

Unveiling the Subversive Power: Feminist Revisions in Jane Yolen's *Briar Rose* (1992) and Robert Coover's *Briar Rose* (1996)

كشف القوة التخريبية: المراجعات النسوية في *وردة بريّة* (1992) لجين يولين و*وردة بريّة* (1996) لروبرت كوفر

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Abstract

The present article examines the subversive power of feminist revisions of the classic fairy tale "Sleeping Beauty" within two retellings, namely Jane Yolen's *Briar Rose* (1992) and Robert Coover's *Briar Rose* (1996). It strives to demonstrate how these authors constructively re-imagine traditional fairy tales, particularly the Brothers Grimm's "Briar Rose" (1812), in innovative and often revolutionary ways to question prevailing gender roles and power dynamics. From both male and female perspectives, these distinct adaptations serve as compelling case studies for exploring how contemporary writers skillfully employ postmodern techniques with feminist lenses to infuse their female protagonists with agency, complexity, and a resounding voice. Through breathing new life into a character historically defined by passivity, the paper invites readers to explore the transformative potential of feminist reinterpretations and challenge the conventional narratives that shape our perceptions and roles.

Keywords: Feminist fairy tale retelling, Briar Rose, Sleeping Beauty, Robert Coover, Jane Yolen.

المخلص : يفحص المقال الحالي القوة التخريبية للمراجعات النسوية للحكاية الخرافية الكلاسيكية "الحساء النائمة" ضمن اثنين من اعداتي السرد، وهما رواية *وردة بريّة* (1992) لجين يولين و*وردة بريّة* (1996) لروبرت كوفر. فهو يسعى لتوضيح كيف يقوم هؤلاء المؤلفون بإعادة تصور الحكايات الخيالية التقليدية بشكل بناء، ولا سيما "وردة بريّة" (1812) للأخوين جريم، بطرق مبتكرة وغالباً ما تكون تخريبية لاستجواب الأدوار السائدة بين الجنسين وديناميكيات السلطة. من منظوري الذكر والأنثى، تعد هذه التكييفات المختلفة بمثابة دراسات حالة مقنعة لاستكشاف كيفية استخدام الكتاب المعاصرين بمهارة لتقنيات ما بعد الحداثة بعدسات نسوية لمنح بطلاتهم النسائية القوة والتعقيد والصوت المدوي. من خلال بث حياة جديدة في شخصية تم تعريفها تاريخياً بالسلبية، تدعو الورقة القراء إلى استكشاف الإمكانيات التحويلية للتفسيرات النسوية وتحدي الروايات التقليدية التي تشكل تصوراتنا وأدوارنا.

الكلمات مفتاحية: إعادة سرد الحكايات الخرافية النسائية، وردة بريّة، الحساء النائمة، روبرت كوفر، جين يولين

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1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, classical fairy tales have captivated audiences with their enthralling narratives and enduring popularity. Yet, behind the surface of these enchanted tales lies an intricate network of social and cultural ideologies, which frequently perpetuate gender stereotypes and reinforce patriarchal norms. Fairy tales, therefore, have long acted as a canvas on which cultural norms and gender roles are painted, with women frequently portrayed as passive and in need of rescue, while men are projected as heroic saviors.

Since the main concern of the second wave of feminism of the 1970s was to examine and criticize how gender was portrayed, constructed, and represented in literary texts, it has influenced many critics and scholars to approach literature, including fairy tales, from a feminist perspective. Feminist critics frequently emphasize the idea that gender is a social construct rather than a fixed biological characteristic. They argue that societal norms play a formative role in shaping gender roles and expectations, and these norms are reflected in literary works. Accordingly, these critics highlight the embedded stereotypes in classical fairy tales and question their implications for both the characters and readers. Their criticism vastly focuses on well-known classic fairy tales, whose heroines like Sleeping Beauty, Beauty, Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, and Snow White who are frequently portrayed in roles that adhere to traditional stereotypes of passivity, beauty, and dependence on male characters for their ultimate salvation.

Accordingly, both the world-renowned scholar of fairy tales Jack Zipes, in the introduction of his seminal work *Don't Bet on the Prince*, and the critic Donald Haase, in his article "Feminist Fairy-tales Scholarship", profoundly argue that feminist fairy tale productions and their scholarship began with the notable dispute between Alison Lurie and Marcia R. Lieberman in the early 1970s. This dispute, concerning the representation of female characters, marked a significant turning point in the analysis of fairy tales. It ignited discussions and research that would shape feminist perspectives on these narratives for decades to come. In her captivating articles "Fairy Tale Liberation" (1970) and "Witches and Fairies" (1971), Lurie shook the literary world with her compelling argument that fairy tales can serve as catalysts for women's liberation by showcasing strong female protagonists. Lurie's argument led to a heated debate in the form of essays and

academic studies. Among the most prominent critics, who fiercely criticized Lurie's assertions, was Marcia R. Lieberman. In her article "Some Day My Prince Will Come: Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale" (1972), Lieberman suggested that while a few tales may contain empowering messages, the majority of well-known fairy tales actually perpetuate restrictive gender roles and expectations. The heated discussion between Lurie and Lieberman has ultimately spurred further scholarship on the intersection of feminism and fairy tales.

In response, during the 1970s, many postmodern authors actively engaged in producing feminist fairy tales that went against the grain of traditional narratives. They contributed to the creation of narratives with new twists that reflected changing social and cultural attitudes towards gender roles and female empowerment. These feminist fairy tales became an important part of the broader feminist movement, promoting the idea that women could be strong, independent, self-assertive, and capable of determining their own fates. Drawing upon the feminist insights of Jack Zipes and Donald Haase's feminist survey, the article digs deep into the world of feminist revisions of the classical fairy tale of "Sleeping Beauty" as portrayed in Jane Yolen's *Briar Rose* and Robert Coover's *Briar Rose*, aiming to uncover the subversive power embedded within these postmodern retellings. In essence, the main purpose of the article is to reveal how Yolen and Coover both challenge the conventional depiction of the stereotypical passive sleeping princess and how they both disrupt the preconceived notions of gender roles and power dynamics within their retellings.

