Who’s Wicked Now? The Stepmother as Fairy-Tale Heroine

The wicked stepmother is a staple of the popular fairy-tale tradition and arguably its most famous villain. While she wasn’t always wicked or always a stepmother in folklore tradition, the wicked stepmother can be found in a variety of well-known Western fairy tales. The Brothers Grimm feature some of the best-known stepmothers, such as those in “Cinderella” (ATU 510A), “Snow White” (ATU 709), and “Hansel and Gretel” (ATU 327A) as well as lesser-known stepmothers, such as those in “The Six Swans” (ATU 450) and “The Juniper Tree” (ATU 720), all of whom are wicked. Walt Disney took the Grimms’ wicked stepmother and gave her an unforgettable face in his 1937 film, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. Snow White’s stepmother stands out for her terrifying image as the wicked queen. Since then, the wicked stepmother has become a stock figure, a fairy-tale type that invokes a vivid image at the mention of her role—so much so that stepmothers in general have had to fight against their fairy-tale reflections. A quick Internet search for the term “wicked stepmother” will produce hundreds of websites dedicated to the plight of stepmothers fighting against the “wicked” moniker they have inherited from fairy tales.

Robert Coover’s 2004 novel, Stepmother, takes on the wicked stepmother figure of fairy-tale tradition and offers a more complex depiction of the character. The plot of Coover’s novel is quite simple; the novel, however, is far from simple. Stepmother, the title character and the novel’s protagonist, is trying to save her daughter’s life. Her unnamed daughter has been found guilty of an unnamed crime against the court of Reaper’s Woods and is to be executed.
Stepmother breaks her daughter out of prison, and the two of them flee to the woods. Stepmother hides her daughter and, once the daughter is recaptured, tries various schemes to prevent, or at least to delay, the planned execution. She tries appealing to the Reaper, her arch enemy and the authority in the woods, with magic, sex, and reason, but she fails. Her daughter is executed, and Stepmother seeks vengeance. The execution of her daughter and Stepmother’s subsequent revenge is not a new plot to Stepmother, as she repeats it over and again with each of her daughters, the many heroines of fairy-tale tradition:

How many I’ve seen go this way, daughters, stepdaughters, whatever—some just turn up at my door, I’m never quite sure whose they are or where they come from—but I know where they go: to be drowned, hung, stoned, beheaded, burned at the stake, impaled, torn apart, shot, put to the sword, boiled in oil, dragged down the street in barrels studded on the inside with nails or nailed into barrels with holes drilled in them and rolled into the river. Their going always sickens me and the deep self-righteous laughter of their executioners causes the bile to rise, and for a time thereafter I unleash a storm of hell, or at least what’s in my meager power to raise, and so do my beautiful wild daughters, it’s a kind of violent mourning, and so they come down on us again and more daughters are caught up in what the Reaper calls the noble toils of justice and thus we keep the cycle going, rolling along through this timeless time like those tumbling nail-studded barrels. (1–2)

Stepmother explains that there is nothing new in what we are about to read; she has experienced it all before and will experience it all again. But she still has to try to save her daughter, and as readers we are left with the impression that she will keep trying with each new daughter’s appearance.

The impetus of the novel is summed up in its second sentence, narrated by Stepmother: “my poor desperate daughter, her head is locked on one thing and one thing only: how to escape her inescapable fate” (1). Throughout the novel, Stepmother and other characters struggle against their predetermined fairy-tale functions. Despite recognizing the “inescapability” of their fates, they still try to change the cycle of events they know will unfold by manipulating fairy-tale patterns to their advantage. Stepmother, too, is engaged “in what the Reaper calls the noble toils of justice”; as an adversary, she challenges the Reaper and his values. Unlike the Reaper, Stepmother is not motivated by a larger cause but works to save lives, one daughter at a time. And yet her focused actions have a wider impact in that by trying to save the lives of her daughters, she begins to undo the master narratives that make her daughters victims. In attempting to change the rules, she shows that they are not “natural.” There is no evidence in the text
that she hopes she will succeed, but she still fights the master narrative because it “sickens” her and someone has to.

In this postmodern retelling of fairy-tale conventions, Coover challenges the static, predetermined roles of fairy-tale characters. His characters express dissatisfaction with their positions in the narrative and a frustration with the predetermined roles they enact. This creates a tension between the prescribed roles of popularized, conventional fairy-tale characters like the wicked stepmother and a postmodern rescripting of those roles. Coover's retelling—wherein traditional fairy-tale figures are conflated into a few characters, fairy tales collide in Reaper's Woods, and characters are aware of their own irremovable place in a fairy-tale cycle—works to unmake recognizable plots and motifs of well-known fairy tales. This collision among Coover's retelling of the fairy-tale genre and the figure of the stepmother and what readers know and expect about fairy-tale stepmothers creates an intertextual space that allows for the exploration of further possibilities for fairy tales in contemporary Western societies and, as Cristina Bacchilega puts it in her review of *Stepmother*, “denaturalize[s] their hold on our imaginations” (198).

