kinds of spells and enchantments that Master does not use. He practices and practices, sitting in front of the Looking Glass as it tells him to correct his hand position or make his pronunciation more precise.

He is fifteen when he tells the Looking Glass, "I want to meet my parents."

The Looking Glass thinks him foolish, but it helps him anyway. It tells him the way to the palace, and it teaches him spells for invisibility and moving in silence to get past the guards. It wishes him luck as he climbs out the window of the storage room.

He is fifteen when he flies through the window of the royal chambers, invisible and silent in the dead of night.

His feet touch down onto the pristine wooden floors of his mother's room. Everything is big, grand, extravagant, *gold*. His eyes are assaulted by gold. The walls are painted with intricate golden swirls, the dressers and bed are gold-plated, and the chandelier and the mirror and the lanterns and the bookshelves are twinkling the way that only pure gold does. He thinks back to the Looking Glass's tale and wonders how much of this room was made by his Master.

There is one thing in the room that is not gold. In the gold-plated bed, under the golden covers, resting on a golden pillow, there is a woman in a white nightgown. She is beautiful, so very beautiful, sleeping peacefully with her dark hair spread across the pillow. He approaches his mother. She looks young to be a queen, no older than thirty-five. There is a crease in her brow and frown lines on her face.

He reaches out a hand to wake her. Her eyes open slowly, but she shies away from him.

"Who are you?" she says, sitting up quickly and pulling the covers

around herself protectively. “I’ll call the guards—”

“I’m your son,” he says.

For a moment, it is silent.

“You can’t be,” she whispers. “I lost my son.”

He doesn’t know what to say to her. He hasn’t really thought of that.

But he doesn’t have to speak, because she continues. “You are. Oh, God, you are. I’m so sorry,” she tells him. “You have to understand—I was supposed to win.”

And suddenly the wrongness of the situation washes over him. This is not how it is supposed to be. This woman, his mother, should not be a complete stranger to him. He should not be learning for the first time at age fifteen that her hair is brown and that her eyes are the same shape as his and that her room is drenched with gold. He suddenly feels cheated, wronged, and he is hit with an incredible urge to fly back home to his Looking Glass.

“You’re so handsome,” she says, traces of a smile appearing. “You’ve grown up so beautifully without me . . .”

The words hang in the air between them. He had grown up without her.

He had grown up a trinket.

And he is standing in front of his mother and she is looking at him like he is something precious and he feels hollow, because he could have grown up with someone looking at him like he is something precious and he *didn’t*.

“You gave me to him.” The words are out of his mouth before he is aware of it. Her smile melts like ice thrown into a fire.

“Yes,” she says, voice barely above a whisper. “I am so sorry. I didn’t... I didn’t have a choice. I tried to *save* you. He took you.”

But he didn’t *just* take me, the boy thinks. There was an agreement, a deal. “How could you do it?” he asks. “You bet your necklace, and you bet your ring—but how could you bet your *son*? How could you bet *me*?”

“I didn’t want to!” she says. “I didn’t have anything else to give. I was going to die, and you didn’t even exist yet. He said he would save me if I’d only—”

“If you’d only *what?*”

“I didn’t have a choice!” she says. “If I could have done *anything* else—”

“You could have refused,” he says. “You could have run away, you could have offered yourself. You could have done something if you had stopped to think!”

“I didn’t have time to think,” she says. “I was about to die, the king was going to kill me!”

“You could have saved me!” He does not know what he is doing now; words come on their own accord. “I have no *name*,” he says. “I live in a storage shed. I feed myself and clothe myself and keep myself warm. I have no name and no friends and no family. You could have protected me from this, but instead here you are in luxury. In this room made of spun gold.”

“I did not want this room!” she shouted. “I did not want this gold. I did not want this life! I would trade everything I have for you in a heart-beat!” Her face is red, her fists are clenched, and she grabs his hand. “*My* father used me as a bid for power, I am married to the man that threatened to *kill* me, I was tricked by my supposed savior, and I lost my only child! You may hate me, you may blame me—and you should—but do not tell me that I wanted *this* and do not tell me that I am not suffering!”

That makes him stop. He looks once again at the crease in her brow and the frown lines on her face. And suddenly, his mother seems very tired.

Where was his father in all of this?

He does not know what her life has been. He does not know why she made her deal. He does not know why she is all alone in this golden room. He does not know her at all. Not like he should.

But he knows one thing.

“Parents are supposed to protect their children,” he says. “You were supposed to try.”

He is fifteen when he realizes that his only family is a Looking Glass.

HANNAH LEVIN is a mechanical engineering major in Boston University's College of Engineering Class of 2018. She comes from a suburb an hour outside New York City, where she has been doing creative writing ever since she was young. She would like to thank her high school English teachers, whom she credits with making her the writer she is today. She would also like to thank her professor, Theodora Goss, for all her help with this story and for creating such an exciting and enriching class, and her family and friends for all of their support.