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**MÁSTER EN ESTUDIOS LITERARIOS Y CULTURALES INGLESES Y SU
PROYECCIÓN SOCIAL**

**Altered Worlds: Fairy Tales Revisions in Helen Oyeyemi's
works**

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this work is to delve into the revision of fairy tales in contemporary literature and prove their ability to reflect on relevant current social issues, such as gender violence and its portrayal in fiction. The research will be carried out through the analysis of three selected novels by Helen Oyeyemi: *Mr. Fox* (2011), *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014) and *Gingerbread* (2018). This thesis will be conducted from a feminist perspective, while also applying intersectionality theory and considering Oyeyemi's novels postmodern works. Therefore, the work of theorists from Gender Studies and experts on the field of fairy tales, like Jack Zipes, Maria Tatar and Cristina Bacchilega will be used to uncover the topics presented in Oyeyemi's works.

The works chosen are illustrative of the contemporary retelling phenomenon for their inclusion of complex romantic or family relationships conditioned by social status, race and gender, the prominence given to non-stereotypical female characters and the recognition of present struggles like immigration and the formation of identity. Oyeyemi relates past and present concerns while presenting alternative models for our diverse globalised society.

After the first introductory section of the work, a chapter on the revision of fairy tales will follow. The origin of fairy tales will be explored, as well as their role in present times, reflecting on the reasons why the genre has survived and evolved considerably throughout history. Then, the core of the thesis will be divided into three subsections, each of them devoted to one of Oyeyemi's novels, comparing it to the fairy tales they revisit and analysing the most relevant themes they emphasise. To conclude, final conclusions on the work of the author will be reached by examining Oyeyemi's success in making fairy tales relevant for contemporary society.

Keywords: fairy tales, retellings, Helen Oyeyemi, feminism, intersectionality

RESUMEN

El objetivo principal de este trabajo es profundizar en la revisión de los cuentos de hadas en la literatura contemporánea y demostrar su capacidad para reflexionar sobre temas sociales relevantes en la actualidad, como la violencia de género y su representación en la ficción. La investigación se llevará a cabo a través del análisis de tres novelas seleccionadas de Helen Oyeyemi: *Mr. Fox* (2011), *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014) y *Gingerbead* (2018). Este trabajo se realizará desde una perspectiva feminista, aplicando a su vez la teoría de la interseccionalidad y considerando las novelas de Oyeyemi trabajos postmodernos. Por lo tanto, se empleará el trabajo de teóricos de Estudios de Género y expertos en el campo de los cuentos de hadas, como Jack Zipes, Maria Tatar y Cristina Bacchilega, para así descubrir los temas presentados en las obras de Oyeyemi.

Las obras escogidas son representativas del fenómeno *retelling* por su inclusión de relaciones románticas o familiares complejas, condicionadas por el estatus social, la raza y el género, la importancia dada a personajes femeninos no estereotipados y el reconocimiento de dificultades actuales como la inmigración y la formación de la identidad. Oyeyemi relaciona preocupaciones del pasado y el presente mientras que presenta modelos alternativos para nuestra diversa, globalizada sociedad.

Tras la primera sección introductoria del trabajo, le seguirá un capítulo acerca de la revisión de los cuentos de hadas. Se explorará el origen de los cuentos de hadas, además de su papel en la actualidad, reflexionando sobre los motivos por los que este género ha sobrevivido y evolucionado de forma considerable a través de la historia. Después, el cuerpo principal del trabajo se dividirá en tres subsecciones, cada una de ellas dedicada a una de las novelas de Oyeyemi, comparándolas con los cuentos de hadas que revisitan y analizando los temas más relevantes que enfatizan. Por último, se alcanzarán conclusiones finales sobre el trabajo de la autora examinando cómo Oyeyemi triunfa al hacer que los cuentos de hadas tengan relevancia en la sociedad contemporánea.

Palabras clave: cuentos de hadas, retellings, Helen Oyeyemi, feminismo, interseccionalidad

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1. Introduction

“Tales are marks that leave traces of the human struggle for immortality. Tales are human marks invested with desire.” (Jack Zipes, “The Changing Function of the Fairy Tale”)

Fairy tales have been present in my life for as long as I can remember. Being introduced to the works of Charles Perrault and Hans Christian Andersen among others at a young age, these stories meant my first contact with literature. Since then, I have grown from a child eagerly waiting for a new bedtime story every night to an adult who appreciates fairy tales as a source of inspiration, an endless and prolific material to experiment with, and even a tool for change when it comes to social denounces.

Telling stories has always been part of human nature, a process which first fulfilled the need to make sense of the world and the cycle of life. Then, this knowledge could be recorded and passed to the following generations. Storytelling was also deeply rooted in our desire to be remembered, which facilitated the spread of common values and developed a sense of community. Most fairy tales could be read as cautionary tales, providing lessons for children, such as the consequences of trusting strangers and disobeying their parents. Fairy tales, despite their usual association with happy endings and magical settings, may also hide the darkest sides of humankind, with jealous and wicked stepmothers, parents who abandon or abuse their children without remorse and the inclusion of gory scenes out of the scariest nightmares. The fact that they can depict such ambivalence may be one of the reasons why they still resonate, centuries after their creation, with children and adults alike.

Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, fairy tales have experienced an unprecedented revival thanks to the many adaptations to other media, such as cinematic ones. These derivative works, especially the celebrated Disney animated films, have helped to create a shared collective imagination, infiltrating tales into all forms of popular culture. Many of these adaptations, nevertheless, tone down the original violent nature of some of the fairy tales, for instance those belonging to the Grimms’ brothers’ collections. In contrast, in literature, retellings which present new versions of fairy tales may or may not retain the tone of the original ones, but a revision of their values is almost always implicit.

Contemporary writers often deconstruct traditional tales, by breaking archetypes, choosing new points of views and exposing damaging visions of masculinities and femininities, as well as revisiting simplistic reductions of human relationships which may be

present in some tales. The production of fairy tales retellings means generating new possibilities, achieving fairer representation in terms of gender, race, social class and sexuality, as well as other aspects. These revisions do not only highlight values that were embedded in the tales and are still valuable for our present society, but interpret texts according to current visions, inscribing new concerns into them.

1.1. Hypothesis and Objectives

The purpose of this study is to explore the revision of fairy tales in contemporary literature and how they work as a mirror of society, reflecting on relevant issues such as gender violence, immigration, and the construction of identity among others. Although the rewriting of fairy tales implies a process of deconstruction, leading to inevitable changes, the use of tradition as a basis for all these alterations is equally inescapable, as Jack Zipes explains:

But what distinguishes the great writers and storytellers is that they write and tell with a conscious effort to grab hold of tradition as if it were a piece of clay and to mold it and remold it to see what they can make out of it for the present. They don't view tradition as iron-clad, static, or settled, but as supple and changeable. Nothing is inanimate in their hands and mouths. They are animators, breathing life into all things and all beings. They don't worship the past and tradition, but demand that the past and tradition justify themselves in the present. In turn, they ask that their remolding of the past and tradition be questioned. (*Why Fairy Tales Stick* 241)

Therefore, in order to analyse the relevance of the fairy tale in the contemporary world, it will be fundamental to consider its evolution from being originally regarded as children's literature to becoming a genre open to transformation. Authors can experiment with both content and form in retellings, that is, literary pieces written based on a traditional fairy tale, considering the point of view of a secondary character, presenting a different ending or locating it into a new context, among endless possibilities. In a way, retellings are marked by contradictions: they are easily approachable due to the familiarity produced by the source material, yet they defy the readers' expectation by subverting classical archetypes and plots.

The work of Helen Oyeyemi will be the case study of this thesis. It is my aim to examine the significance of fairy tales in her novels *Mr. Fox* (2011), *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014) and *Gingerbread* (2018) and analyse their remarkable portrayal of society and the complex

human relationships established in it, conditioned by social status, race and gender. As Arthur Franks points out “stories not only contribute to the making of our narrative selves but also weave the threads of social relationships and make life social” (qtd. in Zipes, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale* 17). Setting well-known tales such as “Bluebeard” or “Hansel & Gretel” in the 20th and 21st centuries, Oyeyemi relates past and present concerns and exposes the darker sides of fairy tales, challenging previous social conventions on beauty or romantic relationships and presenting alternative models.

To study the issues presented in Oyeyemi’s work, I will also be considering the role of postmodernism as an approach that recovers new meanings on old fairy tales, as Cristina Bacchilega points out: “As literary texts, cartoons, movies, musicals, or soap operas, postmodern fairy tales reactivate the wonder tale's "magic" or mythopoeic qualities by providing new readings of it, thereby generating unexploited or forgotten possibilities from its repetition” (*Postmodern Fairy Tales* 22).

In conclusion, in this thesis I will focus on Helen Oyeyemi’s novels *Mr. Fox* (2011), *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014) and *Gingerbread* (2018), considering them postmodern works which connect tradition and modernity through experimentation and deconstruct the fairy tales they are based on. I intend to prove the prevalence of the fairy tale in contemporary settings thanks to these revisions, which depict current social issues, such as race or gender struggles, and expose them. In addition, the impact of Oyeyemi’s background and her fusion of European fairy tales and African folklore will be regarded as a way to break from previous retellings.

1.2. State of the Art

Like fairy tales themselves, academic studies focusing on them have evolved throughout the centuries. As precursors of this field of study, research on folklore progressed slowly until it became a discipline worth to be examined. Zipes argues that the 19th century marked the starting point of folklore studies, facilitated by the social and cultural context of the times, with “struggles to form nation-states while transforming absolutism and constitutional monarchy” (Zipes, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale* 105). In this changing European society, folklore started to prove its usefulness, as material applicable to the present:

Many members of this class who called themselves folklorists or, more broadly, “scientific men and women” unearthed a usable past which had been hidden by the rapid material transformation of the present. [...] Folklore and folklife became keywords in a new scientific

awareness of the past which would, in turn, furnish the emergent social order. (Bronner qtd. in Zipes, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale* 105)

In the mid-19th century, the Grimm Brothers considered folk tales essential to unite the German nation and deemed research on an unexploited subject equally vital for such endeavour:

Our fatherland is still filled with this wealth of material all over the country that our honest ancestors planted for us, and that, despite the mockery and derision heaped upon it, continues to live unaware of its own hidden beauty and carries within it its own unquenchable source. Our literature, history, and language cannot seriously be understood in their old and true origins without doing more exact research on this material. (Grimm qtd. in Zipes, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale* 106)

Throughout the 20th century, fairy tales studies varied in their scope. For instance, some studies aimed only to label fairy tales based on their characteristics, such as “the Aarne-Thompson tale-type catalog” (Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick* 129), while others aimed to discover what characteristics prevailed in fairy tales. On this matter, Vladimir Propp published one of the most relevant studies on folk and fairy tales: *The Morphology of the Folk Tale* (1928). Although he centred his analysis on “the Russian wonder tale” and its structure, Propp’s study served to understand “the constant components of a tale that are the acts of a character and necessary for driving the action forward” (Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick* 49).

It was the 1970s when literary studies and criticism on fairy tales reached its peak, experimenting an explosion of retellings as well, accelerated by advancements in society such as “the 1968 movement and the second wave of feminism” (Joosen 4). One of the works which is considered to have prompted subsequent research on fairy tales is Bruno Bettelheim’s *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (1976). As a psychoanalytic study of fairy tales, Bettelheim’s work started “the academic discussion of the fairy tale’s role in children’s development and education” (Joosen 124). Other disciplines and perspectives began to be applied to the study of fairy tales too, such as feminist criticism. With *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar inaugurated a new mode of reading which unveiled “a model for feminine rebellion” hidden in Grimms’ fairy tales (Joosen 7). Since the 1970s and 1980s feminist readings of fairy tales and retellings have continued with authors like Marina Warner. In *From the Beast to the*

Blonde (1994), Warner explored the role women adopted both as storytellers and keepers of traditional tales, and also as protagonists of fairy tales.

Along with Warner, Maria Tatar and other fairy tale scholars, Jack Zipes must be highlighted as one of the main voices in the academic study of fairy tales. With an extensive career and dozens of published works on the topic, some of his most significant contributions to research are *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* (2006), *Why Fairy Tales Stick* (2006) and *The Irresistible Fairy Tale* (2012) among many others. In his works, Zipes explores the social and cultural dimension of fairy tales, delving into their evolution and relation to folklore, analysing the reasons for their permanence throughout the centuries and their revision in retellings and adaptations. Like Zipes, Cristina Bacchilega and Vanessa Joosen offer a contemporary vision of fairy tales and their derivative works. Bacchilega's *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies* (1997), focuses on postmodern revisions of fairy tales, such as "Snow White" and "Little Red Riding Hood" and the work of authors like Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood. Similarly, Joosen considers the intersection between postmodern retellings and literary criticism in her work *Critical & Creative Perspectives on Fairy Tales: An Intertextual Dialogue between Fairy-Tale Scholarship and Postmodern Retellings* (2011).

As it can be seen, studies of fairy tales continue to prevail in relation to contemporary literature. In the case of Helen Oyeyemi, the focus of study in this thesis, she has already been academically studied in works like Chloe Buckley's and Sarah Ilott's *Telling it Slant. Critical Approaches to Helen Oyeyemi* (2017). The chapters focus on issues present on Oyeyemi's work, ranging from fantastic and gothic elements to intersectionality and the connection between beauty and race. Other articles concerned with the topics to be examined are: "Snow White and the Trickster: Race and Genre in Helen Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird*" (2016), by Kimberly J. Lau, Beauty Bragg's "Racial Identification, Diaspora Subjectivity, and Black Consciousness in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and Helen Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird*" (2017) and "Bluebeard" versus black British women's writing" (2020), by Alexandra J. Sanchez. These three authors have considered *Mr. Fox* and *Boy, Snow, Bird* novels which subvert patriarchal notions present in classical fairy tales. While Sanchez focuses on the intertextuality present in *Mr. Fox* and Oyeyemi's use of metafiction, Lau and Bragg are more concerned about how Oyeyemi integrates the European fairy tale tradition with African folklore. This thesis aims to contribute to these studies by recognising Oyeyemi's fusion of approaches and topics that make her stand as an author portraying

current European diverse society. Due to the lack of research on the novel *Gingerbread*, it is also my intention to interpret it according to academic analysis.