Coover's conflation of fairy-tale conventions in the novel *Stepmother* rewrites female roles in popularized fairy tales by complicating the situations and motivations of the female characters and creating alternate paths to the end of the story. While his characters do not escape their predetermined fates and continue to enact the roles for which they are named, Coover's *Stepmother* explodes the standard notions of what a fairy-tale heroine is by revealing an (embedded) under-story that complicates and contrasts the popular fairy tales we have come to identify with the genre. *Stepmother* encourages identification with a traditional villain through shifting focalization and unmasks the limitations of one-dimensional gendered character types by collapsing the mainstays of the fairy-tale genre on a diegetic level. In doing so, *Stepmother* challenges the authority of popular fairy-tale narrative patterns. These fairy-tale patterns—perpetuated by the reproduction of a fairy-tale “canon” contrived from a few select stories from Charles Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen, and solidified by Walt Disney—are so pervasive that they dominate the possibilities for fairy tales in Western popular culture and do not allow other stories to take root. Additionally, *Stepmother* performs the struggle undertaken by feminist writers who try to reshape the gendered narrative patterns entrenched within the genre without losing the wonder that makes these stories the fairy tales to which we keep returning.
The Making of a Wicked Stepmother

By using well-known figures and motifs, and not inventing wholly new ones, Coover forces a comparison between his Stepmother and her cruel foremothers. Coover collapses and dismantles a variety of tales, tale types, motifs, and functions in *Stepmother*, challenging not only the popular conception of fairy tales in Western culture but also the structuralist base of fairy-tale and folklore studies. He does not change the actions of stepmothers who have been previously identified as villains (by Vladimir Propp) or as cruel (by Stith Thompson). Instead, he shifts the focalization and the motivations for these actions, thus recontextualizing specific acts by cruel stepmothers to allow for meaning that is not possible in Propp’s rigid and gendered functions or Thompson’s limiting motifs. For example, when Stepmother sends the “kind” stepdaughter on an impossible task in an embedded recounting of tale type ATU 480, The Kind and the Unkind Girls (a tale indentified under the cruel stepmother motif, S31), she does so as an act of protection. The “kind” stepdaughter is annoying and sanctimonious, and Stepmother is afraid she is going to hurt the stepdaughter. To avoid this, Stepmother devises ways “to get her out from underfoot” (23). The girl returns home “coughing up gold pieces,” a curse courtesy of Stepmother’s rivals (23). When the “unkind” daughter duplicates the task, she does so without Stepmother’s blessing and in order to stand up for her mother. From Stepmother’s point of view, she is protecting her “kind” stepdaughter by removing her from the house, not seeking to harm her. And though the “unkind” daughter is cursed to spit toads, it is not a punishment for her and Stepmother’s greed (as it is often explained), but it is in reaction to her actively defending her mother. The actions of Stepmother remain consistent with those identified in the tale type, but in changing the context of those actions Coover challenges the traditional classifications and understandings of the fairy tale.

This generic self-consciousness relies on the reader’s familiarity with the genre for any critique to work. Merja Makinen, in “Theorizing Fairy-Tale Fiction, Reading Jeanette Winterson,” asserts that “[t]he fairy tale, as a well-known, culturally familiar body of texts with an almost canonical status . . . is a ripe site for both reduplication and rewriting, for pastiche and for parody, within a broadening of the concept of literary historical metafiction” (148). And in Cathy Lynn Preston’s article “Disrupting the Boundaries of Genre and Gender: Postmodernism and the Fairy Tale,” Preston argues that “[i]n postmodernity the ‘stuff’ of fairy tales exists as fragments (princess, frog, slipper, commodity relations in a marriage market) in the nebulous realm that we might most simply identify as cultural knowledge” (210). I would also add “wicked stepmother” to Preston’s list of examples. Coover’s rewriting of the stepmother figure depends
on the reader’s familiarity with the popularized stepmother character and the associated narrative conventions. Preston’s concept of “fragment” is particularly useful for analyzing Stepmother because Coover does not work solely from the “cruel stepmother” motif, but instead combines a variety of other stepmother motifs, stereotypes, and assumptions. Motifs are the smallest recognizable units of meaning in the tales cataloged by folklorists, but fragments take their meaning from a wider cultural context. The term “fragment” is more flexible than “motif” because it is not tied to specific academic designations. Using “fragment,” then, redirects the unit’s meaning by breaking up the motifs into smaller parts or placing them in different contexts, thereby destabilizing motifs and opening the unit (stepmother) to multiple possible meanings. As a fairy-tale fragment, whose reach is wider than the folklore designation of “cruel stepmother,” the wicked stepmother exists outside of any specific tale. She is a stock character who is evil and always has been. This cultural knowledge of the character creates the ground on which Coover’s rewriting stands.