From both male and female perspectives, the work endeavors to answer the following questions: How do Jane Yolen and Robert Coover, with their distinct male and female perspectives, subvert and rewrite the classical fairy tale of "Sleeping Beauty" in their respective works? What's the aim behind that? In what ways do they subvert gender roles, particularly in their portrayal of the female character, challenging the conventional archetype of the passive and dependent princess? What narrative techniques and thematic elements do they employ in their postmodern feminist revisions of "Sleeping Beauty"? Do they succeed in giving voice and subjectivity to women who have formerly been silenced and objectified?

2.Reclaiming the Narrative: the Subversive Nature of Feminist Fairy Tale Retellings

Literature has been regarded as a mirror that reflects society's values, beliefs, and culture. One of the best-known, enduring, and oldest genres of literature is the fairy tale. This particular type of folktale is typically passed down orally from one generation to another by different storytellers. Its origins are believed to date back as far as mankind itself. Consequently, scholars throughout history have engaged in debates and discussions regarding the roots of fairy tales. While the accurate origins of fairy tales remain enigmatic and intricate, they undeniably originate from oral traditions. Due to their flexibility, adaptability and oral nature, they spread rapidly across nations and are greatly valued in every part of the world (Sanders, 2006, p. 82).

The term 'fairy tale', which is undeniably a complex and elusive concept, lacks a universally agreed-upon definition, because it encompasses a wide range of narratives that share certain characteristics but also display considerable variation across cultures, time periods, and individual tales. It was originally coined in Madame d'Aulnoy's book *Contes des Fees* (1697), which was later translated into English as *Tales of the Fairies* (1749). No author named his or her tale a 'fairy tale' until d'Aulnoy created the word. As a result, the evolution of fairy tales was notably shaped by the contributions of French women writers, also known as *conteuses*, during the 17th century, a period marked by the emergence of intellectual gatherings known as salons. Within these salons, *conteuses* played a crucial role in nurturing and embellishing literary fairy tales, infusing female characters with elements of empowerment and resilience that often deviated from the reality they faced (Zipes, 2012a, pp. 23-24). However, these tales, when transposed into literary formats, underwent transformations at the hands of male authors. They reflected societal expectations and perceptions of gender roles, by depicting male characters as superior, dominant, and female saviors, while portraying female characters as weak, submissive, and self-denying. The works of these French writers influenced the fairy tales collected by the three fathers of the genre: Charles Perrault (late 17th century France), the Grimm brothers (early 19th century Germany), and Hans Christian Andersen

(mid-19th century Denmark), showcasing the cross-cultural nature of these stories.

The versatility of fairy tales is a crucial aspect contributing to their revival. Rooted in oral traditions, these stories have always been subject to variations and reinterpretations as they were passed down through generations. In his book *The Irresistible Fairy Tale* (2012a), the most stirring theorist on the field of fairy tales, Jack Zipes, claims that fairy tales “do not have agency. They are not alive, but they breathe and are vigorous, and as they are passed on to us through traditions of storytelling, they almost assume a life of their own” (p. 17). This adaptability has allowed fairy tales to be transformed and re-contextualized in numerous forms and formats in postmodern era. Hence, postmodern authors, filmmakers, and artists have played a crucial role in keeping fairy tales alive by crafting new retellings and adaptations. In this regard, they have breathed new life into these classical tales, by infusing them with contemporary themes, fascinating characters, and new perspectives.

In contemporary literature, there has been a growing interest in revising established narratives through the use of postmodernist approaches to create new or alternative narratives that challenge traditional ways of understanding stories and create new possibilities for interpretation. By reimagining familiar stories or creating entirely new ones, postmodern writers are questioning traditional storytelling methods and pushing literature in new and exciting directions. They analytically rewrite classical fairy tales in subversive ways to deconstruct established norms, beliefs, and ideologies. In her book *Postmodern Fairy Tales*, Cristina Bacchilega defines postmodern fairy tales as “stories that rework classic tales and tropes, distinguishing themselves from traditional tales through rewrites that refuse to obey their authority by revising and appropriating them” (1997, p. 4). For Zipes (1991), rewriting fairy tales means that the traditional narratives were thoroughly reexamined and challenged to criticize the dominant social norms and to maintain a sense of curiosity, wonder, and imaginative thinking (p. xxv).

The second wave of feminism, which began in the late 1960s and lasted through the 1970s, had a significant influence on literature in general and the revision and retelling of traditional fairy tales in particular. Feminism is owed a great deal of credit for the revival of interest in classical fairy tales. Feminist

critics and scholars, for instance, continuously question the longstanding depiction of women in literature, which frequently presents them as submissive, helpless, and reliant on male characters for their happiness. This critical examination extended to classic fairy tales, where heroines like Sleeping Beauty, Beauty, Cinderella and Snow White were seen as reinforcing traditional gender norms. In the introduction of his anthology *Don't Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales of North America and England* (1986), Jack Zipes suggests that feminist criticism of fairy tales emphasizes a positive desire for change:

[T]he criticism which deals with fairy tales has stressed the positive notion of change. That is, the criticism underscores our deep desire to change the present male-female arrangements and endeavors to demonstrate that we can raise our awareness of how fairy tales function to maintain the present arrangements, how they might be rearranged or reutilized to counter the destructive tendencies of male-dominant values. (2012b, p. 4)

For Zipes, one of the goals of feminist criticism is to raise awareness among readers and audiences about how fairy tales contribute to maintaining stereotypical gender norms and expectations. This awareness can serve as a catalyst for contemporary feminist critics, scholars and writers to deal with fairy tales in a more critical, analytical and subversive ways.

In his article "Feminist Fairy-Tale Scholarship" (2004), the critic Donald Haase rigorously claims that feminist criticisms of fairy tale initially began with Alison Lurie's dispute of the early 70's. Essentially, Alison Lurie, the Pulitzer Prize-winning American writer, had made a remarkable contribution to feminist scholarship on fairy tales by publishing her first article titled "Fairy Tale Liberation" (1970) and its sequel entitled "Witches and Fairies," (1971) in *The New York Review of Books*. In her articles, Lurie's central argument is that fairy tales are valuable because they depict strong and powerful female characters that could be found not only in the popular classic tales but also in a much larger body of lesser-known tales. Lurie further argues that fairy tales can serve as a voice for women's liberation by depicting strong and resilient female characters. She believes that fairy tales have the potential to align with feminist beliefs

because they are “one of the few sorts of classic children’s literature of which a radical feminist would approve” (cited in Haase, 2004, p. 4).