1.3. Methodology

The type of research conducted in this work is a qualitative one, aiming to analyse the revision of fairy tales in contemporary literature and their representation of society struggles. By examining Helen Oyeyemi's three selected novels, the topics of identity, race, gender violence and family and romantic relationships will be explored. With this thesis, I will try to demonstrate the relevance of fairy tales in today's world and their possible role as tools for social critique.

Therefore, the primary sources for this thesis are the novels *Mr. Fox* (2011), *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014) and *Gingerbread* (2018), and the fairy tales they revisit: "Bluebeard" "Snow White", "Hansel and Gretel", compiled in *The Complete Fairy Tales* (Perrault and Betts) and *Grimms' Fairy Stories* (Grimm and Grimm). On the other hand, the secondary sources include works of well-known scholars and critics like Jack Zipes, Maria Tatar and Christina Bacchilega. Due to the intersectional nature of Oyeyemi's novels and the themes she tackles, I will also be considering the works of authors focusing on intersectionality and gender studies.

The first part of the thesis revolves around the revision of fairy tales, examining the proliferation of retellings and their explosion in the late 20th century and the early 21st, how it is manifested and the reasons why such phenomenon is still taking place. The following part is the core of the thesis, in which I will analyse the figure of Helen Oyeyemi and the novels I have selected. First, *Mr. Fox* (2011) will be analysed as a retelling of the "Bluebeard" fairy tale, a novel addressing the portrayal of violence against women in literature and reflecting on writing and literary canon. Then, I will focus on *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014), set in the 1950s, which employs topics and characters from "Snow White", such as the figure of the wicked stepmother, and depicts the struggle with the identity of a white-passing mixed-race family. Finally, in *Gingerbread* (2018), one of Oyeyemi's latest novels, elements of both "Hansel & Gretel" will be identified, in connection with class exploitation and the topic of immigration, with three family generations in their search for a stable home.

1.4. Theoretical Framework

This study will be mainly based on the work of prominent scholars who have theorised about fairy tales, such as Jack Zipes. His books *Why Fairy Tales Stick* (2006) and *The Irresistible Fairy Tale: The Cultural and Social History of a Genre* (2012) provide an extensive outline of the evolution of the genre and its impact on society across centuries, as well as a needed reflection on the prevalence and subversion of the fairy tale. When analysing the rewriting of fairy tales in Oyeyemi's work, one of the main approaches that will be used is postmodernism, as theorised by Linda Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988). The following works will also be useful in the analysis of the novels: Cristina Bacchilega's *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies* (1997), Jessica Tiffin's *Marvelous Geometry: Narrative and Metafiction in Modern Fairy Tale* (2009) and Vanessa Joosen's *Critical and Creative Perspective on Fairy Tales* (2011), . Postmodernism is an indispensable approach to understand the deconstruction present in Oyeyemi's novels, since it has been key to reevaluate traditional fairy tales and provide new visions of them. In words of Bacchilega:

Other postmodern tales expose the fairy tale's complicity with the "exhausted" forms and ideologies of traditional Western narrative, rewriting the tale of magic in order to question and re-create the rules of narrative production, especially as such rules contribute to naturalizing subjectivity and gender. Still other tales re-place or relocate the fairy tale to multiply its performance potential and denaturalize its institutionalized power. In every case, though, these postmodern transformations do not exploit the fairy tale's magic simply to make the spell work, but rather to unmake some of its workings. (*Postmodern Fairy Tales* 23)

A second and equally important approach to unveil Oyeyemi's main concerns is gender studies. Some of the general sources to be used are Jane Pilcher's and Imelda Whelehan's *Fifty Key Concepts In Gender Studies* (2004) and *Introduction To Women, Gender, Sexuality Studies* (2017), by Miliann Kang, Donovan Lessard, Laura Heston and Sonny Nordmaken. While some of the sources used may not explicitly belong to gender studies, most of the authors included in this thesis employ a feminist lens in their examination of the objects of study. I consider that applying this perspective on the analysis of fairy tales is fundamental to discover how identity is constructed in relation to gender and how impactful these representations can be for girls and women:

A close examination of the treatment of girls and women in fairy tales reveals certain patterns which are keenly interesting not only in themselves, but also as material which has undoubtedly played a major contribution in forming the sexual role concept of children, and in suggesting to them the limitations that are imposed by sex upon a person's chances of success in various endeavors. Is now being questioned whether those traits that have been characterized as feminine have a biological or a cultural basis: discarding the assumptions of the past, we are asking what is inherent in our nature, and what has become ours through the gentle but forcible process of acculturation. (Lieberman 384)

In relation to a feminist approach, I believe that the chosen novels provide models of female collaboration that are a product of 'new' femininities and third-wave feminism. This wave is said to have its origin in the 1990s, rejecting the "too exclusively white and middle class" views of second-wave feminism, advocating for a global perspective instead (Pilcher and Whelehan 169). Pilcher and Whelehan also remark that third-wave feminism has not originated only in academia but seems to be "powerfully shaped by popular culture, particularly music, television, film and literature" (170). Therefore, this theory may be suitable for literary analysis, as with it "it is possible to approach popular culture simultaneously as a site of pleasure and an object of critique" (Budgeon 280).

Due to the many diverse topics intertwined in Helen Oyeyemi's works, an intersectional approach will be applied to their analysis, since intersectionality, as Leslie McCall argues, deals with "the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations" (1771). The concept of intersectionality was created by Kimberlé Crenshaw to provide a method of analysis which comprised several aspects at the same time:

Within intersectional frameworks, race, class, gender, sexuality, age, ability, and other aspects of identity are considered mutually constitutive; that is, people experience these multiple aspects of identity simultaneously and the meanings of different aspects of identity are shaped by one another. In other words, notions of gender and the way a person's gender is interpreted by others are always impacted by notions of race and the way that person's race is interpreted. (Kang et al. 24)

It would be pointless then, for example, to examine gender as an isolated issue, considering that Oyeyemi, a Black author herself, explores it in relation to race and the influences they both have in the construction of identity. As Stephanie Shields explains, "gender must be understood in the context of power relations embedded in social identities"

(301). Oyeyemi's characters, especially those who come from mixed backgrounds, can only be explained by the complex intersection of factors that determine their position in society. For instance, being a black migrant, lower class woman, or a young girl, whose white-passing appearance enables her to enjoy the privileges of whiteness.

Additionally, I will also consider the connection of these topics with immigration and the creation of a sense of belonging. Due to Oyeyemi's ethnical background, regarding her works as postcolonial ones is inescapable. Postcolonial studies aim to analyse "texts produced outside of Western Europe in former colonies" as well as reject "the Eurocentricity of literary studies in the West" (Jay 22). Contemporary literature, like our current society, has been marked by globalisation, a process that has led to an "interest in difference, connected as it is to the study of the minority, multicultural, postcolonial, and transnational literatures" (Jay 25). Taking fairy tales as a point of departure, Oyeyemi enriches originally Western tales with her ambivalent position between European and African traditions, claiming both as spaces she may inhabit.

2. Revisiting the fairy tale

The origin of fairy tales can be traced back to oral storytelling practices, in the same way that common knowledge was passed from one generation to the next. For this reason, some authors consider the fairy tale a “borderline” genre, since it “bears the traces of orality, folkloric tradition, and socio-cultural performance” (Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales* 3). Although it is nearly impossible to determine when they exactly appeared and how they evolved thousands of years ago, Zipes points out that only those oral tales that “continued to have cultural significance were imitated and passed on” (*Why Fairy Tales Stick* 13), highlighting the early medieval period as the time when they started to become a body of works, their spread facilitated thanks to the creation of the printing press.

Later in history, Andrew Teverson spots another marking point, the introduction of the French term “Conte de Fée”, not considered a fairy tale yet, in England via the 1699 translation of Marie-Catherine Le Jumel de Barneville’s work, *Tales of the Fairies* (56). Similarly, Zipes emphasizes the dominance of French texts in the 17th and 18th centuries, mostly due to the importance of female writers, known as *conteuses* and *salonnières*, as well as some male authors like Perrault (*The Irresistible Fairy Tale* 34). By the end of the 18th century, children belonging to the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie had already become familiar with the fairy tale, while children from lower classes could only access them through hearing oral wonder tales (Zipes, *The Changing Function of Fairy Tales* 17).

The fairy tale as we know it today established itself as a literary genre primarily thanks to the Grimm brothers and the Danish author Hans Christian Andersen, among others. As Teverson explains, after the French Revolution the dominance of this country in fairy-tale narratives shifted to Germany, where a phenomenon towards the return to their roots and the recovery of popular traditional tales was starting to appear (99). For this reason, Jacob and Wilhem Grimm began to classify and collect different tales until they published the first volume of these in 1812, including 86 tales, and a second volume two years later, adding 70 more stories (Teverson 103-104). Like Zipes claims, what the Grimm brothers achieved was “not the culmination of the oral and literary traditions, but it did bring together representative tales in a style and ideology that suited middle-class taste” (*Why Fairy Tales Stick* 84). In the same century, Andersen followed the model that had been popularised by the Grimms and put together his own series of tales, but, unlike the German compilers, he did create most tales, instead of basing them on already existing stories, and started publishing them in the 1830s and 1840s (Teverson 115).

In the mid-19th century, another phenomenon was taking place in England with authors like George MacDonald and Oscar Wilde, who “used the fairy tale as a radical mirror to reflect what was wrong with the general discourse on manners, mores, and norms in society” (Zipes *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* 107), which Zipes attributes to a time marked by the development of industrialisation and an increased impoverished society. From these decades onwards, and up until the 1900s, a tendency of creating parodical fairy tales for children began, to “question the traditional value system and suggest alternatives that appeared to contradict the notion of wonder and transformation that had been so dominant in the wonder folk tale” (Zipes, *The Changing Function of Fairy Tales* 21). Whereas the fairy tale had played a social function orientated to the instruction and spread of common values before, in the 20th century it started to “amuse and provide some social commentary that implied criticism in the civilizing process” (Zipes, *The Changing Function of Fairy Tales* 23).

The fairy tale genre has been experiencing an explosion in terms of criticism and in the proliferation of retellings since the 1970s, which Vanessa Joosen attributes to “developments in literature and literary criticism as well as in society more generally, such as the 1968 movement and the second wave of feminism” (4). Zipes gives predominance to the revision of classical well-known tales such as “Cinderella” and “Little Red Riding Hood”, and provides a similar explanation for the rising interest in their recreation: “given the sexist disposition of most of these popular tales, the artists who use them explicitly as their subject matter tend to embody a startling critique of the stories in images that urge, if not drive, viewers to rethink what they know about tales” (*The Irresistible Fairy Tale* 126).

Lieberman goes further to support this idea of deconstruction of the fairy tale, since children may “learn behavioral and associational patterns, value systems, and how to predict the consequences of specific acts or circumstances” through fairy tales, and what’s even more important, these also “present a picture of sexual roles, behavior, and psychology, and a way of predicting outcome or fate according to sex” (384). Some of the most representative works which revisited fairy tales from a feminist approach are Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), Anne Sexton’s poems *Transformations* (1971) and Margaret Atwood’s *Bluebeard’s Egg* (1983). These authors stand out for their successful actualisation of fairy tales for a contemporary adult audience, finding themes that may have not been tackled before in the genre and most importantly, exploring sexuality, the construction of gender and

the effects of patriarchy on women's roles and representation in literature (Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales* 50-53).

Angela Carter's collection of short stories, *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) paved the way for following authors, twisting already existing tales and questioning the depiction of women in literature and the roles they were attributed in them. Other well-known authors, such as Margaret Atwood and Toni Morrison, have also reinvented fairy tales. The latter revisited "Hansel and Gretel" in her novel *Home* (2013), focusing on the relationship between two siblings, Frank and Cee, and revealing "the intergenerational transmission of trauma, which here (as in other works by Morrison) is racial persecution" (Visser 151).

The fairy tales which Helen Oyeyemi explores in the three chosen novels, "Bluebeard", "Snow White", and "Hansel & Gretel", are some of the tales most frequently retold. Nonetheless, her interpretation of them deviates deeply from the usual sugar-coated adaptations for children, being closer to how Zipes describes contemporary retellings:

On the contrary, contemporary artists have approached fairy-tale topics from a critical and sceptical perspective, intent on disturbing viewers and reminding them that the world is out of joint and fairy tales offer no alternative to drab reality. Their subversive views of the fairy tale collide with traditional norms and conventional expectations of the fairy tale representations as well as the false, rosy images that the Disney corporation and other popularizing artists and publishers have disseminated for close to one hundred years. Indeed, they defy pulp-produced and sanitizes images that publishers and media moguls have spread. (Zipes, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale* 126)

Other previous retellings of the three fairy tales to be analysed would also fall under this description. Starting with "Bluebeard", authors like Carter, Atwood and Jane Campion have formerly revisited it, with a keen interest on the development of the main female character, as they were "empowering female protagonists as well as readers/viewers, while interrogating the fairy tale's naturalizing of gender dynamics. Doing so involves focusing on agency, but also on the protagonist's voice [...]" (Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales* 113). In Carter's retelling, the young protagonist becomes her own heroine, escaping her murderous husband with the help of her mother, who kills him, and later on the protagonist uses Bluebeard's fortune to open a school for blind people (Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales* 120). In Atwood's "Bluebeard's Egg", the wife, called Sally, is enrolled in a narrative fiction course that encourages her to write a new version of the tale of Bluebeard. When she decides to write from the point of view of an egg, she compares it to her husband, who she

must also protect in real life. However, disillusionment follows as she realises, being his third wife, she could also be discarded by him later on (Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales* 115).

As for “Snow White”, thousands of revisions and adaptations exist since its creation, being one of the most well-known fairy tales in the world. Zipes points out to retellings such as Neil Gaiman’s “Snow, Glass Apples”, in which the evil queen “does everything in her power to befriend her stepdaughter, who has demonic powers” (Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick* 136). In this case, both take the role of the villains and end up killing each other. Another postmodern revision is Carter’s “The Snow Child”, with Snow being a product of her father’s wishes, in a tale which rapidly escalates into Snow’s “death, rape and fetishizing” (Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales* 38). “Hansel & Gretel” and its retellings hides an equal violent story. For instance, in Donna Jo Napoli’s *The Magic Circle* (1993), the story is narrated by a healer, the Ugly One, who is haunted by demonic forces which push her towards the woods, abandoning her daughter, and secluding herself in a house made from candy. When Hansel and Gretel arrive, the girl touches some jewels that belong to the witch, prompting the return of the evils, who possess the witch again and urge her to eat Gretel. Instead, she is the one that kills the witch (Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick* 215). One of the finalist of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2013, *The Snow Child* (2012), by Eowyn Ivey, also explores the story of the pair of abandoned siblings, who this time are not family members but a married couple. Set in the 1920s in Alaska, Jack and Mabel live in a harsh land, working on a farm. One day, they build a snow child which disappears but seemingly transforms into a little girl, Faina, who suddenly shows up the following morning and who they take care of as if she were their daughter (“The Snow Child”).