Of course, the villains we know and love as wicked stepmothers were not always stepmothers. As both Maria Tatar and Marina Warner, among others, have pointed out, the Brothers Grimm made editorial changes to various stories from one edition of their collection to the next. These editorial changes led to the absent mother and the wicked stepmother becoming staples of the fairy-tale genre (Tatar 36–37; Warner 210–13). The mothers of Snow White and Hansel and Gretel had been the first villains in their stories, siding with the father over the children and attempting to kill the children they viewed as threats. As the Grimms increased the violence in their tales in order to make them more didactic, they changed these wicked mothers into stepmothers, effectively killing off the good mothers to make room for the villains. In The Hard Facts of the Grimms’ Fairy Tales, Tatar states, “Wilhelm Grimm recognized that most children (along with those who read to them) find the idea of wicked stepmothers easier to tolerate than that of cruel mothers” (37). While Tatar’s explanation of the appearance of the stepmother focuses on the text and editorial choices, where one wicked person is substituted for another, Bruno Bettelheim’s Freudian interpretation in Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales provides a psychological reason for Wilhelm Grimm’s editorial choices. Bettelheim is fixated on the psychic and emotional development of a child who splits the mother into two people. Bettelheim suggests that “[t]he fantasy of the wicked stepmother not only preserves the good mother intact, it also prevents having to feel guilty about one’s angry thoughts and wishes about her—a guilt which would seriously interfere with the good relation to Mother” (69). The figure of the mother is split into two roles in fairy tales, says Bettelheim, as a way to provide children with a means of handling the troubling emotion of anger toward a beloved parent.
Bettelheim’s application of Freudian theory, however, does not take into account the editorial history of the tale, nor does he recognize the literary features of the fairy-tale genre. Warner, in *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*, argues that the popularity of Bettelheim’s application of Freudian theory to fairy tales has done irreparable damage to the genre and to motherhood:

The bad mother has become an inevitable, even required ingredient in fantasy, and hatred of her a legitimate, applauded stratagem of psychic survival. Bettelheim’s theory has contributed to the continuing absence of good mothers from fairy tales in all kinds of media, and to a dangerous degree which itself mirrors current prejudices and reinforces them. His argument, and its tremendous diffusion and widespread acceptance, have effaced from memory the historical reasons for woman’s cruelty within the home and have made such behaviour seem natural, even intrinsic to the mother-child relationship. It has even helped to ratify the expectation of strife as healthy and the resulting hatred as therapeutic. (212–13)

Warner’s problem with Bettelheim’s reading of the stepmother figure is relevant because of its two-pronged attack. She not only recognizes what the reading has done to the genre by reinforcing negative female stereotypes, but she also sees the damage possible by taking a fictional genre and using it as a treatment for psychological and social discord. Had Bettelheim’s theory not been so popular, perhaps the wicked stepmother would not be embraced as the fairy-tale villain.

In this case the psychoanalytic approach neglects both the editorial and the historical origins of the stepmother. Both Tatar and Warner point out that a straightforward psychoanalytic reading of the wicked stepmother figure is incomplete, as, in addition to the Grimms’ editorial practices, it neglects sociohistorical cultural context (Tatar 49–50; Warner 212–14). Both scholars refer to the high rates of mortality for mothers during childbirth before medical intervention was commonly practiced: the stepmother was a common figure in history. Arguing that Bettelheim’s approach “leeches history out of the fairy tale” (213), Warner suggests that the cruelty of stepmothers found in fairy tales has a historical origin in addition to the editorial one. With remarriage the second wife could easily find herself competing with her stepchildren for the very resources for which she married (Warner 213). Thus, cruelty to her new husband’s biological children would be a way to ensure survival for her own biological children. Warner also suggests that the villainy of the stepmother figure is partially possible due to “psychoanalytical and historical interpreters of fairy
tales usually enter[ing] stories like ‘Cinderella,’ ‘Snow White,’ or ‘Beauty and the Beast’ from the point of the view of the protagonist” (214). As Warner points out, popular fairy tales rarely involve first-person narration (215).