By asserting that numerous fairy tales actually promote empowering qualities, such as independence and strength, among young girls, Alison Lurie’s articles explosively sparked controversy in the field of feminist fairy tale scholarship. In response, Marcia R. Lieberman, in her article “Some Day my Prince Will Come: Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale” (1972), took issue with Lurie’s two articles by presenting an opposing viewpoint and an alternative perspective on the subject (Zipes, 2012b, p. 4; Haase, "Feminist Fairy-Tale Scholarship", 2004, p. 1). Lieberman disagrees with Lurie’s argument about the portrayal of strong female characters in fairy tales, and believes that the best-known fairy tales, such as Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and Snow White, have a greater impact on children’s acculturation than lesser-known tales. She consciously argues that these tales perpetuated gender stereotypes and served as a mechanism for female socialization. In contrast to Lurie’s viewpoint, Lieberman arguably suggests that the less-known fairy tales recorded in the field by authors, as well as Andrew Lang’s later collections, cannot be seriously considered in the study of the meaning of fairy tales to women (Haase, 2004, p. 1).

Donald Haase (2004) argues that the debate of early 1970s between Lurie and Lieberman had marked the early stages of feminist fairy-tale research and the emergence of modern fairy-tale studies. This dispute simultaneously spurred critics and scholars to dive deeper into fairy tale narratives, investigating their political and socio-historical contexts, as well as issues such as canonization and institutional control. Furthermore, the dispute led to the discovery and recovery of alternative fairy-tale narratives and the identification of the woman’s voice in fairy-tale production from the earliest documented references to the present (2). As a result, the evolution of feminist fairy-tale scholarship emerged from a simple debate over the representation of women in fairy tales and developed into a more nuanced analysis of the genre’s history, production and reception.

The feminist criticism of fairy tales during its early stages endeavors to analyze and examine the cultural and societal influences on how gender roles and identities are portrayed and perpetuated in fairy tales. Its main concern is to question whether certain gender roles and behaviors are inherent or socially constructed. Feminist scholars, in addition, explore how the depiction of female

characters in fairy tales might influence how children, especially girls, perceived themselves and their roles in society. This implied that the tales could play a major role in shaping the psycho-sexual identity of children, as it is suggested by Lieberman in the conclusion of her article: "We must consider the possibility that the classical attributes of 'femininity' found in these stories are in fact imprinted in children and reinforced by the stories themselves. Analyses of the influence of the most popular children's literature may give us an insight into some of the origins of psycho-sexual identity" (1972, p. 395).

Subsequently, after the notable dispute, most feminist scholars and critics agree with Lieberman's assertion that traditional fairy tales perpetuate inaccurate perspectives on gender roles. Accordingly, Andrea Dworkin's views, in her book *Woman Hating* (1974), echo Lieberman's argument and her analysis aligns with the broader feminist critique of traditional fairy tales. She highlights how these narratives maintain and reinforce gender stereotypes that limit women's agency and perpetuate a binary view of gender roles. Her work encourages critical examination of how cultural values and expectations are embedded in stories that have been passed down for generations (Zipes, 2012b, p. 5; Haase, 2004, p. 4). In the same vein, Karen E. Rowe, in her essay "Feminism and Fairy Tales" (1979), emphasizes the substantial role of fairy tales, mainly those with idealized romantic themes, in shaping how women perceive themselves and their relationships with men, marriage, and society (Zipes, 2012b, pp. 10-11; Haase, 2004, p. 5). Drawing on the most popular volume of 1981 *The Cinderella Complex: Women's Hidden Fear of Independence*, Colette Dowling's crucial argument is that fairy tales are not responsible for women's dependency; rather, they mirror and reinforce societal oppression of women, which causes women to internalize these attitudes. Dowling refers to this phenomenon as "The Cinderella Complex". For her, this complex is defined as a network of usually suppressed attitudes and concerns that prevent women from realizing their full intellectual and creative potential. According to Dowling, women are still waiting for external causes to change their lives, just like Cinderella was waiting for a fairy godmother to modify her circumstances (Zipes, 2012b, pp. 8-9).

These critics and others, along with the broader feminist discourse on fairy tales, put emphasis on the importance of reassessing and reimagining these

stories to mirror a more equitable and diverse understanding of gender roles and identities. Feminist fairy tale scholarship has played a role in inspiring feminist postmodern writers to engage with and revise traditional fairy tales, craftily spinning new narratives that offered alternative perspectives and empowered female characters to break free from the confines of conventional gender norms. In other words, these new retellings often transmit explicit or implicit feminist messages to confront the stereotypical fairy tales roles, by depicting unconventional female characters who become the subject of action. Moreover, these adaptations with new twist incorporate many postmodern techniques such as: intertextuality, parody self-reflexivity, fragmentation, and play with narrative structures and themes to engage with, criticize, and comment on the original tale. They, in addition, deconstruct binary opposition such as good vs. evil, beauty vs. ugliness, and reality vs. fiction, blurring the lines between these categories to create complex layers of meaning. Besides, postmodern retellings challenge the notion of a happily-ever-after ending that is prevalent in traditional fairy tales. Instead, they offer a different perspective that acknowledges that life is not always perfect, but that genuine happiness can still be attained. Among those writers who have excelled in revising, subverting, and rewriting classical fairy tales are Robert Coover and Jane Yolen in their brilliant creation of “Sleeping Beauty”.

3. Sleeping Beauty’s Representation in Jane Yolen’s *Briar Rose* and Robert Coover’s *Briar Rose*

The tale of “Sleeping Beauty” has a rich history and has been told through various versions. Although it is not extensively spread in oral tradition, the majority of its versions are drawn mostly from written sources. It first appeared in the Catalan *Frayre de Joy e Sor de Placer* (14th century), and in the French romance epic *Perceforest* (16th century) as “Troilus and Zellandine”. The story was later published by the Neapolitan writer Giambattista Basile in his *Pentamerone* as “Sun, Moon, and Talia” (1634-6). In his 1697 collection of fairy tales called *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* (*Stories or Tales of Times Past*), Charles Perrault published the version of “Sleeping Beauty” under the title of “La Belle au Bois Dormant” (Sleeping Beauty in the Wood). Two centuries later, the Brothers Grimm published a version entitled “Dornröschen” (“Briar Rose”)

in their collection of fairy tales called *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (1812-15) (*Children's and Household Tales*). The enduring popularity of the classic versions by Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm has influenced numerous adaptations of Sleeping Beauty in various art forms, and has served as a source of inspiration for postmodern literature (Zipes, 2000, p. 467).