In the last decades, the fairy tale as a genre has evolved not only in the form of retellings such as the ones mentioned, but adaptations to other media, such as film, tv series and videogames. An adaptation is characterised by “its close resemblance with, or immediately connect it with, another text, at the same time that we acknowledge they are differently located texts, whether the change has to do with genre, medium, space, or discourse.” (Bacchilega, *Fairy Tales Transformed* 30). However, this link between texts, this intertextual relationship and the inevitable influences received in the process of rewriting, are not the most essential traits defining an adaptation. Its ability to “reflect back on them, coloring our view of them”, is, as Bacchilega explains, equally important if not more for it to have truly transformative power (*Fairy Tales Transformed* 31).

New visions of old tales often aim to examine the morals behind traditional tales, their portrayal of women, gender roles, and the questionable romantic relationships presented in most of them, among other controversial topics. It is only natural they do so, as Tatar notes that fairy tales themselves were originally subversive and experimental too: “metamorphosis is central to the fairy tale, which shows us figures endlessly shifting their shapes, crossing borders, and undergoing change. Not surprisingly, stories that traffic in transformation also seek to change listeners and readers in unconventional ways.” (55). In relation to this, Zipes brings up another interesting reflection:

What is important to bear in mind is that neither the institutionalization of the fairy tale as genre nor the individual tale as text itself has remained fixed, and one of the problems with using structuralist approaches, such as the one developed by Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, to understand the “nature” of the fairy tale as literary genre or the oral tale is that it fails to consider the interrelation between oral and literary traditions and the mutations and variations of the literary fairy tale that has numerous strains. (*Why Fairy Tales Stick* 97)

Therefore, it may be argued that fairy tales have been immersed in a constant process of revision ever since they were created, and not only in the last decades, with an evident trend in retellings. Fairy tales’ connection with folk tales in their creation process “have thus generated a concept of textuality that views each tale not as a text assigned a permanent place in a linear succession or hierarchy that takes us back to an original or a primary form, but as a component in a larger web of texts that are linked to each other in multiple ways” (Haase qtd. in Joosen 10). Their origin, then, cannot be pinned down to a single source either in most of them, considering how they evolved from oral pieces of literature to printed versions, experimenting changes while being recorded. It is important to note, however, that this process of rewriting may result in two contradictory processes regarding ownership over the tales:

The twentieth century’s tendency toward commercial appropriation of fairy tale has perhaps blunted its aspect of communal *ownership*, despite its adoption of the mock-oral voice at times, but it has simultaneously ensured that the process of communal *experience* is enabled by the new technologies of mass culture and mass production (Tiffin 219).

Having established an idea of the collective origin of the fairy tale, the most important question is, how has it maintained its importance over the centuries? What makes it such an

appealing literary form for writers to revisit? On the one hand, the fairy tale may be relevant for practical reasons, since:

It is a socially symbolic act of representation and communication. For centuries we have developed the oral and literary capacity within our brains to communicate relevant information about specific conditions and relations in our lives and to use and change this information as we adapt to our changing environments for survival. (Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick* 95)

On the other hand, the key to the popularity of retellings and adaptations may be attributed to the prior knowledge that readers possess, the pleasure that derives “from repetition with variation, from the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise” (Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* 4), or likewise, their ability “to create a sense of nostalgic familiarity” (Tiffin 2). Their significance is also maintained by the relevance of the values transmitted through stories. After all, as Zipes claims, “there are profound meanings in the classical fairy tales that stem from human conflicts of the past and still speak to us” (*The Irresistible Fairy Tale* 125).

If we consider stories a tool available for social denounce and the exposition of struggles present in our contemporary society, we may also consider the fairy tale a viable genre for its spread. When analysing adaptations, Bacchilega argues for an activist approach that “help us focus on how to read hegemonic and counterhegemonic practices that are changing the twenty-first-century fairy-tale web. ‘Activist’ here refers to an adaptation’s responses to pre-texts, as well as to the response it instigates in listeners/readers/viewers.” (*Fairy Tales Transformed* 36). Thus, retellings may be used not only as a medium for writers to express their concerns, but to spark debate among audiences as well.

Another factor that makes the fairy tale so appealing for both its continued consumption and its rewriting in the 21st century is its permanent link to the fantasy genre, which provides endless possibilities for the transformation of plots and characters and easily creates playful connection with other genres. Fantasy also allows us to take life experiences and reflect on them as well as to use them “for spiritual regeneration and to contemplate alternatives to our harsh realities. More than titillation, we need the fantastic for resistance.” (Zipes, *Relentless Progress* 48). The popularity of this genre could be seen as a “response to the growing complexity of our society” (Tiffin 220). Contemporary artists may also approach the fairy tale “from a critical and sceptical perspective, intent on disturbing viewers and reminding them that the world is out of joint” (Zipes, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale* 126).

It can be useful, then, to disregard the typical vision of the fairy tale as a narrative that always ends up well, that is, “an artificial oversimplification imposed on events so that they have a neatness and self-containment rather different from the messy, ongoing matters of real life” (Tiffin 14). Here, the postmodern perspective comes into action, as the application of this theory has multiplied the number of retellings originated since the late 20th century and early 21st century.

Fairy tales may mix freely with other genres and narrative conventions when created under the lens of postmodernism, since “the borders between literary genres have become fluid” (Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* 9), parody being one of its most representative genres, because “it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies.” (Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* 11). But, most importantly, postmodernism offers the possibility of creating a reflective literary work, regardless of the perception on the importance of the fairy tale, not being dismissed as a lesser genre:

Many of the twentieth-and twenty-first-century popular versions go out of their way to exploit the self-conscious unreality of the narrative, many of them finding in this metafictional awareness the necessary distance for critique. As I have earlier discussed, so-called low and high art are fluid, flexible categories under the contemporary gaze. (Tiffin 221)

Thus, postmodernism may be suitable for the revision of fairy tales, since it allows for experimentation with genres and narrative techniques, resulting in groundbreaking fictional works. With this approach, authors may also adopt a critical stance toward any given issue, mix genres without limitations and disregard literary conventions.

3. A Case of Study: Helen Oyeyemi

“I write and retell fairy tales because I’m convinced they are real, that they are talking about our lives as we live them. Not idealized or fantastic. They are talking about truths that we sometimes want to look away from” (Helen Oyeyemi)

Despite being a young author, Helen Oyeyemi has had a prolific career, publishing her first novel in 2005, *The Icarus Girl*, when she was only eighteen, and other seven novels ever since. *Mr. Fox* (2011), which retells “Bluebeard” is Oyeyemi’s fourth novel and also the work that marked her interest in fairy tales, since in it “there is a shift from an explicitly gothic register into a playful metafictional mode that sees Oyeyemi experimenting with the fairy tale, the romance genre and ‘screwball’ comedy” (Buckley and Ilott 16). In this novel, Oyeyemi does not only reflect on the nature of writing, but also approaches the abundant and problematic deception of violent acts against women, by turning Bluebeard into a writer in the 1930s who often murders his fictional female characters. Her following work, *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014), “uses the tropes and psychodynamics of the Snow White story to unfold a narrative about the fraught relationship between mothers and daughters” (Tatar 178), by inserting the celebrated fairy tale into a mixed-race family in the America of the 1950s, when whiteness was celebrated as the epitome of beauty. Finally, *Gingerbread* (2018), containing features from “Hansel and Gretel”, can be read as a retelling criticising current issues such as Brexit, heavily fixating on family relations and immigration. In fact, Oyeyemi has stated that she does not consider this novel a fairy tale, but a product of the social circumstances when it was being written:

With *Gingerbread*, I felt like I spent a lot of time having explained to me that it was a fairy tale. I was like, *No, I’m actually writing about the year that I wrote it in*. I started writing it in 2016—we’d had the Brexit referendum, we’d Trump elected. It was an of-the-moment book of somebody trying to wake up from the neoliberal nightmare (Masad)

Her fiction, regardless of their topics, “defamiliarises the mundane through richly symbolic, intertextual and haunting narratives that work to undermine rather than to confirm accepted ways of knowing or being” (Buckley and Ilot 1). Thus, it can be argued that Oyeyemi is perpetuating the fairy tale tradition while also responding to it according to new social behaviours and contemporary values. This means challenging the idea of the existence of one sole explanation, a single truth hidden in each story, as she explains, “especially in our era, it’s become really hard to find meaning. Because there’s a multiplicity of meaning in any simple story that we’re told” (Akumiah).

Even though Helen Oyeyemi's retellings are not part of her first body of works, she has always showed an interest in the interaction of text with pre-existing tales and other cultures, making her novels rich in integrations of various sources. She was first published at age 18 with the novel *The Icarus Girl* (2005), infused with Oyeyemi's influences from Nigeria and Yoruba mythology, the country she was born in (Wright). Then, she wrote *The Opposite House* (2006), with a black Cuban and white Jewish protagonists navigating modern life in London as mixed-raced, and *White is for Witching* (2009), which employs the trope of the haunted house. Similarly, the novels which I will analyse, *Mr. Fox* (2011), *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014) and *Gingerbread* (2018), also present various times and locations, set in America in the 1930s, the 1950s and the 2010s in England respectively, allowing for multiple interpretations of fairy tales in these new backgrounds and exploring, like her predecessors, their relevance for contemporary audiences.

Since Oyeyemi's works have not been extensively studied in relation to fairy tales, especially her latest novel, *Gingerbread*, my purpose is to present these novels from an academic perspective. Even though the rewriting of fairy tales has long been a tendency in literature, I believe it is worth analysing the perspective of an African-British author who also belongs to a younger generation and uniquely depicts very sensible matters like violence against women or the construction of identity.

3.1. *Mr. Fox*

Oyeyemi's fourth novel, *Mr. Fox* (2011), is focused on Perrault's tale "Bluebeard" or "La Barbe bleue", published in 1697 (Hermansson 20). In this well-known fairy tale, a rich man marries a young noble lady, giving her complete freedom at her new home while he is away for business. There is one exception: she cannot, under no circumstances, enter his private room downstairs. Although his wife is showered in gold and other luxurious possessions, she cannot stop thinking about the room and one day ventures into it. There, she discovers Bluebeard's terrifying secret: he has murdered all his previous wives and they are stored in this private room, whose floor is full of blood. As she is in great shock, she drops the key and it gets tarnished with blood, revealing what she has done. When Bluebeard gets the keys back and sees the stain, he discovers her disobedience. He decides to give her a deadly punishment: her execution. Luckily, the lady's brothers get in time to stop it, killing him instead. In the end, she marries someone else and inherits Bluebeard's fortune. There are

two morals of this tale, the first having to do with the risks of being curious and disobedient, particularly as a woman:

Curiosity's all very well in its way,
But satisfy it and you risk much remorse,
Examples of which can be seen every day.
The feminine sex will deny it, of course,
But the pleasure you wanted, once taken, is lost,
And the knowledge you looked for is not worth the cost. (Perrault 171)

Despite this seemingly encouragement to be obedient wives, the second moral blames husbands for intending to be too controlling:

ANOTHER MORAL
People with sense who use their eyes,
Study the world and know its ways,
Will not take long to realize
That this is a tale of bygone days,
And what it tells is now untrue:
Whether his beard be black or blue,
The modern husband does not ask
His wife to undertake a task
Impossible for her to do,
And even when dissatisfied,
With her he's quiet as a mouse.
It isn't easy to decide
Which is the master in the house. (Perrault 171)

According to Zipes, what has made this tale resist the passing of time and still be appealing to readers is how “it reveals the miscalculation of male power, and, in some case, male anxiety about the potential encroachment of women on this power” (*Why Fairy Tales Stick* 157), which also seems to be the warning in the second moral of the tale. Sally Engle Merry comes up with a similar explanation when defining gender violence, agreeing on male dominance: “when men abuse women in intimate relationships, they use the violence to define their own gendered identities. A batterer often wants to show the woman that he is in control or to prove other men that he controls her” (13).

In addition to Perrault's tale, Oyeyemi also considers following variants of it such as the English fairy tale "Mr. Fox", by Joseph Jacobs. In this version, Lady Mary marries Mr. Fox, a rich gentleman with a huge castle and riches who also hides a terrible secret. The day before the wedding, thinking her fiancé is away, Lady Mary visits his castle and finds another house with an inscription which says: "Be Bold, Be Bold, But Not Too Bold, Lest That Your Heart's Blood Should Run Cold" (Jacobs). When she opens the door, she sees the bodies of other young women and when she leaves in a hurry, she catches Mr. Fox dragging a young lady. She is able to run off, after having seen Mr Fox cutting the lady's hand, and the following day she faces him. She starts telling him she had a dream featuring everything that she discovered the previous day, and she has the proof: the ring of the lady, which landed on her lap when her hand was cut. Once she reveals it, Lady Mary's brothers kill Mr. Fox. Like it happens in "Bluebeard", female curiosity plays an essential role to unmask the true intentions of the husbands, proving it can be "life-saving" (Tatar *Hard Facts* 178) and not a flaw which leads to a deadly punishment.

Oyeyemi does not only take the title of her novel from "Mr. Fox", but also the character's names, since St John Fox, a writer, is the protagonist, and his muse and fictional character is called Mary Foxe. The novel brings "Bluebeard" into a completely new context: it's the 1930s in the United States and Mr. Fox is a reputed novelist. One day, he is suddenly visited by Mary Foxe, a character he created in the past, accusing him of being a serial killer due to the number of women he has killed in his works. On the other hand, there is Daphne, St John's wife. Since his husband starts acting strangely, she suspects he is cheating on her, but she does not know what torments him is actually a woman that does not exist. After Mary asks Mr. Fox to stop writing about women being murdered, they both start writing each other short stories, intertwined with the chapters that follow the novel's timeline. In some of them, they even write themselves as the stories' characters, exploring their hypothetical relationship in other alternative worlds.