**Unmaking the “Wicked” Stepmother**

Coover’s use of first-person narration, with the stepmother telling her own experience of events, encourages reader identification with Stepmother. In referring to Coover’s rewriting of fairy tales in his collection *Pricksongs & Descants*, Jackson I. Cope states, “Coover in these stories accepts and preserves the integrity of the narrative history presented him in his folk sources. The significant difference is in the place of the narrator” (19). Coover employs the same technique in *Stepmother*; he shifts the narrator out of extradiegetic narration and into multiple narrative positions for the stories being told. Stepmother narrates four out of fourteen sections (including the first and last sections), and the extradiegetic narration is focalized through other characters and an external narrator. In *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies*, Cristina Bacchilega explains that “an external or impersonal narrator whose straightforward statements carry no explicit mark of human perspective—gender, class, or individuality . . . present[s] the narrator’s vision as the only possible one” (34). Statements such as “there was,” ‘there are,’ [and] ‘she was,’” when made by an extradiegetic narrator, present information as objective knowledge or “fact” (Bacchilega 34). In this way, extradiegetic narration discourages questioning of the narrative voice, and “naturalizes” the “social conventions” presented by that voice (Bacchilega 34, 35). First-person narration, on the other hand, acknowledges the subjectivity of the narrative position. Rather than presenting a single external narrator that functions as the moral authority for the tale, moral judgment shifts between Stepmother and the external narrator.

Stephen Benson, in “The Late Fairy Tales of Robert Coover,” describes the voices of *Stepmother*—Stepmother herself and the extradiegetic narrator—as “dense, elaborately loaded and knowing,” voices that are “freighted with knowledge and tradition” (123). The narrating voices are fully entrenched in fairy-tale tradition and so carry with them the authority of that tradition. Coover provides Stepmother with not only a voice, but with a voice recognizable as authoritative in fairy-tale tradition. Thus the reader is able to both identify with Stepmother because of her first-person account, which diminishes the distance between character and reader in the popular tales, and recognize that voice as imbued with the authority expected of a traditional extradiegetic narrator.
This inclusion of Stepmother as narrator makes it difficult to simply characterize her as wicked. In telling her own story, she provides motivation and context for her actions, thus questioning traditional interpretations of the same actions rendered in popular tales as “wicked,” or “cruel” as Stith Thompson’s Motif-Index would have it. This challenge provokes the question, Who decides that the stepmother is wicked? The context in which a story is told is just as important as plot and can allow for a more complex reading than critics like Bettelheim provide. Coover avoids a single interpretation of Stepmother’s character and actions by shifting narration and focalization, but Stepmother never has total control over the story, as her inability to change it demonstrates.

However, aligning the reader with Stepmother through narration and focalization encourages the reader’s identification with a traditional villain. In doing so Coover breaks down one of the barriers that constructs and reconstructs the stepmother figure as wicked.

Postmodern fairy tales that are self-conscious of genre, using and abusing the fairy-tale form to comment on how the genre creates gender narratives without simply reproducing or reversing them, offer rich possibilities for both postmodernists and feminists wishing to reclaim a much-loved tradition for viable use in a culture at odds with the master narratives that popular fairy tales can reinforce. Specifically in Stepmother, characters express awareness of the narrative patterns and motifs they inhabit and a dissatisfaction with their fates. In the second section the external narrator explains that in Reaper’s Woods, “nature . . . is all” and “character is character and subject to its proper punishment; tampering with endings can disturb the forest’s delicate balance” (11). This proclamation sets up a problem: within the fairy-tale realm, the narrator states, characters are defined by their unchangeable or stereotypical characterizations and roles—as many of their names demonstrate—and the endings of their stories cannot be altered. This proclamation is contested by Stepmother, her relationship to the Reaper, and the antics of the other characters identified by their appellation.

Coover challenges the hold of popular fairy-tale conventions (demonstrated in the aforementioned proclamation by the narrator) by reducing many popular fairy-tale characters to their roles and then exposing the limitations of those roles. Coover conflates well-known fairy-tale stepmothers into one character, though Stepmother is complex enough not to be an archetype or stereotype. Likewise, he blends all fairy-tale maidens—“daughters, stepdaughters, whatever”—into a single role where biological relationship between Stepmother and child is less important than Stepmother’s caregiving attitude toward the enumerable girls who need her help (1). Coover’s conflation of fairy-tale characters is not unique to his novel but is a part of long-standing fairy-tale tradition. As noted earlier, the Brothers Grimm changed mothers into
stepmothers to make the violence perpetuated by the maternal villains in their tales more palatable, and Warner has noted that in French the word for “stepmother is the same as the word for mother-in-law—*belle-mère*” (218). Warner describes how mothers, stepmothers, and mothers-in-law present the same threat and occupy the same role in the fairy tales they inhabit, an observation also made by Tatar. For Warner and Tatar, female villains are anti-mothers, functioning as consumers rather than nurturers. While in Coover the characters’ roles define who they are and what they can do, his Stepmother is no anti-mother. Neither is she merely “good.” Coover avoids reducing her to a flat fairy-tale character by writing her as one who tries to work against the predetermined pattern of events, and by allowing her to narrate. Stepmother is not a wicked cannibal bent on her daughter’s destruction, and although she is doomed to fail, she does try to save all of her daughters.