The Brothers Grimm version of "Sleeping Beauty", titled "Dornröschen" or "Briar Rose," has a similar plot to other versions but includes some unique characteristics. The Grimm's general outline of the tale tells the story of a king and queen, who finally had a child after many years of longing, decided to celebrate the birth of their daughter by hosting a majestic feast. They invited twelve wise women, but unfortunately, they forgot to invite one of them, who happened to be an evil fairy. During the feast, the wise women bestowed gifts upon the baby princess, named Rosamund, such as beauty, wittiness, virtue, and kindness. However, the wicked fairy cursed the princess, enunciating that the princess would prick her finger on a spindle and die on her fifteenth birthday. Another fairy breaks the spell by saying that the girl would not die but will sleep for a hundred years. Despite the desperate efforts of her parents to ban all spinners and spindles from the kingdom, the girl comes across the last one. Tragically, when she reached the target age, she pricked her finger on it and fell into a deep sleep along with the entire court. Hearing about a sleeping princess, many courageous princes attempted to approach the castle, but they were snagged and killed by the thorns. After a century, a prince with good intentions discovered the secret castle; as he approached, the thorns mysteriously transformed into flowering flowers. He entered the castle and discovered the princess sleeping peacefully. He leant in and gently kissed her, overcome by her beauty. Thus, the Grimm's version of "Sleeping Beauty" ends with the princess being awakened by the prince's bravery and true love's kiss, along with the entire court and kingdom.

In earlier versions of the Sleeping Beauty tale, such as Basile's "Sun, Moon, and Talia," the awakening of the princess involves a sexual encounter. However, in Perrault's version and the Brothers Grimm's version, the awakening is depicted in a more chaste manner. In Perrault's version, the princess awakens when the prince approaches her and his proximity arouses her from sleep,

whereas in the Brothers Grimm's version the prince's kiss is portrayed as the catalyst for breaking the sleeping spell. The Grimm's variant does not include the second part featured in Basile's and Perrault's versions, in which the prince and the princess have children, who are hidden instead of killing them due to the orders of the prince's mother, the ogress (Zipes, 2000, p. 476). Both variants end with the king marrying Beauty, and they live happily ever after along with their own children. In simple words, the classical tale of "Sleeping Beauty" has been adapted and reimagined in books, plays, movies and other mediums by contemporary writers. Each author brings his/her unique perspective and introduces changes to the original story. For instance, Jane Yolen's novel *Briar Rose* (1992) and Robert Coover's novella *Briar Rose* (1997) serve not only as pioneering instances of revisiting the "Sleeping Beauty" tale but also challenge established norms and conventions inherent to traditional fairy tale structures. Both Yolen and Coover's retellings draw their primary inspiration from the classic Brothers Grimm tale "Briar Rose" ("Dornröschen") and Perrault's "Sleeping Beauty," however, my analysis will exclusively center on the Grimm's version as the original tale.

3.1. Beyond Damsel in Distress: Subversion and Female Empowerment in Jane Yolen's *Briar Rose*

Jane Yolen's postmodern novel *Briar Rose* (1992), won the annual Mythopoeic Fantasy Award for Adult Literature in 1993 and was nominated for the Nebula Award, is notable for its explicit connections to fairy tales. It uses a dual narrative structure to reimagine the story of "Sleeping Beauty" within the context of a Holocaust survivor's personal journey. It is structured into thirty three chapters, which are organized into three main sections: 'Home', 'Castle', and 'Home Again'. The novel sets the story during World War II in forests patrolled by the German army. It tells the story of a young woman, named Becca, residing in the United States during the early 1990s. Becca's childhood was filled with her grandmother Gemma's subverted version of the classic fairy tale Sleeping Beauty, referred to as "Briar Rose." Through the fairy tale, Gemma seems to be attempting to reconnect with her lost memories and relive a part of her past that she has otherwise forgotten, as she declares: "I have no memories in my head but one... a fairy tale" (Yolen, 2016, p. 233). Being curious about

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Gemma's past, Becca promised to discover the truth behind her grandmother's claim: "I am Briar Rose" (Yolen, 2016, p. 35). After Gemma's passing, Becca embarks on a journey to Poland to explore a potential connection between her grandmother, the Holocaust, and the fairy tale. During her time in Poland, Becca encounters Josef, a homosexual man who holds crucial information about Gemma's history and her fascination with Briar Rose. Known as the prince, Josef reveals that Gemma was imprisoned in the Chelmno extermination camp, where she and numerous others were confined inside a van and suffocated with exhaust fumes. A group of partisans, including Josef, discovered the mass grave and Josef managed to revive Gemma, metaphorically bestowing upon her the prince's kiss that awakens the sleeping princess. Thus, Yolen's *Briar Rose* is written as a retelling of "Sleeping Beauty" fairy tale, but with "much darker undertones" (Carpan, 2006, pp. 60-61).

In her essay entitled "How Briar Rose Became", Jane Yolen noticeably reveals her main intention in interweaving the tale of 'Sleeping Beauty' to convey the trauma of the Holocaust; she announces that:

Watching the movie *Shoah*, I'd heard about the concentration camp "Chelmno," which was set up in a *schloss*, a castle. Barbed wire surrounded the place, and people –mostly Jews- were gassed there ...and how it seemed to me to be the perfect match for the story of "Sleeping Beauty": girl/woman in a castle, wire/ briars, gassed/sleep. The Nazi Commandant/ the wicked Fairy. (Yolen, 2016, p. 12)

To explore the legacy of the Holocaust, Yolen draws on many elements of "Sleeping Beauty" to subvert and reimagine them in a more realistic and historical context. For instance, the castle in the fairy tale where Sleeping Beauty slept is a metaphor for the extermination camp at Chelmno. Yolen does not surround it with thorns so that nobody could get to the princess as in the Grimm's classical tale, but rather she uses barbed wire. The wicked fairy who curses the princess is symbolically referred to Hitler and the Nazi soldiers: "Not the bad fairy. Not the one in black with big black books and silver eagles on her hat" (Yolen, 2016, p. 19). However, the partisans who come to Gemma's aid are seen as a representation of the good fairies in the original fairy tale narrative. They mirror those who resisted the Nazi oppression and attempted to assist the

persecuted. Furthermore, Yolen's description of "the great mist" (Yolen, 2016, p. 51) that surrounds the castle alludes to the gassing of millions of Nazi victims during the war.