St John and Daphne are the counterparts of Bluebeard and his latest young wife. St John Fox also fought in the Great War, giving him such trauma that he even contemplated suicide once: "It got so I had a pistol to my head, there in my cosy study, and I wasn't all sure that I'd taken it out of my desk drawer myself" (Oyeyemi, *Mr. Fox* 96). It is only thanks to Mary that he stops: " 'Shhh,' said Mary Foxe. She reached over my shoulder, prised my fingers loose one by one, and took the gun." (Oyeyemi, *Mr. Fox* 96). Feeling guilty over returning whole from the war compared to his peers, as well as being unable to write, it was

Mary then who saved his life. As she is his own creation, it could be argued that writing and his imagination were what saved him. Although he is not an abusive husband, the way he regards Daphne at the beginning of the novel proves he can be a controlling one: “She doesn’t complain about anything I do; she is physically unable to. That’s because I fixed her early. I told her in heartfelt tones that one of the reasons I love her is because she never complains. So now of course she doesn’t dare complain.” (Oyeyemi, *Mr. Fox* 1). Like Bluebeard, Mr Fox sets unrealistic boundaries he does not want his wife to cross. Since she has a comfortable life and they are well-off in terms of money, he believes Daphne has no reason to be dissatisfied.

However, his feelings are contradictory. For instance, after Daphne starts suspecting he cheating on her, she reacts violently. In this moment, he admires Daphne’s beauty but regards her as weak at the same time, not only in appearance, but also in the way she acts:

I crossed the room and caught her hand, which seemed like the coldest and most fragile little thing in the world just then. I held her hand, patted it. She looked away and just let me hold it, as if it was of no use to her any more. My wife was pretty, I noticed. Sort of elfin, but vulnerable-looking with it. (Oyeyemi, *Mr. Fox* 71)

On the other hand, he is impressed by her reaction; “it was interesting to know I’d married someone who could cause this much of destruction on a hunch. It made me like her more”, and by her display of initiative, even if it is against him: “Daphne had bought a divorce dress with my money. Even more interesting. I’d had her down as a starry-eyed idealist who didn’t notice my flaws. I’d have to keep an eye on her” (Oyeyemi, *Mr. Fox* 72). Even if he is partially pleased by this, overall, Mr. Fox adopts a quite patronising attitude towards his wife, almost as if she were a child. It is more concerning that, once Daphne has calmed down, Mr. Fox thinks he should be praised for not having reacted worse: “I was proud of myself. In the old days I would have lost my cool” (Oyeyemi, *Mr. Fox* 74). Therefore, he could also potentially be an abuser, physically or emotionally, despite not acting on those impulses.

Daphne Fox, unlike her husband, has no skills that make her really stand out. She tries various hobbies to discover if she is good at something so she can prove her worth, and even educates herself on the matters that Mr. Fox likes so as to hold more compelling conversations with him, although, with not much success: “I don’t think my husband likes me. And I don’t know how to make him. I try talking to him about books, and when he

replies he won't look me in the eye, and sometimes his voice is muffled, suppressing a coughing fit... or laughter" (Oyeyemi, *Mr. Fox* 192). She does not only get a condescending treatment from Mr. Fox, but her friends also believe she is overreacting, undermining her: "Oh, did you marry him for the intellectual conversation? You didn't even finish college, Daphne!" (Oyeyemi, *Mr. Fox* 92). The comments she gets affect her greatly, leading to an evident lack of self-esteem and confidence. She is not unaware of the poor treatment she receives and the apparent inferior position she occupies in their marriage either:

The way he talks to me. I thought it was just his manner — I didn't mind that he never said anything romantic, not even at the very beginning — I was relieved about never having to wonder whether to really meant what I was saying. But now I'm starting to worry that this simplicity is contempt, that he picked me out as someone he could manage. I don't like to give that thought too much air, though. It'd be hard to go on if I really thought that was true. (Oyeyemi, *Mr. Fox* 194)

Daphne's dissatisfaction with marriage reveals the opposition of the public and private sphere that St John and she inhabit. St John occupies the spaces traditionally reserved for men since, historically, they "have acted within the public realm and have moved freely between it and the private realm, while women (and children) have been mostly restricted to the private realm and subjected to the authority of men within it" (Pilcher and Whelehan 125). Daphne is mostly confined to the private sphere of her home, as she is not employed, a space she is not comfortable in due to her husband's disregard of her opinions.

Apart from the main protagonists and their troubling relationship, there is also a clear element which is present in both the fairy tale and Oyeyemi's revision of "Bluebeard": the husband's private room. Unlike the literal bloody chamber containing bodies, St John's private space is a study, where he writes and plots how his female characters are going to die. This is the also the place where Mary Foxe appears unexpectedly for the first time in years, and how the novel starts: "Mary Foxe came by the other day — the last person on Earth I was expecting to see. [...] I was sitting in my study, writing badly, just making words on the page, waiting for something good to come through, some sentence I could keep." (Oyeyemi, *Mr. Fox* 1). This study is only used by St John, but there are some moments when Daphne trespasses it, like the young ladies in *Bluebeard* and its variants do. For example, in the previously mentioned scene where she storms the study and throws shelves and books around, demanding to know who he is cheating her with. Apart from those moments, the study is St John's sacred space, where he can write and relax and not think about his wife:

“The windows were open. I was sort of listening to something by Glazunov [...]. My wife was upstairs. Looking at magazines or painting or something, who knows what Daphne does. Hobbies.” (Oyeyemi, *Mr. Fox* 1). Even in one of the short stories written by St John and Mary Foxe, there is a scene which parallels the finding of the previous wives’ bodies, but with animals instead:

When I came back from town I went into S.J.’s study, to fetch a cookbook. He’d left the French doors open, and in going to close them, I almost trod on a finch. The bird lay on its back in between the doors and didn’t take fright at my drawing so near. Its beak and feet pointed at the sky, blackened, as if blasted by flame. It had died with its eyes open and some liquid in them congealing. And there were more outside. I stopped counting after ten. They were all in the same condition. (Oyeyemi, *Mr. Fox* 169)

It is not only fairy tales that Oyeyemi employs in her novel. One particular short story written by St John and Mary, called “What happens next”, is greatly inspired by *Rebecca*, the novel by Daphne Du Maurier, which can be compared to “Bluebeard” too. In the novel, the young protagonist, an unnamed woman, marries the widower Maxim de Winter. The previous Mrs. de Winter, called Rebecca, has died in mysterious circumstances. As the new wife falls in love with Maxim, she also feels repulsed by the possibility of him being a murderer. Even once she discovers he did kill Rebecca, she decides to stay by his side. Oyeyemi explains the dynamic she meant to achieve between the characters, resembling Mr and Mrs. de Winter, which can be perceived in the attraction the protagonists of “what happens next” feel, mixed with loathing:

Then I read Du Maurier's *Rebecca* and that tilted my perspective on the story—the heroine is radically altered. She doesn't run away from her Bluebeard, she's actually drawn by his inaccessibility and the violence of their romance. It was a whole new Bluebeard for me, and I wanted to have a go at that the narrative in my own way. (Crispin)

In “What happens next”, St John Fox, now a doctor and not a writer, meets young Mary Foxe on a plane going back home to New York. Both are haunted by their tragic past: Mary’s father murdered her mother after they divorced and St John is a widower. Like it happens in *Rebecca*, it is unclear whether his wife, Daphne Fox, did kill herself or she was killed by him, as Mary fears once they get engaged. Gender violence is very present in this passage along with another important topic: the trauma Mary experiences by being surrounded by it. Before the murder of her mother, her father used to send her paper news of women who had been brutally killed to scared her off. This had a tremendous impact on

Mary's daily life and simultaneously made her realise the system's inability to put a stop to gender violence:

I kicked open cubicle doors in public toilets, so expectant of discovering an abandoned corpse that for an instant I'd see one, slumped over the toilet bowl, her long hair falling into the water. I saw them in the dark, the girls, the women yet to be found. I counted their faces, gave them names and said the names, as if calling a class register. Here's what I learnt from the clippings: that there is a pattern. They'd told people: someone is watching me, has been following me, has beaten me up before, has promised me he will kill me. (Oyeyemi, *Mr. Fox* 144)

Oyeyemi's revision of this well-known twisted fairy tale brings the treatment of women in fiction to the front, as we can see in the quotation below. However, Oyeyemi herself explains she would be content if her work could be used to create awareness on the matter:

I'm not sure that *Mr. Fox* does make a firm statement for or against the violent deaths of women in entertainment. I'll be thrilled if it draws yet more attention to gratuitous feminine death as a strangely inevitable centerpiece to the popular imagination—I'll be thrilled if it adds to the fund of narratives that question the legitimacy of such a centerpiece. (Crispin)

The strongest criticism about how women are brutally killed in fiction comes from the character of Mary Foxe, who starts the novel by appearing to her creator and making clear he is a serial killer in his fictional works:

'I don't want you like this. You have to change,' she said.

The symphony ended, and I went to the Victrola and started it up again.

'I have to change? You mean you want to hear me say I love you for your...?' I allowed myself to smirk, 'soul?'

'It's nothing to do with that. You simply have to change. You're a villain.'

[...]

There was a brief but heavy silence, which Mary broke by saying: 'You kill women. You're a serial killer. Can you grasp that?' (Oyeyemi, *Mr. Fox* 3-4).

St John has killed Mary, for example, hitting her repeatedly in the head, and other fictional women too in different ways, all of them brutally and graphically described. In one of the stories, a doctor called Dr Lustucru, murders his wife so he can control her: "Doctor Lustucru's wife was not particularly talkative. But he beheaded her anyway, thinking to

himself that he could replace her head when he wished for her to speak.” (Oyeyemi, *Mr. Fox* 6). In another one, “Fitcher’s Bird”, based on another Bluebeard variant, Miss Foxe and Fitcher, who believe in fairy tales too deeply, end up being murderer and victim:

And without further argument he unsheathed the sword and cleaved Miss Foxe’s head from her neck. He knew what was supposed to happen. He knew that this awkward, whispering creature before him should now transform into a princess — dazzlingly beautiful, free, and made wise by her hardship. That is not what happened. (Oyeyemi, *Mr. Fox* 69)

Despite the constant pattern in most of his stories, St John dismisses Mary’s claims and even thinks that she is overreacting: “You have no sense of humour, Mary’, I said. ‘You’re right,’ she said. ‘I don’t.’ I tried again: ‘It’s ridiculous to be so sensitive about the content of fiction. It’s not real. I mean, come on. It’s all just a lot of games” (Oyeyemi, *Mr. Fox* 5). But is the content included in fiction so impactful for real life? According to Kang et al., “media representation is a key domain for identity formation and the creation of gendered and sexualized difference” (76). Thus, what we consume contributes to assimilate repeated patterns and attitudes towards gender, affecting socialisation depending on the content we are exposed to. That is why having positive representations and denouncing violence is so important to avoid spreading harmful stereotypes, or romanticising unhealthy relationships, among some problematic tropes in fiction. For instance, Kang et al. blame Disney movies for making children “to value hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity” (76), therefore promoting traditional roles in which men are above women and the latter are content serving them.

The debate about the deaths of women in fiction has, in fact, been opened for some decades. For instance, in 1999, Gail Simone coined the term “Women in Refrigerators” to criticise how women were abused and murdered in superheroes comics, a problematic trope since “many of these women are killed or maimed because of factors outside of their control or influence” and also, because it often “serves as both the inciting incident, and the emotional thrust, for a male protagonist’s journey” (Gonzales 2016). As it can be seen, this trope is not exclusively used in comics, but applicable to analyse any kind of fictional product. For Oyeyemi, it is only natural to depict the death of women in literature, as any other topic, as long as it is used consciously and not romanticised:

I find the death and the maiden trope spectacular when it's properly done—for example, when it feels organic to the story and doesn't participate in a dodgy aesthetic. All I ask of a story about the murder of a woman, or the murder of several women, is that it doesn't imply that her

death was beautiful, or that the murdered woman is in some way more beautiful or potent or interesting in death. That's a terrible lie, and I don't want to hear it. People tend to be at their most beautiful and potent and interesting when they're alive. (Crispin)

Mr. Fox justifies the death of her characters, to which Mary responds in a way that can be read as critique from Oyeyemi herself, considering her point of view:

You're explaining things that can't be defended, and the explanations themselves are mad, just bizarre — but you offer them with such confidence. It was because she kept the chain on the door, it was because he needed to let off steam after a hard day's scraping and bowing at work, it was because she was irritating and stupid, it was because she lied to him, made a fool of him, it was because she had to die, she just had to, it makes dramatic sense, it was because “nothing is more poetic than the death of a beautiful woman”, it was because of this, it was because of that. It's obscene to make such things reasonable. (Oyeyemi, *Mr. Fox* 120)

This reflection is even more interesting considering that Mary is a product of St John's imagination, therefore, the contrast between the two positions in the novel when it comes to gender violence is a struggle of St John only. He can be seen as the villain, since he is the equivalent to Bluebeard, but the distinction is not as clear as in the original tale. Oyeyemi shifts it “by having the villains and victim as facets of the same character” (Ormond 155). In any case, he is not the only one to blame, since he can be regarded as a product of society and his own environment:

By allowing the Bluebeard character of St John to argue with himself, Oyeyemi puts what he does into context: when Mary loses her head as a result of St John's story he sees the impact his story can have. What he writes – crime fiction centred upon the murder of young female characters – sells. Thus it is not St John who is at fault here, but the society that popularises the type of entertainment that romanticises violence against women, to the point that women themselves think of such violence as ‘normal.’ (Ormond 157)

After exploring St John and Mary's confrontation, Daphne's opinion on her husband's doings and his relationship with Mary must be examined. At first, Daphne seems to relax once Mr. Fox explains there is no woman in his life, just Mary Foxe. However, when she starts receiving phone calls without any answer she starts to suspect. When she ventures to his study once again while he is out, she finds a list comparing the qualities of both women in her life, his wife and his muse, making her feel repulsed by St John's twisted imagination: “My husband was trying to choose between me, his wife, and someone he had made up. And I, the real woman, the wife, had nothing on the made-up girl. We each had five points in our

favor. The son of a bitch.” (Oyeyemi, *Mr. Fox* 198). At this moment, Daphne proves she can also have violent thoughts, just like her husband does:

So many thoughts kept coming —maybe I could make him take a fall— not a serious one, but it might shake him up, and she’d be gone. Or I could ask him, tell him, to stop, do whatever was necessary, he could kill her or something —what did that even mean, to kill someone imaginary— why, it was nothing at all. He could do it. He should do it, for me. (Oyeyemi, *Mr. Fox* 199).