Many of the characters in *Stepmother* are, like the title character, named for the roles they play. I’ve mentioned how Coover’s characters are conflations of multiple fairy-tale figures reduced to their role in the plot. Naming the characters for their roles restricts their available actions and allows for no possibility for development. Even Stepmother, the character who comes closest to breaking the fairy tale’s hold on her life by working to thwart established plot lines, is only capable of being a stepmother figure; she did not become the stepmother figure after being something else. Stepmother explains, “I was born a long-nosed toothless crone with warts and buboes and hair on my chin and dugs that hang to my knees, or it seems that I was, for I have no memories of happier, more delicate times” (25). Unlike other postmodern retellings that conflate characters so that Beauty (of “Beauty and the Beast,” ATU 425C) ages into Granny (of “Little Red Riding Hood,” ATU 333), as in Coover’s “The Door,” characters in *Stepmother* do not have the possibility of transcending their appellations.

Initially Stepmother identifies herself as a witch: “I’m a witch, I should be able to do something. And it’s true, I do have a few tricks, though in general it’s more useful to be thought a witch than to be one” (2). She suggests here that characterization is more powerful than the acts committed by the character. After being rescued from prison, Stepmother’s daughter says, “I feel trapped by life itself, mama. I want more than this” (20). She articulates the problem of the novel: “she is who she is” (84). The fairy-tale characterizations are a trap and do not allow for the possibility of a richer existence. Women are able to be princesses or witches but not much else. Stepmother is a conflation of the powerful female characters with agency, and they are mostly, if not always, dangerous in the fairy-tale realm. Coover shows that the one-dimensional roles relegate to fairy-tale characters are frustrating by utilizing the metafictional technique of creating characters who are aware of their existence in a fictional story.
As a part of his larger critique of traditional authorities, Coover, however, does not only show the unsatisfying nature of female roles in fairy tales, but also demonstrates that the misogyny of popular fairy tales restricts representations of masculinity. Princes are less charming than they are criminal in Reaper’s Woods. Coover collapses many of the misogynistic motifs of fairy tales into the characters of the princes. The wickedest characters are, arguably, the two oldest prince brothers who rape and murder maidens, mutilate their “simple” brother, and plot his demise. But even they are acting their parts, repeating the same fairy-tale plots of princes and brothers in the popular tales. Coover’s version is more explicit about the rapes and murders, but the scenes recalled by the brothers invoke “The Six Swans” (ATU 451), “Brother and Sister” (ATU 450), and “Rapunzel” (ATU 310), all Brothers Grimm stories of maidens bedded, and sometimes wedded, after being found by prince or king. The prince brothers hope to encounter “naked or near-naked maidens” they can rescue (41). They are aware of the damsel-in-distress plot and plan their time accordingly. Likewise, they recognize that though “their royal line is favored, . . . clever elder brothers are not, being often ill-treated by fortune and the way things are” (42). The brothers’ malicious behavior is all part of the misogynistic patterns established by popular fairy tales. They cannot act differently, because they are written in this way. They may seek to use the patterns to their advantage as they plot to use Stepmother’s daughter to rid themselves of their youngest brother, who is competition for the crown, but they are just fulfilling their princely roles; like Stepmother, they know they will not succeed.

Coover underscores some of the gender inequality in popular fairy tales by describing the hypocrisy of how different-gendered characters’ actions are valued: “Rudeness here will get a girl in trouble quicker than anything. Boys can get away with rape, incest, theft, torture, murder, for them it’s just part of growing up, but a girl need only be discourteous to have the world fall upon her like a dropped millstone,” says Stepmother (4). As the daughter’s crime for which she has been imprisoned is unnamed, the reader does not know why she has been incarcerated, although ultimately it does not matter, because she, like her predecessors, is doomed to be the victim, just as the princes are fated to never ascend the crown. But in contrast to the princes’ plot, it is precisely her agency that dooms her.

Makinen explains that part of the task of feminists working with the fairy-tale genre is to establish a tradition where women are not relegated to the victim/villain dichotomy where passivity is virtuous and activity villainous: “feminist theorists point to the patriarchal inscriptions of the best known tales such as ‘Cinderella’ and ‘Sleeping Beauty,’ with their vaunting of feminine passivity and rejection of feminine activity as wicked or monstrous. Feminist fairy-tale historians argue for women’s active roles as tellers of stories and for tales that
celebrate active female protagonists and feminine wisdom while acknowledging that these tales have been largely suppressed by the predominantly male compilers” (148–49). Feminist retellings of fairy tales in literature and popular culture often try to subvert what have been perceived as narrowly defined roles for women in the popular tales. Rather than creating “new” feminist fairy tales, these retellings seek to reclaim the figures of women in the better-known tales in which women are constructed in less than flattering ways: from passive objects of male desire to powerfully evil figures working from selfish motivations.