Essentially, on her deathbed, Gemma's whisper of "I am Briar Rose" profoundly carries connotation of a fairy tale princess, Briar Rose. For instance, Gemma's red hair, referred to in the novel as "the crown of red hair" (Yolen, 2016, p. 32), deeply solidifies this identification. On the other hand, captivated by Gemma's tale, Becca recognizes her role in revealing her grandmother's secrete, thus she becomes closely entangled with Gemma, basically becoming her double. This association transforms Becca into a version of Briar Rose with twist, but with her own unique perspective and experiences. In her retelling, Yolen represents the character of Josef Potocki as Gemma's metaphorical prince; as he is coming out of the woods with the partisans, he witnesses a group of gassed Jews among them, Gemma who is barely breathing. Eventually, the prince, Josef, successfully saves the princess, Gemma:

But by that time the girl had stopped moving, had even stopped breathing. Josef could feel her die in his arms. So he laid her down on the ground and, putting his mouth on hers, the taste of vomit bitter on his lips, he tried to give her breath ... Josef breathing into her mouth. And it was into Josef's mouth that she, at last, sputtered and coughed. (Yolen, 2016, pp. 228-29)

By presenting a revival scene that is far from romanticized, the passage questions idealized notions of love and romance prevalent in traditional fairy tales: "The prince was so astounded by her beauty that he leaned over and kissed her" (Grimm, 2014, p. 164).

To escape her tragic past and trauma, Gemma ingeniously creates an imaginary world of fairy tales in which she identifies herself with Sleeping Beauty princess. In this context, fairy tales are used by individual's to transform their trauma and suffering and find a sense of safety and belonging associated with the idea of home. In this sense, Donald Haase points out: "some adults who have experienced the violence of war, exile, and the Holocaust as children map those experiences with the overlay of the fairy-tale landscape, attempting to transform trauma through desire for the reconstituted safety of home" (2000, p. 366). For Gemma, Fairy tales serve as a therapeutic and valuable tool for coping

with and healing from trauma. In this view, Robin Mara (2007) admits that “it was the Sleeping Beauty tale that gave Gemma an identity when gassing by the Nazis seized her mind and her memory; Gemma’s tale was an effective, repressive tool to hold back the demons, allowing her to leave her horrors behind and start anew” (p. 68). Accordingly, Gemma’s creation of a fictional world populated by fairy tales serves as a psychological refuge from the harsh realities of her past. This imaginative world allows her to temporarily escape the oppression and the misery she has experienced, much like Sleeping Beauty’s the enchanted sleep. Here, Yolen demonstrates the power of storytelling and imagination in helping women to get through the darkest chapters of their lives and finding a sense of safety, solace, and belonging in the face of hardship.

It has been argued from a number of critical perspectives that traditional fairy tales were very patriarchal, with women often being portrayed as passive, obedient and helpless and male characters were usually the ones who play the role of saviors. For instance, the classical fairy tale “Briar Rose” by the Brothers Grimm widely perpetuated gender stereotypes through its portrayal of the princess as a beautiful and physically attractive, yet passive damsel and silent figure, who has no free will and simply needs a man to rescue her. The prince, on the other hand, is presented as powerful, active, savior, and assertive figure who exercises his free will and shows a bold and adventurous spirit (Leow, 2014, p. 5). However, as many postmodern feminist writers, Yolen reactively subverts gender roles embedded in traditional fairy tales and defies patriarchal power structures in her retelling, by empowering her female characters and challenging the notion of the damsel in distress. Through her two central heroines, Gemma and Becca, Yolen’s retelling of “Sleeping Beauty” efficiently claims the narrative space for women and provides a new perspective on female empowerment and resistance.

Although Yolen highlights the ways in which women were targeted during the Holocaust and were often subjected to sexual violence and other forms of gender-based violence, the character of Gemma plays a crucial role in the novel in shedding light on the empowerment and resilience of women to resist patriarchal oppression. Gemma’s character is truly remarkable in the novel, as she weaves together the tale of “Sleeping Beauty” with her own experiences as a

Holocaust survivor. Through her powerful storytelling, Gemma not only preserves her own history but also serves as a means for transmitting the collective memory of the Holocaust: “She always spoke of her past as if it were a fairy tale ... Briar Rose. You know – Sleeping Beauty” (Yolen, 2016, p. 70). Unlike the Grimm’s princess whose voice is limited and her role is reduced to a recipient of rescue, Gemma’s storytelling allows her to take control of her own narrative and assert her voice in the midst of the painful events she has faced. In a context where survivors’ voices were often repressed or overlooked, Gemma’s ability to share her story, with her granddaughters and readers, is an act of empowerment and agency. Her determination to pass on her experiences to her family and future generations emphasizes the importance of speaking out against injustice and bearing witness to historical atrocities. Moreover, Gemma’s character embodies Yolen’s broader theme of female empowerment through her ability to keep her pregnancy a secret from the guards in the concentration camp, and ultimately saving herself and her child “I am with child ... And I will not let it die” (Yolen, 2016, p. 244). From a feminist perspective, Jane Yolen successfully acknowledges the often ignored and marginalized stories of women in history by placing Gemma at the center of the narrative.