The relevance of this passage does not only lie on the realisation that women can be as capable of violence as men, but the positioning of Daphne closer to the figure of the villain too, a woman capable of wanting another woman dead, someone who is perceived as a rival to be eliminated. When she finds the note, something even more bizarre happens to Daphne. Mary Foxe materialises, magically coming to life and becoming real. The scene is interrupted by a friend of the Foxes, and Mary starts doubting her mental health: “I’ve seen and heard a woman he made up. I know what this is called — folie à deux, a delusion shared by two or more people who live together” (Oyeyemi, *Mr. Fox* 201). At a house party, she confides to another friend of theirs, who tells her the fairy tale “Fitcher’s Bird”, yet another Bluebeard variant by the Grimms’ brothers: “She went insane because of him’, Daphne said. ‘I think that’s happening to me” (Oyeyemi, *Mr. Fox* 230). Later, Daphne realises she is not imagining it, Mary has become truly real, and they even spend some time together dining with her friends. In the end, Mary disappears from the Foxes life, as Daphne and St John are trying to make their marriage work, bowing to start all over again. Oyeyemi’s ending is comparably filled with hope, kinder than Bluebeard’s one, revealing how marriages can be saved instead of being doomed from the beginning: “And, laughing a little, he kissed me back. He kissed me like ice cream, like a jazz waltz, the rough, gentle way the sea washed sand off my skin on the hottest day of the year. And the whole time there was that little laugh between us, sweet and silly” (Oyeyemi, *Mr. Fox* 260). In the end, Mary has acted as a catalyst for St John’s re-evaluation of his views on women, both in fiction and real life, resulting in less damaging representation in his novels and a healthier relationship with his wife.

In terms of style and structure, *Mr. Fox* can be analysed as a postmodern novel. Postmodern authors reject the idea of universal literary structures which must be followed, arguing that these are “artificial constructions rather than universal abstractions” and prefer to depart from them “to be explored and disrupted, either playfully or radically, or both” (Tiffin 2). This can be frequently found in Oyeyemi’s work, since the chapters shift from

Mr. Fox's, Mary's, and Daphne's perspective either in first or third person, as well as the short stories intercalated between them. There is no pattern either to discern what will follow after one of these. In addition, the chapters range from long ones to others just one or two pages long, including different formats such as lists and letters.

Because the idea of intertextuality and the dialogue between existing text is central to postmodernism, Tiffin also points to the role that readers play when approaching a postmodern work and recognising the narratives involved in it:

The production of narrative comes to rest not only in an interaction with genre traditions but also in a reciprocal relationship between the producer and the receiver of the tale, between the tale-teller and audience, in a shared understanding of the parameters and characteristics of the narrative (3)

Due to the pre-existing novels and fairy tales that Oyeyemi uses as inspiration and references in her novel, readers are likely to recognise them or at least be familiar with the topics presented. Some of the intertextual references are more explicit than others such as the use of *Mr. Fox's* known sentence: "be bold, be bold, but not too bold" in one of the short stories, or the title "fitcher's bird" to refer to the fairy tale in another one. In relation to intertextuality, Bacchilega points to the social dimension implied in its use:

I see the cultural turn in adaptation studies that Stam initiated as key to further opening up possibilities for intertextual readings of fairy tales to reach into a range of discourses and link to social activism. After all, dialogues are not between texts as such, and, as I put it in my introduction, stories and people work with, for and on one another. (*Fairy Tales Transformed* 34)

This reflection can be related to the discussion of themes that are relevant for our contemporary society, such as the depiction of gender violence in fiction, which Oyeyemi mentions frequently throughout the novel. Its inclusion opens up the possibility of exploring this problem not only in her present work, but also in the original sources she uses, in this case, the fairy tale "Bluebeard" and how it persists in the 21st century. As Oyeyemi states, she sees gender violence as a contemporary problematic despite the setting of the novel:

NH: Bearing in mind what you (rightly) say about the way our culture normalises violence against women, did you worry that the period setting could historicise the problem, make it seem like a problem of the past? Is that why many of the individual stories range quite widely in time and space?

HO: No, I don't think the time in which a story is set (or written) has much of a relationship to the relevancy of any point a story is making. (Harrison)

Since Oyeyemi demonstrates she is also concerned about the process of writing, *Mr. Fox* presents yet another typical postmodern characteristic: the use of metafiction. Metafiction refers to “fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (Waugh 2). Even though *Mr. Fox* presents its own fictional world, the lines between that one and ours get blurred in the novel. For instance, fairy tales seem to exist too in this world, as Daphne mentions once: “You’re not Bluebeard? Or Reynardine?” (Oyeyemi, *Mr. Fox* 227). This seems paradoxical, considering *Mr. Fox* itself is based on “Bluebeard”, as it situates a fictional setting into a world that resembles reality.

It can also be argued that Oyeyemi presents different kind of writers with her three main characters. Two of them, St John and Mary, are immersed in a duel by writing each other short stories. In one of the chapters, Mary is a young writer who sends her stories to St John, already established as a writer, trying to get published. Mary trusts St John to give her an honest opinion about her writings, but when weeks pass and she gets no answers, she decides to visit him and ask to get her stories back. What she receives, however, is pure cruelty. St John is not the one to face her but his secretary, who acts according to his wishes, burning the stories Mary had worked hard on. With this example, Oyeyemi brings light to the difficulty of becoming a respected author in literary circles, with newcomers having to prove their worth or only entering the publishing industry thanks to connections which may or may not come to fruition, such as in this case. Sánchez claims that, through metafiction, Oyeyemi is also reflecting on writing and the formation of canon, since St John stands for “the Author — the (predominantly male) canon incarnate”, while Mary Foxe could be “Charlotte Brontë, Margaret Atwood [...] literary commentators whose primordial critiques of canonical authors have become classics in their own right” (7).

If St John and Mary represent the established and promising authors respectively, there is a third figure to be examined as a writer. Unexpectedly, Daphne Fox reveals herself as a potential writer at the end of the novel. It is once she and Mary have started to get along that the latter suggests it:

‘Modesty is more effective than the most expensive rouge.’ Then I realised I hadn’t read it anywhere and I’d just made it up.

[...]

‘Hey, you should put that in your book,’ Mary said, with a smile of approval.

[...]

‘Mary...what was that about a book? What do you mean, my book?’

Mary poured us both more wine, fixed me with a suddenly keen gaze. ‘Aren’t you going to write one?’

(Oyeyemi, *Mr. Fox* 248-249)

From this moment, Daphne realises she can also tell her own story. When Mary says goodbye to the Foxes in a letter she encourages her to do it: “Mrs Fox —I’ll send you a forwarding address when I know it, so you can send me pages of *Hedda Gabler and Other Monsters* —don’t forget to write it. And don’t talk yourself out of it — you can do it, and it’s going to be really good” (Oyeyemi, *Mr. Fox* 260). Daphne, therefore, would be “the woman writer of today, vying for a place among the Greats” (Sanchez 7), like Oyeyemi herself. Sanchez also argues that, since the novel is set in the 1930s, when Daphne du Maurier published *Rebecca*, “Daphne Fox can be interpreted as a metafictional reimagining of Daphne du Maurier” (7), furthering Oyeyemi’s playfulness with fiction and reality.

In her revision of “Bluebeard”, Oyeyemi explores the falling apart of a seemingly perfect marriage, disturbed by the presence of a third person. But instead of employing the usual trope of “the Other woman”, with the two female characters fighting for the men’s affections, Daphne and Mary solve their differences and pursue their dreamed careers, and unlike in the fairy tale, the Foxes celebrate their newfound happiness after deciding to mend their relationship. By presenting a new model of female bonding and not confrontation, Oyeyemi adheres to new modes of feminism. Women do not longer fit “simple binaries such as ‘good’ or ‘bad’”, as third-wave feminism “insists on the necessity of straddling binaries and working with the contradictions that result” (Budgeon 280). Therefore, Mary cannot be categorised as the evil woman that breaks a marriage anymore, while Daphne is able to overcome jealousy and see Mary as an ally and not a rival.

On the other hand, turning the character of Bluebeard into a writer who systematically kills his female characters in brutal ways, offers the possibility of condemning the gratuitous inclusion of violence against women in fictional works. This type of content is not only alarming considering how it contributes to normalise violence, but because of its damaging

portrayal of toxic masculinities and its potential effect on the construction of gendered identities.

Oyeyemi also shifts this well-known fairy tale with her experimentation in terms of narrative style, combining different narrative voices, including short stories within the novel, and alluding to other fairy tales with several intertextual references. Her use of metafictionality, reflecting on literature and writing itself, highlights her unique style and blurs the lines distinguishing reality and fiction, playing with the readers' expectations and enriching the story of "Bluebeard".

3.2. *Boy, Snow, Bird*

Set in the 1950s in the United States, *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014) follows the life of Boy Novak, a young woman running away from an abusive father. Divided in three parts following the three main female characters (Boy, Snow and Bird), the first and third parts are narrated by Boy and the second by her daughter Bird, in a time jump of a decade. At the beginning of the novel, Boy leaves New York for the fictional Flax Hill, Massachusetts, where she will meet her future husband, Arturo Whitman, and his daughter, Snow. Oyeyemi discusses beauty, race and the construction of identity and how these intertwine by revisiting Grimms' "Little Snow White". What is one of the most renowned fairy tales in history tells the story of Snow White and her evil stepmother, a powerful and jealous queen. When her magic mirror declares she is not the most beautiful woman in the realm anymore but her stepdaughter, she plots to kill the girl in multiple occasions, all of them failed. Snow almost dies but overcomes the plots to get rid of her thanks to the seven dwarfs she lives with and ends up marrying a prince.

Zipes believes "Snow White" deals with "competition and selection" and "the manner in which females cope with one another to select or attract a male whom they consider worthy of their eggs" (Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick* 135). As well as this competition among women, the female roles depicted in the tale are born from patriarchy, like Joosen argues, since the two main characters respond to two damaging archetypes in which women are perceived as "the angel and the witch" (217). Snow White would be the angel and the Queen would fit in the role of the witch, the monster who opposes the former. In Oyeyemi's novel, Boy seems to replicate the Queen's role, although she is not depicted as a villain from the beginning.

Boy Novak, a motherless young woman, has been a victim of domestic abuse at the hands of her father since she was a child. Frank Novak is a ratcatcher who both psychologically and physically abuses his daughter on any given occasion:

He hit me when I pronounced a word in a certain way that made him think I was acting stuck-up. [...] He'd hit me when I didn't flinch at the raising of his arm, and he'd hit me when I cowered. He hit me when Charlie Vacic came over to respectfully ask if he could take me to prom. (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 7)

Trapped in a life with no possibility of advancement and fearing for her life, "there were times I thought the rat catcher was going to knock me out for sure" (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 8), Boy steals her father's money and escapes one night without even thinking of the destination. In addition to the violence she suffers at home, Boy is traumatised by the absence of a mother which left her defenceless:

These are the thoughts that come to you while you spend however long you spend holding icepacks to your eye, or tilting your head back against the wall to try to do something about the way your nose is bleeding, letting your mind work on the question: What reasons might somebody have for leaving her kid in the care of a man like Frank Novak? *Don't ever try to find her. Don't even try to find out if she's alive.* This way my mother's alive, she's dead, she's whatever she deserves to be on that particular day (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 48).

This experience does not only build more resentment towards her family but also affects the way Boy behaves with her stepdaughter, Snow, and her biological one, Bird. If we consider mirrors a tool portraying identity, Boy seems to have trouble to understand who she really is when she first arrives to Flax Hill: "There was no chair to sit on, and no mirror in my room, so I made brief consultations with myself as I washed my face in the bathroom down the hall" (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 15). This material absence of a mirror may be seen as her loss of identity now that she has escaped home, and the possibility of forming her own identity now too, because, as Paula Barba Guerrero claims, mirrors can also be "a space of spaces where identity is reformulated in the examination of reflections." (39).

Apart from the brutality she is accustomed to, beauty plays an essential role in the construction of Boy's identity, and every other female characters too. To begin with, Boy represents the ideal Western standard of beauty: "Mirrors showed me that I was a girl with a white-blond pigtail hanging down over one shoulder; eyebrows and lashes the same color; still, near-black eyes; and one of these faces people call "harsh" and others call "fine-boned". (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 3). Her new friends in Flax Hill believe that her whiteness and

attractiveness make her life easier. For example, when she finds a job as a hostess for a boat party in which only blondes are wanted: “Webster lent me bus fare. ‘Must be great being a blonde,’ she said. ‘Maybe you’ll meet a millionaire!’ I couldn’t find any sarcasm in her voice.” (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 27). Her physical aspect is relevant for how she is perceived since “a woman’s experience of beauty standards depends not solely on gender but also on her other group memberships including race, class, age, sexuality and disability” (Cole and Sabik 177).

However, Boy is frequently undermined due to her appearance, for instance, one of the first times she and Arturo meet, he tells her she should go back to New York:

“I’ll keep it simple. People make beautiful things here. We’re interested in the process, not the end product. Now, you—you don’t have what it takes to start that kind of process, let alone see it through So. There’s nothing here for you.”

I looked at him in the eye and said slowly: “Oh, isn’t there?”

[...]

Arturo didn’t turn a hair: “What were you at home, a dressmaker’s model?”

(Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 22-23)

As Ormond explains, “believing her to be shallow, he dismisses her ability to bring anything worth to Flax Hill”, which “shows how assumptions are made about what a woman is like based on her looks” (160). But Boy, despite others’ opinion, is deeply insecure and reflects on hers and other girls’ appearance as she does when she finds out an unidentified girl has been found murdered nearby: “I guess it’s all wrong to describe a corpse as “well nourished yet slender” —I just wouldn’t want that for myself. I pushed the cream soda away. *I should cut back on treats.*” (Oyeyemi, *Boy Snow Bird* 27). In other occasions, when Snow’s beauty is praised, she feels anxious about the passing of time too: “Most of the people who say that beauty fades say it with a smirk. Fading is more than just expected, it’s what they want to see. I don’t.” (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 79).

As Joosen claims, the mirror can be seen, both in “Little Snow White” and most of its retellings, as a tool of patriarchy which “is shown to encourage rivalry and destroy female friendship” (219). This rivalry is irremediably linked to beauty standards since, in order to be considered beautiful, women have to adhere societal norms, often marked by the perception of men. In media representation, this was coined as “the male gaze” by Laura

Mulvey, which “encourages men viewers to see women as objects and encourages women to see themselves as objects of men’s desires” (Kang et al. 69). This idea is engrained in Boy’s mind, as it is shown after her father disfigured her face so it would scar and nobody would love her:

“There is no exquisite beauty without strangeness in the proportion, is that not so? Let’s fix it so that Charlie is truly mesmerized by you. Let’s fix it so that he stares. Seven scars should do it.” [...]