While Coover takes on the task of disassociating “wicked” from “stepmother,” he does not try to make a wholly virtuous character. Instead, Coover leaves his stepmother a witch who tries to destroy her fellow characters, shifting not her action, but its context: “[Stepmother’s] wickedness is beyond dispute, nor does she dispute it herself” (15). Stepmother has done all the things we expect of witches—spells, murder, cruelty, selfishness—but “she has also been wrongly blamed” for all evil in the wood, whether it be imaginary or not (15). She is kind to her daughter, but that kindness is also a part of her larger struggle against naturalized, traditional authority. Coover’s vision of the wicked stepmother is not a role reversal into a good stepmother in order to make her into a heroine. He develops Stepmother as a character, exploring her motivation and ambition rather than changing her into an opposite type. Thus Coover creates a new story on old patterns by dismantling the caricature of the wicked stepmother.

**Who’s Wicked Now?**

If the stepmother is no longer simply “wicked” and no longer the villain of the story, who is the villain? In the case of the novel *Stepmother*, none of the characters snugly fits into the role of “villain.” What is left, then, is the plot and its relationship to pattern. The wicked elements of the story are the popularized, conventional fairy-tale patterns that have been reproduced and naturalized as authoritative in Western popular culture and fix the characters of *Stepmother* into well-defined roles and plots. Coover unmakes these patterns in three primary ways: (1) he reveals that the patterns have a stranglehold on which conventions are recognized as making up the genre in popular culture; (2) he challenges the authority of those patterns to have that hold by showing that they can be contested and are not inevitable; and (3) he offers a way to contest those patterns by staging these conflicts from within the stories.

Coover’s deconstruction of fairy-tale narratives relies on his impeding of those narratives. His use of nontraditional fairy-tale qualities, such as first-person narration, complex and self-aware characters, and metanarrative critiques, breaks genre boundaries and expands the possibilities for fairy tales as a genre in
a postmodern and feminist culture. Coover’s work in *Stepmother* is similar to that in his earlier novel, *Briar Rose*, which suspends the “Sleeping Beauty” story (ATU 410) before the princess is awakened. In both novels characters are reduced to functions, plots are unchangeable, and patterns are limiting. But unlike the characters of *Briar Rose*, Stepmother actively tries to change the patterns. The characters in *Briar Rose* do express frustration with the reiteration of pattern and even a desire to change those patterns, but they are not able to do anything to change their situations (only inhabit different variants of the same tale type). Stepmother, too, is dissatisfied with her lot, but she does not accept that it is unchangeable. *Stepmother*, in offering possibilities for the genre, changes Coover’s own pattern of deconstructing fairy tales. He does not reconstruct a new ideal for the genre, but lays it bare as a genre in flux, one that can change.

Coover does not make the fairy tale into something else, but shows it for what it is: a complex genre that authoritatively disseminates narratives about how we construct our lives. He does not show us how to use fairy tales, but shows how the fairy-tale genre is being used. He reveals that the authority of the narratives and the authors to whom we attribute those narratives are not as stable and as natural as they purport to be. Coover deconstructs the popularized, conventional patterns of the Western fairy-tale genre to reveal them as patterns without the authority that we as authors, readers, and popularizers give them. The authority of the convention comes not from the tales or even their authors, but from the people who assume them to be authoritative.

As such, it is only fitting that the protagonist’s greatest enemy is the Reaper, the character who thrives on patterns and is intent on reproducing them: “[The Reaper] does not disturb the way things are and is angered by those who do; thus his unending conflicts with Stepmother, who would hang the lot and burn the forest down if she could, and all the world beyond it” (13). By maintaining order the Reaper preserves his authority in Reaper’s Woods, named after him for his constant presence. He is the authority because the other characters recognize him as the authority. In the final pages of the novel, the conflict between Stepmother and the Reaper comes to a head, and they discuss the inescapability of plot and Stepmother’s desire to change it:

I [Stepmother] would like my daughter to be set free. I can arrange for her immediate disappearance, never to return, so she will never trouble you or the forest again.

Alas, madam, I [Reaper] cannot do that. She has been adjudged wicked and must be rightfully punished.

Others have gotten away with more. Send the barrel rolling without her. No one will ever know.
You and I would know. Things will happen as they must. (87–88)

Stepmother suggests removing her daughter from the situation altogether in such a way as to maintain the appearance of fidelity to the established pattern. The Reaper, however, argues that the appearance of fidelity is not fidelity.