Furthermore, the novel centers around another female character called Becca, the granddaughter of Gemma. Becca is a journalist, whose profession is typically male-dominated, an attempt by the author to depict her as a strong and resilient female character. Despite being portrayed as Gemma’s double and a sort of “Sleeping Beauty”, Becca plays a powerful role in the story far from passivity and docility. She undergoes a transformative journey throughout the course of the novel. Firstly, she acts as an empathetic listener, but as events unfold, she evolves into an interpreter and detective, finally taking on the role of a storyteller. Throughout her travels to Poland, Becca exhibits the attributes of a real fairy tale heroine, suffering hardships that serve as her initiation into the horrors of the Holocaust. Along her journey, she experiences psychological growth and maturity, leading to profound revelations and self-discovery. Yolen’s deconstruction of Becca’s character through enabling her to establish her own identity aligns with Zipes’ argument about feminist fairy tales that: “the most noticeable change in the narratives concerns the heroine who actively seeks to define herself, and her self-definition determines the plot” (2012b, p. 14). By

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uncovering the truth of her grandmother's past and her own family's history, Becca successfully breaks the spell of silence and ignorance and learns that she has the power to shape her own destiny. In this context, Yolen skillfully subverts the notion of unavoidable fate, often symbolized the evil fairy in the Brothers Grimm's classical fairy tale, to replace it by contemporary assertion of free will and individual responsibility (De la Rochère, 2011, p. 405). Becca's role as a protagonist and her active involvement in the quest to uncover the truth about her grandmother's past further solidify her agency and strength as a character.

In her novel, Yolen questions not only the representation of female characters but also masculinity in traditional fairy tales. Yolen's portrayal of Josef, metaphorically the prince, is quite intriguing as it challenges and, in some instances, mocks the traditional stereotypes associated with the charming and ideal prince figure of the Brothers Grimm. At firsthand, Josef's character is not solely defined by his romantic desires or his search for a princess. Instead, he is characterized as a man of intellect and talent who was educated at Cambridge and is fluent in several languages. He is also a poet and dramatist, demonstrating his artistic side, as he is described by himself: "a Pole educated in Cambridge, a poet and playwright, a member of the minor aristocracy, a man of literate tastes, master of five languages, and a gourmet cook" (Yolen, 2016, p. 196). In this sense, His multilayered nature challenges the one-dimensional picture of princes in fairy tales, who are frequently displayed as being mainly focused on finding true love or seeking thrilling adventure. Additionally, the representation of Josef's sexuality as homosexual undermines the heteronormative portrayal of princes in classic fairy tales. The prince is frequently depicted as a heterosexual figure in classic fairy tales, rescuing and marrying the princess and exemplifying traditional gender roles. With Josef's Character, however, Yolen breaks away from the restricted representations of love and relationships in classical fairy tales by portraying Josef as homosexual. By dismantling the idealized notion of heroes and heroines found in fairy tales, Yolen successfully questions gender stereotypes that have been perpetuated for generations.

On the surface, Gemma's ending of her retelling of 'Briar Rose' appears to follow the traditional fairy tale narrative: "After she was married, she had a baby girl, even more beautiful than she. And they lived happily ever after"

(Yolen, 2016, p. 260). Akin to the Brothers Grimm's "Briar Rose", Gimma's ending ultimately presents a resolution and happy-ever-after for the characters since it ends by a wedding feast. In fact, the ending is subverted by Yolen because in reality no woman managed to escape from the extermination camp, Chelmno, alive, as it is acknowledged in the "Author's Note" by the end of the novel to apprise readers that this is a work of imaginative literature: "This is a book of fiction. All the characters are made up. Happy-ever-after is a fairy tale notion, not history. I know of no woman who escaped from Chelmno alive" (Yolen, 2016, p. 264). The juxtaposition of the happy ending within the retelling and the bitter reality of historical facts surrounding the Holocaust serve to highlight Zipes' notions about the utopian function of fairy tales. In essence, the use of the pronoun "they" suggests that the happiness mentioned at the end of the tale pertains specifically to the mother and her baby girl, not necessarily to the prince and his princess. In this context, Yolen's omission of the father in the final lines of the tale suggests that he is not a part of the ultimate picture of family's happiness, a departure from the typical fairy tale ending responsibility (De la Rochère, 2011, pp. 418-19). From a feminist perspective, the novel challenges the conventional gender roles and expectations associated with family dynamics, by accentuating the mother and the baby girl and excluding the father from the narrative. In this vein, Yollen defies the patriarchal norms where the male figure (the prince) is central, and the female character (the princess) assumes the role of a damsel in distress, seeking fulfillment solely through marriage.

3.2. Sleeping Beauty (Dis)enchanted: Fairy Tale Deconstruction in Robert Coover's *Briar Rose*

When it was initially published in 1996, American postmodern Robert Coover's *Briar Rose* was designated as a New York Times Notable book of the year. The novella is an innovative and postmodern self-reflexive reinterpretation of the traditional "Briar Rose" by the Grimm brothers and "The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood" by Charles Perrault. Coover's brilliant work is notable for its experimental and intricate variations on the traditional fairy tale and, more importantly, for bringing new layers of depth and complexity to the narrative. It is also noteworthy for its manipulation of narrative structure and the blurring of distinctions between reality, dreams, and fantasies. In *Briar Rose*, Coover

intentionally disrupts the linear and straightforward structure of the original fairy tale by deliberately introducing ambiguity concerning the authenticity of certain events, whether they are real, dreamt, or imagined. Accordingly, this outstanding work is seen as “the apotheosis of Coover’s critiques of fairy tales, a masterpiece that distills the ideas and techniques of many of Coover’s stories and myths” (Evenson, 2003, p. 231).

Coover’s brilliant reworking consists of forty-two sections told in third person in short narrative structures. The story begins in the middle, more specifically, when the princess has been sleeping for almost one hundred years and the prince has just entered the thorny briars enclosing the castle, intending to liberate Briar Rose from the enchantment. However, Sleeping Beauty is unable to awake but is dreaming of multiple princes attempting to kiss her. An aged spell-casting fairy, who appears in the princess’s dreams, amuses her with stories of other sleeping beauties. Each section is focused on and centered on one of these characters. Coover deliberately separates the sections with blanks to encourage readers to actively engage in constructing the narrative’s meaning. The story cuts into one moment of the tale in which the prince forcefully slashes through the thorny bushes, signifying the impending dissolution of the curse. This one moment in time remains constant throughout the entirety of the narrative, with both the characters and the reader being inextricably bound to it. Neither the prince nor the princess achieve their respective goals of reaching the castle and waking up.