“Why are you shaking like that?” my father asked, tenderly. “Do you think that if I scar you no one will love you? You’ve got the wrong idea, girl. This will help your true love. He’ll really have to fight for you now” (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 122).

Besides competing with the women in her life and being appealing according to male requirements, Boy also has to meet the expectations of Arturo’s family, since his late wife, Julia, appears to be perfect in Boy’s eyes: “Julia and I wouldn’t have been friends. She looked like a bashful Rapunzel, dark hair pinned up high, doe eyes always down-turned or gazing off to the side in every single photograph.” (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 68). On top of that, she was an opera singer, and left her daughter Snow a book full of handwritten recipes and some records singing her lullabies, like a loving mum would do; something that Boy could never experience.

Snow takes on her mother and behaves perfectly for a little girl, “she was poised and sympathetic, like a girl who’d just come from the future but didn’t want to brag about it” (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 71), and is equally beautiful: “I watched the women watching Snow. Their reverence was over the top. Sure, she was an extraordinary-looking kid. A medieval swan maiden, only with the darkest hair and the pinkest lips, every shade at its utmost.” (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 78). She is pictured like Snow White is in Grimms’ tale: “white as that snow, as red as the blood, and as black as the ebony” (Grimm and Grimm 50). When Boy and Arturo’s daughter Bird is born, however, the illusion of the Whitman’s perfect family crumbles down and their secret is revealed:

There was the quicksand, then there was Bird in my arms, safe and well, and dark. No. It wasn’t just her shade of gold (the closest skin could get to the color of my husband’s eyes. I think I made some dumb joke: “Look at this kid, born with a suntan—”), it was her facial features too. As the nurse said when she thought I was too wiped out to hear: “That little girl is a Negro” (Oyeyemi *Boy, Snow, Bird* 131).

Both the Whitman's and Julia's family have been passing as white, which makes Boy understand why they praised Snow and her appearance so much: "Snow's beauty is all the more precious to Olivia and Agnes because it is a trick. When whites look at her, they don't get whatever fleeting, ugly impressions so many of us get when we see a colored girl." (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 139). Like Ormond argues, Snow's beauty "is the product of wish fulfilment; Snow is 'the fairest of them all' in terms of racial heritage" (159). Moreover, passing as white gives the family a superior and stable position in society because "bodies that are closest to that of the dominant group or the ideal are often perceived as imbued with power" (Cole and Sabik 180), the dominant group here being white people.

Boy also finds out that Arturo's elder sister, Clara, who she has hardly ever heard a thing about, is a black woman too and was sent away so they could continue living in their white community. It is Olivia Whitman, Arturo's mother, who suggests sending Bird with her, like she did in the past with her own daughter, to which Boy responds by banishing Snow instead. With this decision, Oyeyemi breaks "the culturally pervasive images of racialized maternal care" (Lau 375), since it is a white woman who now takes care of a black child and not viceversa.

The Whitman's motivation for keeping their identity a secret relies on the awful discriminatory experiences black people suffered in the 1950s, such as being obliged to use separate restrooms and being deny entry to sports clubs they have paid for, like Gerald Whitman witnessed once, so when they realised nobody perceived them as black after moving to the North, they went along with it. Otherwise, they would not have been treated as the rest of the people, as Olivia argues:

The places you go to, do you see colored there? Let me answer that for you. You see them rarely, if at all. You're trying to remember, but the truth is they don't exist for you. You go to the opera house and the only colored person you see is the stagehand, scattering sawdust or rice powder or whatever it is that stops the dancers slipping... (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 137).

Paradoxically, in spite of her awareness of how it feels to be black and mistreated for it, Olivia does not extend the love she has for her first granddaughter, Snow, to Bird: "It's true that it was hard. Olivia and Gerald attended Bird's christening, and Gerald kissed her, but Olivia didn't." (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 138). This may be one of the reasons why Boy decides to send Snow to live with Clara Whitman, instead of her own daughter, whom she can protect and love herself. Here, the plot comes closer to the Grimms' "Little Snow

White”, although Boy’s relationship with Snow is more ambiguous than the unjustified jealousy of the queen in the fairy tale.

The first time Boy meets Snow as she is passing by her house one night, she gets an ominous feeling, almost as if she knew their mother/daughter relationship is going to fail eventually:

Her voice sounded exactly the way I’d thought it would sound. For some reason that scared me, so I didn’t stop at the gate to greet her even though I heard her saying “Hi” in a startled way. I just said “Hi, Snow” as if we’d met before, when of course I hadn’t, and I kept going, kept my gaze fixed on the road ahead of me. “Scared” doesn’t even really describe it. I almost crossed myself. It felt like the evil eye had fallen upon us both (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 25).

Later on, nevertheless, she starts getting fond of her and refuses to run away with Charlie Vacic, Boy’s old friend, when she is about to marry Arturo: “And maybe it’s the thief in me, but I think this girl is mine, and that when she and I are around each other, we’re giving each other something we’ve never had, or taking back something we’ve lost.” (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 109). If their relationship had worked, they would have found in one another what they were lacking: a mother figure, a family who really loved each other. Throughout the book, there are many references to “Little Snow White” which point to the eventual fallout between Boy and Snow, and Boy filling the archetype of the wicked stepmother. One of the first signs is the gift that Arturo crafts for Boy when they get engaged, since he is a jeweller, a snake bracelet: “All I could think about was: *I will fear no evil, I will fear no evil, I will fear no evil*. That snake was what he’d made for me, it was what he thought I wanted, was maybe what he thought I was, deep down.” (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 104). Before sending Snow away, Boy points to one of the most well-known phrases from “Little Snow White”: “Snow is not the fairest of them all. And the sooner she and Olivia and all the rest understand that, the better.” (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 144).

Boy reaches the turning point towards becoming the antagonist of the story once Bird is born. On one occasion, she almost replicates the abuse she suffered at home with Snow: “There was an afternoon that I raised my hand to Snow, fully intending to swat her like a fly.” (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 141). But what differentiates Boy from the evil queen is her ability to recognise that her behaviour is troubling and her actions out of control: “*This doesn’t feel like my life, it feels like somebody else’s. [...] Make this little girl let me go—I don’t know if I want her. Can’t I start over?*” (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 141). It could be

argued that although sending Snow with Clara Whitman does not seem like the rational option, she would be safer there, because Boy is unable to act as the mother figure she lost. Like Tatar explains, Boy is “refusing to repeat the sins of her father” (*Webs and Mirrors* 179), which could happen if the girl stays. This is highly ironic considering Boy sending Snow away makes her an estranged parent, but not abusive. Therefore, Boy “*mothers* Bird and *others* Snow, adhering to the stereotyped model of fairy-tale step-motherhood.” (Barba Guerrero 40). Another reason for Boy’s rejection of Snow is Ormond’s argument that Snow “threatens the wellbeing of her dark skinned daughter, Bird, rather than Boy’s vanity” (160).

In the second part of the novel the narration shifts to Bird, years later. Bird is now a teenager and loves stories like her Aunt Mia, Boy’s best friend, who is a journalist. Since her birth, there have been further consequences than Snow moving with her aunt. Arturo’s younger sister, Vivian, did not marry her fiancé because he discovered they were white-passing and consequently broke the engagement. This has made Olivia resent the girl even more: “Granny Olivia sometimes smiles at me by accident, like when she’s just turned away from somebody else who’s made her laugh and her eyes fall on me before she’s done smiling. Otherwise I get nothing from her.” (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 149). Bird, on the other hand, does not feel guilty for having revealed the family secret: “I accidentally brought truth to light, and bringing truth to light is the right thing to do.” (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 150).

Although Bird is not completely accepted in her community, Olivia’s rejection is the exception instead of the norm, at least in Bird’s immediate circle. She is supported and loved unconditionally by most members of her family, who provide positive role models for her with whom she can identify as well: “Most of her heroes are colored...like I am. Aunt Mia’s says she didn’t go out looking for colored heroes. She says that’s just the way it worked out.” (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 151). Boy’s decision to keep Bird with her is significant in terms of ideological positioning, because with it Oyeyemi “reveals the possibility of a conscious rejection of whiteness and positive identification with blackness” (Bragg 127). Boy defends it in passages such as this one, swearing an “allegiance to the Us—a collective presumable defined by skin color” (Lau 176):

The three things I know: First, I’m with Bird in any Them versus Us situation she or anyone cares to name.

Second, it’s not whiteness itself that sets Them against Us, but the worship of whiteness...

Third, we beat Them (and spare ourselves a lot of tedium and terror) by declining to worship. (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 275)

Surprisingly, Bird also gets along with Agnes, whose late daughter was Julia Whitman, despite not being related. Bird confides in her to discuss the problems she has when she looks into the mirror: “I told her what happens to me sometimes, with mirrors, and she said: “Watch out; that’s your enemy at work, trying to get rid of you.” (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 153). Like her mother, Bird is struggling with her identity, but now, the novel gets its own share of magic and fantasy, recovering the atmosphere from “Little Snow White”, since Bird problem cannot be rationally explained:

What I told her about me and mirrors is this:

Sometimes mirrors can’t find me. I’ll go into a room with a mirror in it and look around, and I’m not there. Not all the time, not even most of the time, but often enough. Sometimes when other people are there, but nobody ever notices that my reflection’s a no show. [...]

And the oval glass, that dear old glass that used to stand on my dresser, it tried to give me what I wanted, tried to give me my face, but it kept showing me bits of faces that weren’t mine. There were silvers of Mom’s face, and Dad’s, and Aunt Mia’s, and Grammy Olivia’s, and others. (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 156-157).

Analysed as a metaphor, the multitude of faces Bird recognises when she looks at her own reflection could be regarded as her identity being fragmented: she is similar to her family perhaps physically, but also like others in terms of personality, such as Mia. When it comes to her mother, their relationship is a loving one, but Bird has ambivalent feelings towards her. She considers she cannot be the one cursing her: “Maybe she’s the enemy. Seems unlikely, though. We get along in a big-brother-little-sister kind of way” (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 158). At the same time, her difference in appearance unsettles her: “Mom and I have the same eyes. I’m all mixed up about seeing my eyes in a face like hers, her eyes in a face like mine.” (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 160), and she does not like being compared to her either: “Aunt Mia said: “Somehow I doubt that, but have it your way. You’re a deep one, Bird. Just like your mother.” *Don’t say I’m like her. Don’t say I’m like her.* That’s what I was yelling inside” (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 200). Boy, on the other hand, is aware of her daughter’s uneasiness because they behave in similar ways: “She’s growing into a huntress, every line in her clear and strong. She got her eyes from me, and when I talk, she dissects me with my own gaze” (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 275).

Additionally, Bird could have been interiorising the racism shown by her own family since she considers herself in an inferior position next to her mother: “Upstairs Mom checked her lipstick while I stood behind her holding two pairs of earrings, a pair in each hand. She’d picked them out and couldn’t decide which to wear. In the mirror I looked like her maid, and that made me want to throw the earrings at her head and run” (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 185). Oyeyemi does not only portray the racism suffered by African Americans, but also the Asian experience while the Korean and Vietnam wars were being fought (Lau 373). For instance, some classmates of Bird call her friend Louis a Vietcong and attack them, which makes Bird and Louis bond:

They sounded like they were kidding around, but the things they said —*Colored folks are so angry these days, lose their rug over nothing at all, rawwwrrrr, like wild animals. My dad says those Black Panthers are Vietcongs just waiting to happen. Give ‘em an inch and they’ll take a mile, gun us all down in broad daylight.* (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 180)

Bird is already thirteen by now and even if Arturo has been visiting Snow frequently during those years, his first daughter has not come back home yet. What’s more, Boy has not seen her either ever since she left, something that Olivia resents:

She knows what she is doing to that child, that’s why she can’t face her. And you know what I’ve told the woman. You know I told her she better beware the Gullah in me. I told her ‘If Agnes dies or I die, if either one of us dies before you let our baby come home, you’ll find there’s a curse on your head.’ She said fighting talk only makes her stubborn. Well, I warned her. (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 169)

Considering Olivia’s words and her treatment of Bird, she can also partially fit into the wicked queen character presented in “Little Snow White”. Both her and Boy are complex characters which cannot be contained into traditional archetypes, this being one of the characteristics of Oyeyemi’s novels, her inclusion of “uncomfortable themes and unsympathetic characters” (Barba Guerrero 40). Shockingly, Snow does not like her own grandmother either, as she confesses to Boy: “I think she might hate herself, but I can’t help her out there. I feel so little love for her. I want to, but just when I’m getting there, she says or does something that makes me go nuts” (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 285).

In the end, following a long back and forth of letters between Bird and Snow, Boy allows Bird to come back to Flax Hill, mostly encouraged by Bird wanting to meet her sister.

Both girls start to trust each other and talk about their lives through their correspondence and Bird even confesses not being able to see herself in mirrors, which Snow tries to rationalise:

In my other letter I asked if you're aware of what happens to girls who say they don't always appear in mirrors. Doctors get involved, Bird. Sometimes girls like that end up in clinic out in the middle of nowhere, being forced into ice baths and other terrible things I won't write about here. I just want you to be really sure you mean what you said. Are you sure? (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 206)

Once Bird confirms this is exactly what she meant, Snow surprises her admitting it has always happened to her too: "My reflection can't be counted on, she's not always there but I am, so maybe she's not really me... Well, what is she then? [...] I've decided to believe you. Maybe it means we're not supposed to be apart" (Oyeyemi *Boy, Snow, Bird* 207-208). This, however, is met by Bird with discomfort, as she believes she is laughing at her and undermining her experience: "Yeah, you're grown up and I'm not. You've made that very clear. Have you forgotten how it felt when you were thirteen and people tried to humor you?" (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 208). Their misunderstanding resides, according to Beauty Bragg, on "the limits of shared identification built on the experience of absence and loss" (128), as they have been through different experiences, some which Snow has never suffered since she is white passing.

When they finally meet in person, they are cautious around each other, despite their previous friendly conversations, especially Bird: "She looked more colored in person. [...] She smiled at me and the words I'd been about to say went into hiding" (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 263). Similarly, Boy and Snow have a reunion full of tension, but they are able to discuss how they feel, as Boy narrates in the third part of the novel:

"You feel I've treated you badly, Snow?"