This simple exchange contains the crux of the novel’s problem: the Reaper argues that patterns do not change, because they cannot change. This rhetorical move employs discourse that naturalizes the status quo. Altering the established patterns, even subtly, undoes their authority and jeopardizes the Reaper’s position of power. Stepmother, too, recognizes the power in the minute changes, but, unlike the Reaper, she welcomes the rupture small changes can enable. Once one daughter escapes, after all, the pattern is broken and the possibility for further escapes exists. The immediate change that she seeks results in the saving of a life. She argues that making this change will have no real effect on the woods, as “no one will ever know” about it. But of course the reader recognizes this for the rhetoric it is and sees the magnitude of puncturing the Reaper’s authority: the reader will know. While the Reaper upholds the stability of patterns and the impossibility of altering the popularized, conventional patterns, Stepmother and the novel argue that the possibility for change is there and that, though dangerous, it is desirable. In Stepmother’s fight for justice, as opposed to the Reaper’s adherence to punishment, she argues for the moral right of that change. But, paradoxically, by trying to work within the pattern and appealing to the Reaper, Stepmother reaffirms his authority.

The struggle between Stepmother and the Reaper enacts that of postmodern feminist re-tellers of fairy tales and the popularized fairy-tale tradition they are writing against. The Reaper’s actions to impose order on the woods recall the editorial decisions made by the Grimms to Christianize folktales and make them more moral and proper behavioral models for children. Although the Grimms began to edit the tales for a younger audience as the popularity of their work grew, their original intention was not to produce didactic tales for children. Instead their goal was a scholarly one: to preserve German folk traditions for adult audiences (Tatar 11; Haase 10; Zipes, “Once There Were” xxiv). Like the Grimms’ initial purpose of collecting folktales to preserve German folk culture, the Reaper seeks “[t]he revelation of some kind of primeval and holy truth, he would say, the telltale echo of ancestral reminiscences” (Coover 14).

In seeking this revelation and to impose order, the Reaper introduced the Holy Mother, Stepmother’s other enemy, to his woods. The Holy Mother is a Virgin Mary figure representing Christianity and the figure of Mary in tales like the Grimms’ “The Virgin Mary’s Child” (ATU 710). In this tale Mary commands
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a girl not to enter a forbidden room, much like in “Bluebeard” (ATU 312), and then punishes the girl when she does so by banishing her from heaven, removing her ability to speak, and later stealing her children so that the girl is accused of cannibalism and is to be burned at the stake until she confesses her sins. Like the Reaper, Holy Mother’s emphasis is on obedience and punishment. Stepmother refers to the Holy Mother as the Ogress, recalling another staple of female fairy-tale villains. In tales like “Sleeping Beauty” (ATU 410), the mother-in-law, who is sometimes identified as an Ogress, attempts to eat her grandchildren. In her dual naming of Holy Mother/Ogress, Coover conflation two traits often associated with wicked or cruel stepmothers—punishment and cannibalism. She is offered as a counter-character to Stepmother, embodying a recognizably cruel mother for Stepmother to be contrasted against as a potentially good mother—one who wants to nurture and help her children rather than consuming and punishing them as popularized, conventional fairy tales would have her do.

The Holy Mother/Ogress is, like the Mary of fairy tales, a character who guards souls, not lives; collects confessions of sins rather than offers aid; and “mak[es] one feel guilty merely for having been alive” (84). While certainly not a positive portrayal of Christianity, the Holy Mother is introduced as a character the Reaper brings to the forest to possibly civilize the fairy-tale characters (12). Thus aligned with official religion and folklore, the enemies of Stepmother represent the authority of the popular tales against which Coover is writing and the means by which the authoritative narratives are naturalized.

Coover’s most recent work, then, continues to provide a useful metaphor for the retelling and study of retellings of fairy tales. As a stand-in for the canonical male authority that is responsible for compiling and editing the most popular Western tales, the Reaper is, as the silent pun in his name implies, Grimm. Metaphorically, this establishes a struggle between the Reaper, a representative of the popularized, conventional patterns associated with the fairy-tale genre and the authoritative male traditions that employ and disseminate those patterns, and Stepmother, a character aligned with feminist and postmodern writers who revolt against the patterns, trying to unmake them and resist the tendency to repeat what has come before. The novel Stepmother enacts the challenges that arise in trying to rewrite the fairy-tale genre: reproducing-patriarchal and heteronormative ideology, relying on male-authored and -edited stories and ignoring the contributions of women to the genre, granting authority to an already narrowly defined definition of fairy tales and the genre, and perpetuating the misconceptions that fairy tales are simple stories for children. The tension implicit in these challenges stems from the necessity of using the popular, conventional tales as fodder in order for new tales to be recognized as retellings or fairy tales.