By breaking the traditional linear fairy tale narrative structure, Coover masterfully presents the story from three different perspectives. The first is the prince’s point of view as he enters and cuts his way through the briars on a heroic journey: “He is surprised to discover how easy it is. The branches part like thighs, the silky petals caress his cheeks. His drawn sword is stained, not with blood, but with dew and pollen. Yet another inflated legend. He has undertaken this great adventure ...” (Coover, 1996, p. 1). This initial scene is indicative of the sexual undertones that pervade the tale, with the rescue of the Sleeping Beauty being directly linked to the notion of sexual conquest (Redies, 2004, p. 14). However, the second point of view is that of the princess who dreams of being rescued from a curse wrought by a spindle prick, through the agency of a

handsome prince who will bestow upon her a life-saving kiss. Finally, there's the old crone, "the bad fairy, who is also the good fairy" (Coover, 1996, p. 80) that sets the curse in motion, spinning tales to entertain the sleeping princess for a century. The plot alternates between these three points of view repeatedly, allowing each character to examine their hopes and anxieties. Coover's use of alternating viewpoints in *Briar Rose*, as a distinctive postmodern narrative technique, serves to subvert and deconstruct traditional fairy tale storytelling. In other words, by telling the story from the perspectives of three different characters: Beauty, the handsome prince, and the old fairy, the novel seamlessly adds layers of intricacy and subjectivity to the narrative.

Coover's adaptation of "Briar Rose" goes deeply into the Princess's search for identity and her struggle with memory loss. Rose repeatedly questions the fairy about her identity, plagued by her complete lack of memory: "Who am I?... What am I? Why this curse of an endless stupor and its plague of kissing suitors? ... (I have no memory!)" (Coover, 1996, p. 7). In this context, the princess's struggle with her fragmented memory and persistent pursuit of her identity epitomize the difficult challenge that numerous women encounter as they strive to define themselves and reconcile their past with their present. In response, the fairy answers the princess that she is:

That still creature, waiting silently for your hapless prey. You are this window, webbed in spellbinding death, this unvisited corridor, that hidden spiral staircase to the forbidden tower, the secret room at the top where pain begins. You are all things dangerous and inviolate. You are she who has renounced the natural functions, she who invades the dreams of the innocent, she who harbors wild forces and so defines and provokes the heroic, and yet you are the magical bride, of all good the bell and flower, she through whom all glory is to be won, love known, the root out of which all need germinates. You are she about whom the poets have written: The rose and thorn, the smile and tear:/The burden of all life's song is here ... You are Beauty. She says: When others ask, who am I, what am I, you are the measure and warrant of their answers. Rest easy, my child. You are Briar Rose. Your prince will come. (Coover, 1996, p. 8)

The fairy's description presents the princess as a paradoxical person, embodying both danger and vulnerability. Rose personifies the duality of being both predator

and prey, existing in a state of entwined strength and fragility. This is consistent with the feminist viewpoint that women are frequently bound by societal roles that compel them to navigate a delicate balance between empowerment and subordination.

Rose has been imbued with a sense of eroticism that fosters a tendency towards passivity, and it will be quite challenging for her to deprive herself of the victim role. It is in her very state of helplessness that she exerts a remarkable degree of empowerment, as she has the ability to command desire (Gupta, 2007, p. 10). The various versions of "Sleeping Beauty" told by the fairy to Rose are all unsatisfactory, distressing, or even terrifying. Rose yearns for narratives where the princes come to her bedside, filled with excitement and reverence towards her enthralling beauty, while witnessing her ability to seduce them. In diving into the mental world of the princess, Coover employs metaphors centered around the concepts of dreaming and sleep. Specifically, these metaphors are utilized to explore the princess's desires, anxieties, and relationship with her own identity. Accordingly, Jaroslav Kusnír claims that "dreaming becomes a symbolic expression of unfulfilled desires of any kind, one of the most important of which is the desire for physical, sexual love – that is, a desire to live a real, not a symbolic life" (Kusnír, 2004, p. 44). The Princess's dreams are portrayed as a way to express complex emotions and desires that might be difficult to articulate directly: 'SHE DREAMS, AS SHE HAS OFTEN DREAMT, OF ABANDONMENT and betrayal, of lost hope, of the self gone astray from the body, the body forsaking the unlikely self' (Coover, 1996, p. 2). Similar to Rebecca's desires, Yolen's protagonist, to uncover the truth about her grandmother's past and to preserve her memory, Coover's heroine experiences unfulfilled desires, including the desire for physical and sexual love in her dreams:

Her true prince has come at last, just as promised! He is lean and strong with flowing locks, just a little hair around his snout and dirt under his nails ... She sleeps still, eyes closed, and yet she sees him as he bends toward her, brushing her breast with one paw – hand, rather – and easing her thighs apart with the other, his eyes aglow with a transcendental love. It is happening! It is really happening! she thinks as he lowers his subtle

weight upon her as a fur coverlet might be laid upon a featherbed. The only thing unusual about her awakening is that it is taking place in the family chapel and she is stretched out in her silken chemise on the wooden altar, itself draped for the occasion in fine damask. (Coover, 1996, p. 16)

Through these dreams, Coover highlights the complexities of female desire that are often disregarded or marginalized in conventional fairy tales. From a feminist perspective, Rose's dreams can be interpreted as a destabilization of the conventional expectations of fairy tales, which often depict female characters as passive and dependent on a prince to rescue them. Rather than conforming to this gender stereotype, Rose's dreams serve as a manifestation of her desires and anxieties, providing a glimpse into her inner world beyond her submissive role.

Besides representing the character of the fairy as a blend of archetypal female figures such as the bad crone, the good fairy, the witch, and the benevolent maternal character, she plays the role of the female storyteller as Gemma, the grandmother character in Jane Yolen's novel *Briar Rose*. For instance, Gemma weaves together the tale of "Sleeping Beauty" and her life as a Holocaust survivor to eventually form a large part of her granddaughter's personal growth and psychological development. However, Coover's fairy tells the princess diverse versions of "Sleeping Beauty" by keeping the main plot to amuse her in her enchanted sleep throughout the course of the story. In his presentation of the wise and wicked fairy as one character, Coover provocatively challenges traditional narrative conventions by strategically blurring the lines between good and bad.