"Yes, you have."

I'd like to know if Snow has come to feed on admiration, on the gentle tone voice take with her. Does everybody she crosses her path have to love her? [...] She's mad that I haven't been able to love her. Maybe she's afraid that I see something in her that she isn't able to see for herself. (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 282)

Boy and Snow, however, seemingly put their differences apart after this exchange and a "consented" slap they give each other to finally make peace. It is noteworthy, though, that both mother and daughter, Boy and Bird, have learned to distrust kindness, like they do with

Snow. This is something that Boy learned as a teen, perhaps because she was not used to being treated well: “You don't return people's smiles—it's perfectly clear to you that people can smile and smile and still be villains” (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 6).

When Snow returns home, something else happens that unites the women of the family. Frank Novak, Boy's father, has been around them for some time and he has even followed Bird once and spoke to her, telling her about how evil her daughter is. Boy, with her usual insecurities and doubts about herself, considers whether it might be true:

Frank's claim that I'm evil doesn't shock me so much, partly because I've questioned myself on the very same subject before. It's not my actions that raise the questions, but my inaction, the way I've consciously and consistently avoided chances to reduce other people's unhappiness (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 298).

Frank's visit sparked Mia's curiosity, as she was writing a piece on the Whitman's and the unusual upbringing they have been through due to their passing as white, casting Clara aside but keeping Arturo and Vivian Whitman at home. She started researching Boy's family too and found her mother, Frances Novak, who has been a transgender man since Boy was born and is her father Frank. Her mother, therefore, has been never dead or abandoned her like Boy thought, but she was actually her father all along. This is another instance of passing “as a form of survival, in this case passing as a man” (Ormond 163). Mia explains what happened before Boy was born:

Frank told me this himself. Frances was raped. It was an acquaintance of hers. [...]

You know how Frances says he became Frank? He says he looked in the mirror one morning when he was still Frances, and this man she'll never seen before was just standing there, looking back. Frances washed her face and fixed her hair and looked again, and the man was still there, wearing an exact copy of her skirt and sweater (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 293).

Again, the mirror becomes a recurrent element in the novel, a tool that only seems to misrepresent and haunt the female characters. If we consider it a magical mirror, like the one in “Little Snow White”, and accept its existence as such, Oyeyemi's novel could be described as having characteristics belonging to magic realism. This mode, born in Latin-America, is characterised by “the matter-of-fact inclusion of fantastic or mythical elements into seemingly realistic fiction” and often appears in postmodernist fiction¹ (Augustyn). Now that Boy knows the truth about her father, she decides she has to visit him in New York

¹ Due to the scope of this work, magic realism will not be further analysed.

and “break a spell” (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 299). Barba Guerrero claims it is not only Frank Novak who is submitted to this spell, for which a rational explanation is provided: “In *Boy, Snow, Bird*, female characters are entrapped in an ill relationality—a spell—based on gender and race constructs” (39). This is the enemy they have been fighting throughout the novel to define their identity against societal norms, an enemy even Frank Novak can be released from. For this trip, Boy takes Mia, Bird and Snow with her:

Olivia Whitman walked out of her house and into the road as Mia was driving us to the bus station. So we had to stop the car. She gestured for Mia to roll down the window, and when she was obeyed, Olivia said, “Where are you taking my grandchildren?” She tried to sound imperious, but she just sounded old.

Snow looked out of the other window and bit her lip. Bird almost startled the life out of Olivia by planting a noisy kiss on her cheek.

I told her to wait there, and that we’d be back for her, and Olivia stood aside and let Mia drive on. (Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* 307-308)

At the end of the novel then, the villain is no longer Boy, as she is the one trying to reunite her family, and it is possibly not Frank anymore either. It could be Olivia, angered by Boy’s decisions, who now occupies the role of the wicked queen, but she too has been deprived of the power she could have had once over her family.

Unlike in *Mr. Fox*, Oyeyemi does not need to use complex narrative shifts to revisit “Little Snow White”. In addition to her use of magic realism, which provides the story with the aura of the original fantastic fairy tale, Oyeyemi introduces characteristics typical of African-American folk tales and storytelling which may go under noticed. For instance, Bird tells the story of “La Belle Capuchine” to Snow in one of her letters, which she has heard from one of Olivia’s maids. La Belle Capuchine is an African American slave who has mastered imitation to the point she can pose for her white half-sister, Miss Margaux, as they look exceptionally alike except for the colour of their skin. The rest of the slaves do not associate with her due to her superiority complex and consider her a traitor. One day, their saviour, High John the Conqueror, arrives to free them and mistakes Miss Margaux for La Belle Capuchine. Even if La Belle tries to claim she is the real one, the rest of the slaves do not help her, and she is abandoned in the plantation. Once again, Oyeyemi subverts the roles adopted by black and white people, this time with the experience of passing, which is “a complex and ironic passing narrative: consistent with the genre, it is the fair-skinned Miss

Margaux who passes, but in this case she passes for the darker-skinned La Belle Capuchine.” (Lau 377). Lau believes the passage could be a parable of the two sisters, Bird and Snow, as well, a tale which “blurs the lines between us and them and undermines their traditional definition through skin color” (377).

This is not the only story focused on beauty appearing in the novel. Earlier on, Boy creates another tale with Mia, following the traditional beginning of any other fairy tale: “Once there was a pretty powerful magician. He spoke to the things around him, and as long as the thing he addressed had life in it, it obeyed him.” (Oyeyemi *Boy, Snow, Bird* 52). This magician is able to infuse beauty into women, but one day a farmer asks him to perform the opposite: he wants his wife to be ugly because he is frightened of her. Despite many attempts, the magician is not able to transform her since she is also magical. Her heart is guarded by a snake and therefore she is able to defend herself from men who treat women like objects. The collaborative nature of this tale, built by Mia and Boy, resembles how “African tales emerge out of participatory performance” (Lau 382). Both tales, Lau argues, “reimagine the cultural—and often deadly—power of beauty, and their shared tropes and themes reverberate in ways that unsettle the familiarity of fixed categories” (378).

“Little Snow White” may function as the main intertextual reference for *Boy, Snow, Bird*, but the use of African American folk tales along with “collective memories of racist and religious persecution and acts of violence, cultural discourses of beauty in relation to skin color” (Lau 385), allows Oyeyemi to challenge Western beliefs of whiteness as the epitome of beauty and discuss how beauty is just something we all shape, a construction of society. As Beauty Bragg explains, “Oyeyemi’s own ambiguous relationship to Nigeria can be seen as a prime mediating factor in this narrative” (124), this being the fusion of European and African traditions in storytelling. Positioning herself in an in-between space, Oyeyemi “emphasizes the process of developing an intersectional, global black subjectivity” (Bragg 129).

Boy, Snow, Bird twists the idea of the unidimensional villain, making it unclear for readers to determine who the true villains are. At the beginning of the novel, Frank Novak positions himself as the clear antagonist, with Boy as the victim, running away from an abusive household. Yet soon after Boy’s relationship with the Whitmans advances, she starts to play the role of the wicked stepmother who despises Snow. Olivia Whitman could be another villain too, considering her disdain for Bird and her hatred of anyone who would make her passing-as-white façade crumble. She does not hesitate even if they are her blood,

as her own daughter Clara suffered her abandonment. Despite their flaws, these imperfect characters are still worth of salvation, often adopting the role of the antagonist and departing from it in several instances throughout the novel, as in the case of Boy.

In these complex relationships between women, and particularly between mothers and daughters, beauty and race play a crucial role in the configuration of their identity. The central characters, Boy, Snow and Bird, explore their identity and go through a transformation as they grow and discover who they are, against the expectations set by society. While whiteness is regarded as the epitome of beauty and a factor that conditions social position and power, Oyeyemi challenges this idea by making Bird a loving child within the Whitman's family, a mixed-race child cherished by her white mother. In addition, she enriches this revision of one of the quintessential European fairy tales by including features of African American storytelling and tales with powerful female characters as their protagonists, as well as some elements belonging to magic realism, such as the use of the magical mirror, similar to the one in "Little Snow White". By doing so, Oyeyemi claims the right for other cultures to be present in Western dominant stories, as it is typical of postcolonial works.

3.3. *Gingerbread*

Unlike the previous works analysed, *Gingerbread* (2018) replicates characters' dynamics and existing tropes in fairy tale in a more subtle way. Its title alludes to the edible house from "Hansel & Gretel" the Grimms' tale which tackles children abandonment, poverty and its effects on families. Hansel and Gretel, two siblings, are left by themselves in the forest due to the inability of their parents to provide for them. It is their stepmother who suggests abandoning them and although their father rejects it, they attempt it once without success. The children, who have listened to their plans, cleverly leave pebbles behind to remember their way home. The second time, however, they get lost in the woods. There they find a cottage made of food belonging to an old woman. Unbeknownst to them, this woman is a witch who plans to devour the children but the siblings trick her and kill her before she can do it, steal her jewellery and find their way back home to their father, now a widower.

Gingerbread does not follow the story of a pair of siblings. As in *Boy*, *Snow*, *Bird*, the core of Oyeyemi's novel are three female characters from the Lee family: Margot, Harriet and Perdita, who are respectively the grandmother, mother and granddaughter. Both Margot

and Harriet are immigrants who moved to Britain in search for a better life. At the beginning of the novel, set in the late 2010s, the Lees are trying to be just like any other member within their community. Perdita, however, is very isolated and has no friends, while her mother, Harriet, is desperately trying to make her way into the Parent Power Association in Perdita's high school. Instead of depicting the stereotypical white community, Oyeyemi opts for a postcolonial diverse British society. The alumni of Perdita's school, like her, came from diverse backgrounds: "Emil Szep, Abigail Klein, Hyorin Nam, Gemma Jones (now Gemma Ahmad), Felix Nguyen [...] Collectively they were an embodiment of Cool Britannia before the concept had even had a name" (Oyeyemi *Gingerbread* 12).

Despite their fleeing from their home country, called Druhástrana, the Lees are very attached to one tradition: baking gingerbread, following a family recipe. Perdita was addicted to it as a child before she discovered her gluten intolerance, but Harriet continues to indulge her into it until a tragedy occurs. In an attempt to commit suicide, Perdita ingests an enormous amount of gingerbread, which leads to a stint in the ICUs and her suffering temporary muteness. When Harriet comes back home, she reads a note Perdita wrote with the reasons why she decided to eat the gingerbread: "*Don't misunderstand: not dead, just travelling. You know where. You'll be angry, but I have to see it just once! Please trust me and leave me where I am until I wake up?*" (Oyeyemi, *Gingerbread* 35). Harriet immediately understands her daughter must have tried to find access to Druhástrana, following someone else's advice. She suspects someone from their past, as almost no one knows how to find this country. Perdita, in fact, has always wanted to know more about her origins, which leads her to take such a farfetched decision as passing out to see it for herself.

Oyeyemi creates the fictional country of Druhástrana as an enigmatic and distant one, very fairy-tale like, leaving very few clues both for readers and characters like Perdita to figure what it could be like. In the beginning, Harriet googles her home country once, expecting to find information on her friend Gretel, a fellow Druhástranian, receiving an unhelpful answer from Wikipedia:

*Druhástrana (druhástranae) is the name of an alleged nation state of indeterminable geographic location. [...] To date, Druhástrana has only been formally recognized by three nations. (See: Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary.) Slovakia revoked recognition of Druhástrana without explanation on January 1st 2010, and Hungary followed suit on January 1st 2013. (Oyeyemi, *Gingerbread* 18-19)*

Yet, it is not Harriet, but Perdita, who receives news of Gretel from Druhástrana. Despite Harriet's initial disregard of admitting any truth in Perdita's note, she finds her daughter clutching an identical ring to one of hers, a ring that belonged to Gretel, corroborating her claims of finding their home country. After this incident, Harriet and Perdita come to an agreement: "Perdita will tell Harriet how she got to Druhástrana and Harriet will tell Perdita how she left it. [...] First Harriet will tell Perdita how she left Druhástrana. Only then will Perdita tell Harriet how she got there" (Oyeyemi, *Gingerbread* 51). From now on, Oyeyemi embeds a story within a story, with Harriet explaining how she fled, intercalated with the occasional comment from Perdita's seemingly taking dolls, Sago, Prim, Bonnie and Lollipop. Harriet begins her story, in a passage reminiscent of folk and fairy tales:

A girl grew up in a field. Well, in a house, with her family, but the house was surrounded by stalks of wheat as tall as saplings. The girl's earliest memories are framed in breeze-blown green and gold. Ice and moonlight, sunshine and monsoon, the wheat was there, tickling her, tipping ladybirds and other pets into her lap. (Oyeyemi, *Gingerbread* 53)

She reveals that Druhástrana is a small country, based on agriculture and farming, with only a few landmarks worth mentioning, but ones that seemed to be emerged out of a magical world, such as a huge shoe believed to belong to a giant Cinderella. One of those landmarks is the eerie Gretel's Well, which no one dares talk about:

If you dropped a stone there you had to listen intently for up to ten minutes before you heard it hit the bottom. This could mean that the well was exceedingly deep, or it could mean that some acquisitive creature lived in the well [...]. The name attached to it both suggested and withheld a story, and thus invention was forbidden. Children asked parents, younger siblings asked older siblings and all were told: *No story*. (Oyeyemi, *Gingerbread* 55)

Harriet never had much time to stop and think about it, since she had to help her parents in the farm and deliver the gingerbread her mother made as well, which still was not enough to survive. Here, the parallel with "Hansel & Gretel" is clearer: "Once the wheat was threshed and in sacks it was collected by the truck-load. That was when money was handed over, but evidently not enough, as the girl and her parents were hungry almost all the time. So were the families who lived nearby and worked alongside them" (Oyeyemi, *Gingerbread* 56). This poverty is not attributed only to poor results and lack of crops, but to the exploitation they suffered at the hands of the greedy fields' owner:

The circumstances of the farmstead families were dictated by a person, a theoretical person, a corporate letterhead really. Whatever the thing or person was, it had never met them and most likely didn't know their names or what they looked like. The Lees, Cooks, Coopers and Parkers farmed in exchange for places where they could live together in between attempts to meet this theoretical person's ever-varying requirements, requirements which went beyond the fantastic and left the realms of reality altogether. (Oyeyemi, *Gingerbread* 59)

Druhástrana is presented as a "feudal state", which "stands for contemporary modes of inequality" (Mills). By making Druhástrana a predominantly poor country dominated by a minority group, the elite, Oyeyemi begins her evaluation of a society that disregards the needs of its members and favours generating business and accumulating wealth instead. She does not miss the opportunity to incorporate criticism of unprecedented contemporary events, such as Brexit, which she replicates in the fictional country:

Druhástrana's Great Referendum (the one that had divorced it from all formal international relations and most informal ones too) had been brought about by a general taking of umbrage against all the foreigners who kept coming in and trying to propagate distracting inequalities [...]. What Druhástranians wanted was to keep things simple and concentrate on upholding financial inequality. Even that inequality could have been ironed out if the populace really wanted it, but singularity, the possibility of singularity, was something that the voting majority found impossible to sacrifice. (Oyeyemi, *Gingerbread* 114)

Entrapped in such world, Margot and Simon Lee's marriage starts deteriorating together with their financial wellbeing: "Each breath they drew condoned this end. On the upside his part in it wouldn't go on for very much longer. Like his parents and their parents there was little likelihood of living past the age of fifty" (Oyeyemi, *Gingerbread* 69). At this point, Margot has decided to look for the favour of her family, since she actually comes from a very rich family, who made their fortune in dubious legal ways and disowned Margot when she decided to marry the impoverished Simon Lee. Although Margot's father is unwilling to help her, she receives a valuable piece of information regarding her home: the owner is married to a distant relative of theirs, a woman called Clio Kercheval. Margot decides that, rather than seeing her daughter follow her steps, Harriet will be sent away, like Hansel and Gretel, but to work in Clio's gingerbread factory. Shortly after, Harriet chooses to disobey her mother and hide in Gretel's Well, since all the town is looking for her. There, she meets her friend Gretel, who, she does not know yet, is Clio Kercheval's daughter, also hiding.