Tales that adhere to the established patterns can only do so much. Step-
mother is never able to truly break free from the plot set in motion in the first lines of the novel. She makes a lot of noise and shatters a few of her enemies, but the cycle in which she spins remains unbroken. She is doomed to repeat the scenario again, watching her daughters be executed to the delight of the folk and seek her revenge for their deaths in a “kind of violent mourning,” again and again, “keep[ing] the cycle going” (Coover 2). Writers of fairy tales today who are dissatisfied with the roles of women projected by the seemingly endless reproduction of a small canon of popular tales are struggling, like Stepmother, with the narrative patterns that came before them. How does one rewrite a fairy tale to remove and critique the ideological values associated with the genre and still be writing a fairy tale?

The future of postmodern feminist fairy tales lies in stories that can rewrite the genre without totally unmaking it. Jack Zipes, in *Relentless Progress: The Reconfiguration of Children’s Literature, Fairy Tales, and Storytelling*, explains that contemporary writing of fairy tales by women does not seek to construct a new, feminist fairy-tale canon: “Instead of focusing directly on gender issues and radicalizing the canon, women writers nowadays tend to depict baffled and distressed women and men caught in a maize [sic] of absurd situations. In doing this, they are endeavoring to unravel the causes of their predicaments and use narrative strategies that both reflect the degeneration of communication and are somewhat degenerative themselves” (130). This, I believe, is true of Coover’s work as well. Coover’s novel does not reveal liberated women and strong heroines in opposition to the popular tales that are the fodder for his novel; however, by using narrative strategies that show how carefully scripted gender roles are unsatisfying and detrimental in and beyond the world of narration, Coover’s novel does feminist work, even though his critique of misogyny is part of his larger critique of the authority of authors and genre.

Coover’s construction of Stepmother exhibits how similar the most popular fairy tales in Western culture are by how seemingly effortlessly they are collapsed into their roles. In making the characters aware of their ultimate fates, Coover gives his characters, well, character. The princes, for example, though repugnant, are more complex than their popular predecessors—they have motive for the rapes and murder they commit and are nevertheless clever in their manipulation. The stories never reach a level of realism, as Coover of course is not attempting realism, but they are more interesting as characters because they are provided with motivation and agency. The plots remain stable, but the details and distortions that Coover supplies enrich the fairy-tale genre he is parodying. The possibility of evolution here lies not with the characters in Coover’s novel, but with the reader. The characters are bound by their roles, and as they struggle to change their predicaments, they are only further embittered by the trappings of the fairy tale. The reader, however, is free to understand the characters in a
new light—traditional heroes are rendered less gallant, victims are availed of agency, and villains are humanized. As Brian Evenson argues in Understanding Robert Coover, "By clearing a space for his readers, [Coover] allows them to move into the freedom that they always have but which they sometimes are unable to perceive" (22). The characters are trapped by the plot, but the reader is shown how complex fairy tales can be and is led to question the authority of the popularized conventions. The reader is provided with a way to reimagine the genre.

Though Stepmother is clearly a postmodern novel, it also is a fairy tale. It contains all the recognizable traits of the fairy-tale genre and then plays with them. The novel does not abandon fairy-tale patterns in remaking the genre, but instead shows possibilities for those patterns. Coover's work reminds us that fairy tales are not static monoliths. Though the patterns may appear to be stable, there is room for play. Near the end of the novel, when confronted with Stepmother's plot to save her daughter from execution by preventing the Reaper, a fixture at all executions, from attending the event, the Reaper says, "Not all legends are true" (89). When the Reaper tells this to Stepmother, he is explaining that though the pattern is for him to be at all executions, it is not a causal relationship nor does it hold some essential truth about how executions happen. Therein lies the future of the genre; fairy tales as they have been canonized are not "true." Just because a narrative pattern is pervasive does not mean it is essential to the genre of fairy tales. Patterns can be broken, and the plot can continue. Writers can rewrite the popular fairy tale and still write fairy tales, and their heroines need not walk the same paths as their foremothers in order to reach the story's happy ending.

Notes

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1. Stith Thompson's Motif-Index of Folk-Literature identifies several motifs associated with stepmothers, and although most of the motifs are worded to suggest the stepmother acts in opposition to the desires of the hero(ine), clearly aligning her with Propp's villain, only one is identified as "cruel" (S31). However, "Cruel stepmother" is a large entry with sixteen tale types associated with it.

2. While Coover certainly tackles Propp's functions and Thompson's motifs in his novel, he is also working with the popularized conception of the stepmother figure as wicked, and it is this popular understanding of the character that I examine in this article. I refer to the stepmother figure throughout as "wicked," rather than "cruel," to avoid confusing the popularized wicked stepmother with the more diverse cruel stepmother that is specific to folklore studies.

3. For an analysis of Briar Rose, see Sünje Redies, "Return with New Complexities: Robert Coover's Briar Rose," and Jaroslav Kusnir, “Subversion of Myths: High and Low Cultures in Donald Barthelme’s Snow White and Robert Coover’s Briar Rose.”
The Stepmother as Fairy-Tale Heroine

Works Cited