The trapped prince's thoughts, characterized by his false sense of progress in breaking through the thorn hedge, mirror Rose's dreams about her rescue. Just as the prince is repeatedly deceived by his perception of advancement, Rose is caught in a repetitive cycle where she awakens after a kiss, only to find herself still in sleep. On one hand, Rose's repeated dreams symbolize the constraints that cultural and societal standards impose on women, trapping them within specific boundaries. The inability to break free from this cycle reflects the difficulty women frequently experience in transcending preconceived gender expectations. On the other hand, Coover's deliberate decision to incorporate these dreams within the novella ultimately endows Rose with a newfound sense of agency, by giving her a voice beyond the confines of her enchanted sleep. The repetition of

these dream sequences highlights the cyclical nature of fairy tales and storytelling in general, and Coover brilliantly exploits this technique to essentially disrupt the traditional fairy tale structure, revealing its repetitive and sometimes illusory aspects.

Unlike the brothers Grimm's prince, Yolen and Coover's heroic male figures are subject to deconstruction and metafictional analysis in their respective works. In Coover's story, the prince perceives himself as the one who will awaken Beauty, a role that corresponds to the typical prince figure in fairy tales. However, as he hears echoes of similar lines made by former princes who attempted and failed at the same duty, he begins to feel the weight of this role. His cynicism extends to his own role in the plot, as he begins to question the validity of his mission and his chances of success:

Still, he wishes he could remember more about who or what set him off on this adventure, and how it is he knows that his commitment and courage are so required. It is almost as though his questing – which is probably not even 'his' at all, but rather a something out there in the world beyond this brambly arena into which he has been absorbed, in the way that an idea sucks up thought – were inventing him, from scratch as it were (he is not without his lighter virtues): is this what it means 'to make one's name'? (Coover, 1996, p. 15)

The passage reveals how the structure and mythmaking of storytelling exert control over the character, preventing him from expressing his individuality and limiting his agency (Redies, 2004, p. 15). By the end of Coover's book, whether or not the prince attains access to the castle holds no significance: the very disenchantment which serves as the defining feature of his quest has been subjected into question. His desire is to establish a reputation, that is, "to make, at last, his name" (Coover, 1996, p. 1) and to become an agent. However, he must exist within the boundaries of male activity, female passivity, and their amalgamation in marriage in order to adhere to the set narrative structure. Unlike the Grimm's prince who is reduced to a stereotype and never possesses an identity or such consciousness, Coover's prince relinquishes his fairytale hero status by realizing the nature of his actions (Redies, 2004, p. 16). From this

perspective, like Yolen, Coover seamlessly challenges the assumption that fairy tale male protagonists must always possess agency and control.

Coover's novella adeptly disrupts the traditional narrative structure and confronts the illusion of "happily ever after" ending, thereby emphasizing the perpetual nature of storytelling itself. Unlike the Grimm's ending which includes the notion of "the happily ever after": "The prince was so astounded by her beauty that he leaned over and kissed her. Immediately after the kiss, she woke up ... Then the wedding of the prince with Briar Rose was celebrated in great splendor, and they lived happily to the end of their days" (Grimm, 2014, p. 164), Coover's retelling has neither an actual story nor a precise ending, as it is acknowledged by the old crone when she tells Rose that: "You will never awaken because the story you were in no longer exists" (Coover, 1996, p. 65). This quote suggests that Rose's dreams and expectations of fulfilling the classical happy ending, being awakened by the prince's kiss, are merely futile and illusory. According to Kusnir, "the Princess does not want an imaginary, but a real physical and bodily Prince who could fulfill her erotic desires that contradicts the original fairy tale's intent and meaning. Thus Briar Rose becomes a parodied version of her original prototype" (2004, p. 48). Through the repetition of Rose's dreams and the cyclic nature of the events, the idea that the traditional fairy tale structure fails to provide a conclusive ending, definitive resolution, or awakening from the dream-like state. In this respect, by the end of the book, all the characters are still trapped: the princess is imprisoned in her dreams, while the prince is entangled by thorny briars, and the fairy is constrained by her retelling of different versions of "Sleeping Beauty".

4.CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study demonstrates how both postmodern writers Jane Yolen and Robert Coover took the task of rewriting and reimagining the traditional "Sleeping Beauty" narrative, challenging long-established gender roles and giving voice to female characters who have, for centuries, exemplified passivity and dependency. Through the lens of feminist fairy tale scholarship, the study reveals the profound and subversive power inherent in Coover's novella *Briar Rose* and Yolen's novel *Briar Rose*. These reconstructions of "Sleeping Beauty" are more than mere retellings; they, in fact, present narratives that

deeply resonate with the ongoing feminist discourse. Instead of portraying women solely as passive, self-sacrificial and submissive characters, Yolen and Coover successfully create new narratives out of traditional ones that showcase women's agency, strength, sexual desire and independence. They explicitly strive to construct storylines that question the image of the "heroic" prince charming and the assumption that women are always in need of being rescued by a masculine figure. Accordingly, through both male and female perspectives, this article shows how literature has the potential to function as a powerful catalyst for change, capable of redefining cultural narratives and challenging deeply established norms and narratives.

Jane Yolen's notable talent lies in her ability to ingeniously weave the enchanting world of fairy tales with the horrific realities of the Holocaust. She masterfully incorporates historical facts, drawing on actual occurrences and accounts to add authenticity to her retelling. Yolen's aim behind this infusion is to humanize the victims and survivors of the Holocaust and to give a voice to women who suffered during that dark period of history, ensuring that their stories are not forgotten and that their voices are heard. She heroically asserts the importance of women's voices, perspectives, and experiences to celebrate the agency, empowerment, and self-determination of her reimagined female characters. However, Robert Coover's remarkable talent lies in his ability to skillfully disrupt the traditional fairy tale structure, injecting it with postmodern ambiguity and complexity. His retelling, with its non-linear storytelling, his playful narrative techniques, and his unconventional characters, serves as a compelling commentary on the power dynamics and gender stereotypes inherent in traditional fairy tales. Through *Briar Rose*, Coover harshly criticizes the suppressed and constrained women's sexuality and femininity through the portrayal of a female character who overtly articulates her desire to engage in sexual intercourse with men.

Hence, the article will make a valuable contribution to the ongoing discourse about the impact of feminist criticism on traditional fairy tales and their subsequent retellings. It highlights the enduring relevance of these classical tales and their capacity to adapt to contemporary contexts and values.

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