Before entering the well, Harriet drops a packet of gingerbread, making Gretel come out of it, scaring the girl:

The person inside the well said: *What?! I LOVE gingerbread. How did you know?*

[...]

This is super. I was just getting hungry. Hi, I'm Gretel. And you are...?

Harriet didn't say a word.

The girl laughed uneasily. *Some sort of fairy godmother in training? Don't understand Druhástranian?*

Harriet still couldn't speak.

Oh, said the girl. Right. I just popped out of this well and...right. (Oyeyemi, Gingerbread 75)

Harriet comes up the well eventually, as other girls from her town are looking for her, but returns there the following night, finding Gretel outside. She asks Gretel if she knows why the well is called like that, but Gretel's explanation, instead of reassuring her, frightens her deeply:

Gretel had to tell her. *Some girl died here.*

That's sad, Harriet said. How long ago, do you think?

A couple of hours ago, Gretel said.

Harriet laughed politely, but Gretel sighed and said: *No, seriously.*

Where one girl had sat with her back against the well's mouth there were now two, Harriet Lee and a murderous sprite with two pupils in each eye. Harriet regretted having left the cottage that night. (Oyeyemi, *Gingerbread* 84)

Gretel has pushed a girl who went after her down the well, Dottie, one of Harriet's neighbours and believes her dead. However, Harriet pulls her out and saves her, even though Gretel was already coming up with excuses to cover her disappearance. Afterwards, she seems to feel no guilt over it: "Dottie had been bashed on the head so hard she'd lost her sense of smell. [...] Yes, Gretel felt remorse, but she didn't say so. She would only say, *Oh well*. She'd pulled Dottie up, hadn't she? What more did everyone want from her?" (Oyeyemi, *Gingerbread* 90).

Although Harriet becomes friendly with Gretel and believes her to be the only friend she has ever had, she gets an ominous feeling about her, from the way she acts and speaks. For example, when she asks Gretel about where they will see each other again when they grow up, she claims she will never grow up, since she works as a changeling:

Changeling as in nonhuman replacement for a human child?

Changeling as in changeling. We've had bad press.

Right. What are your duties, then?

*Mainly we assist people who've changed their minds in a way that means their lives have to be different too. (Oyeyemi, *Gingerbread* 132)*

Although it is never confirmed throughout the novel whether Gretel is truly a fairy changeling or not, Gretel's evil nature would explain her strange behaviour. Harriet sporadically keeps in touch with her when she moves from her town along with other farmers' daughters. Clio Kercheval becomes their benefactor, by "turning the Lee family gingerbread into a commercial concern" (Oyeyemi, *Gingerbread* 91). In the capital city, Harriet has trouble adapting, since the dream of escaping from the farm and improving hers and the other girls living conditions does not seem to be attainable. Clio has taken the four teenage girls along with other couple dozen farmers' girls to merely dress them up, look beautiful and attract clients in "what Harriet describe in letters to Margot as an authenticity theme park" (Oyeyemi, *Gingerbread* 99). The gingerbread house from "Hansel & Gretel" is replaced by this amusement park the girls live and work in:

The house Harriet, Dottie, Zu and the other Gingerbread Girls slept and worked in was cinnamon-coloured, and had a sugar-dusted effect to its roof and windowsills. The girls were too daunt to be the legitimate inhabitants of a house like that, so Clio met with nutritionists, came up with a potion that guaranteed vigour and had the girls eat seven meals a day. (Oyeyemi, *Gingerbread* 100)

Like the witch fattens up Hansel and Gretel, the Gingerbread Girls have to be overfed too, so they appear healthy and taken care of. Clio Kercheval, however, is tricking both the girls and their families, as Harriet discovers. The letters they were supposedly receiving from home were fake and even more worryingly, the banknotes they were giving as payment were equally forged, which Clio tries to justify when Harriet confronts her: "But of course I was going to pay you, silly. It's just that as a mother I know how careless children are with money, so I issued these slips as tokens you can exchange for your actual wages" (Oyeyemi,

Gingerbread 135). Tired of her lies and hypocrisy, Harriet resigns and leaves the Gingerbread Girls.

Even though she aims to return home, there is no future for her in the village any longer. When Margot calls her, she has more unexpected news for her: they are leaving for England, thanks to the help of yet another Kercheval, but only the two of them, which means leaving Simon Lee behind. Harriet, having lived a horrible experience of exploitation, working as a minor and being paraded around like a doll, is suspicious about the opportunity: “*So this Kercheval becomes my sponsor. OK. And what do I have to do in return? He says he has no expectations whatsoever, but I imagine he’d like to see some gratitude. Shouldn’t be too hard*” (Oyeyemi, *Gingerbread* 140). With a lot of uncertainty, and despite their reservations about the Kercheval’s, mother and daughter begin their search for a stable home. But, to begin with, the journey is not easy. They leave Druhástrana as cargo, after ingesting gingerbread and passing out to be transported to Europe, similarly to what Perdita devised to enter the country, although their decision had an explanation. Harriet argues they were relocated from the hotel room they were staying in to two trunks by some sort of professional team.

The new Kercheval long-lost relatives they moved in with are two brothers, Aristide and Ambrose and their wives Tamar and Kenzilea, who each has a teenage boy around Harriet’s age, called Gabriel and Remy. Harriet finds the family posh, unreadable, and not too trustful, since they do not get along either among themselves. When Margot and Harriet start to become wary of the nature of Ari Kercheval’s business, fearing he may be involved in illegal activities, Harriet even suspects he works as a hitman, they decide to move out of the house and find their own place, even if this means Margot must overwork to support her and her daughter. However, Harriet cannot escape from the Kerchevals so easily and after Gabriel visits one of Margot’s jobs at an antique shop, she begins a romantic relationship with him. Soon after she becomes pregnant with Harriet and although she does not wish to have a child so young, since she is only seventeen and Gabriel nineteen, she ignores Gabriel’s pressure to get an abortion. Then, she becomes closer to Rémy, who at first seems willing to take care of the children but ends up demanding the same as his cousin. This is preceded by Tamar Kercheval’s angry reaction, as she believes the Lees are only after their fortune, considering their social position:

So what now —what is this— can’t wait a little longer for a passport so you’re having a passport baby? Or is it that you think you’ll get more from us if you join the family? Thought

—we were taking you in— but we— were the ones— completely taken in by you—little tramp
—after all we’ve given toy—how—how dare you try to get more? (Oyeyemi, *Gingerbread*
225)

Finally, Harriet raises Perdita on her own, with her mother’s help. Now that her story is over, it is Perdita’s turn to explain how she found Druhástrana. She confesses she counted with the help of a private investigator and that Ambrose and Tamar were the ones who told her how to find Gretel, which prompts a family reunion with the Kerchevals, full of tension. In the end, they come to an agreement:

But Ari was unfolding his plan, and Harriet had to listen if she wanted to help.

‘You came to us willing to join our family, and you did it. You’re family. What we want to do now is start three new families. This was originally Tamar’s plan, actually.’

This was to be this year’s Kercheval Good Deed: Ari proposed to begin with three houses, each house to be occupied by a group of people not necessarily related by blood who were prepared to live together as a family unit. (Oyeyemi, *Gingerbread* 257)

Their task now is not to choose the people that will move to each of the house, but to select the places where they will stay. Three houses had been suggested to Ari and Harriet discovers all of them are the places her and Gretel had thought of for a reunion when they were teenagers, and unsurprisingly, the three of them are rumored to be haunted. Margot, Harriet, Perdita and Tamar inspect them along with a state agent. This family cooperation is what Perdita had been yearning for, to unite the Lees and the Kerchevals, and luckily, it is what she gains from the experience:

‘Feeling haunted yet, Margot?’

‘No. You, Perdita?’

‘Nothing. What you saying, Mum?’

‘I’m fine. Hang on, who started the “Are-you-OK” chain?’

‘No need to stress yourself out, Mum...it was Tamar.’

‘Me? I hadn’t said anything yet. Only joking...it was me, it was me. And I’m fine too. Goodnight.’

‘Goodnigh!’

‘Night.’

‘G’night.’

‘Goodnight...’ And Perdita Lee, who had been counting the ‘goodnight’s, smiled in the darkness. (Oyeyemi, *Gingerbread* 268)

Harriet does not see Gretel in the first house, neither in the second nor the third, which they cannot even access since it was in an island that suddenly sunk. It had always been almost impossible to spot, only a couple people were able to see it recently. Among them was a German tourist who described it as “a classic gingerbread house”, with a sign in the front door impossible to decipher, but the state agent, Miss Maszkeradi, did, since she was Druhástranian: “*Only those who have nothing can enter this place.*” (Oyeyemi, *Gingerbread* 290). Another woman, the only last person to make to the door, also explain it could only be unlocked using “two strangely shaped rings” (Oyeyemi, *Gingerbread* 290), which correspond to the ones Gretel and Harriet own. Here lies Harriet inability to reconnect with Gretel: by the end of the novel, she is not a person who has nothing. She has started a new relationship with a woman, Salomea, her daughter is safe again, and the Kercheval-Lees have finally resolved their differences. The ending reintroduces the magical elements Oyeyemi employs throughout the novel, like Gretel being a changeling, the distant and enigmatic country of Druhástrana, or the gothic-like, haunted houses they explore.

Gingerbread can be reduced to two essential themes Oyeyemi gives prominence to: mother and daughter relationships, and the criticism of exploitation in our capitalistic world. In the novel, Oyeyemi explores what a mother is willing to do for her child, especially what Margot does for Harriet, breaking the cycle of poverty in which their village is immersed: “With each generation the Lees grew poorer and more dutiful. So did their co-farmers, the Parkers, the Coopers and the Cooks. They didn’t know how to change anything. They only knew how to continue” (Oyeyemi, *Gingerbread* 69). Contrary to them, Margot and Harriet are able to turn the gingerbread family recipe into something of financial value for Clio Kercheval, although this becomes the source of Harriet’s unhappiness: “Harriet could stomach any mess, but she was Margot-sick” (Oyeyemi, *Gingerbread* 107). The bond between them is so close that Margot does not make the mistake of sending her daughter away again, but decides to immigrate with her too, accepting her relatives’ offer to live in England. Despite their generosity, once they decide to live on their own, the hardships reappear. Mother and daughter begin their independent lives in a flat in a poor condition and Margot has to balance three jobs to provide for them both, which Harriet is grateful for but

cannot understand, since she would be able to live with less as long as it meant being together:

As they painted, Harriet made an attempt to ask a question via telepathy. She would've loved to know why Margot went on dragging her daughter all over the place in the name of some better way of life that probably didn't even exist, doing this in the full knowledge that said daughter had no special needs aside from that of being wherever her mother was. (Oyeyemi, *Gingerbread* 188-189)

Margot is also faced with complex moral decisions, like having to reject clients because of their discrimination of immigrants, consequently losing potential jobs: "She tells him she can't think of anything more sad or less interesting than putting her heart and mind into making him feel secure. How on earth can she make someone who believes there are too many foreigners in this country feel secure?" (Oyeyemi, *Gingerbread* 197). Eventually, Margot establishes herself as an interior decorator and Harriet becomes an adult education teacher. Even though their life has improved considerably over the years, Harriet seems to inherit Margot's guilt in respect to the way she has raised Perdita, away from the rest of her family: "Harriet is embarrassed that she's left her daughter so starved of fatherly and grandfatherly affection that the girl's just going pledging herself to any male Kercheval that crosses her path." (Oyeyemi, *Gingerbread* 242). In the end, the relationship between the three Lees reflects how "women struggle to preserve their families", in their case having to "repeatedly flee from constraining institutions, whether in the form of a farmstead, a factory, or a benefactor's family mansion" (Huang).

In her novel, Oyeyemi draws parallelisms with our contemporary society, whether by alluding to Brexit, evil corporations which hide child labour and exploitation under a disguise of false modernity, such as Clio Kercheval's, or by including the rest of the wealthy Kerchevals. Even if they are apparently simply benefactors making a kind gesture for a distant family member, their inclination to help is unconvincing:

Every now and then the adult Kerchevals would make offhand references to a collective good deed they carried out annually. The less traceable it was in terms of possibility/probability, the more likely they were to take it on. [...] From this talk Margot inferred that taking in the Lees was this year's good deed, and also that annual good deed was meant to be therapeutic for the family conscience. (Oyeyemi, *Gingerbread* 154)

Ari's decision to host the Lees in the family mansion, therefore, helps him "soothe his guilty conscience with an act of charity" (Huang). In spite of the Lees and Kerchevals

differences in class, race is not an indication of lower class, like it happens for instance in *Boy, Snow, Bird*, since neither of the families are white. Race is also represented positively, with many instances in which blackness is associated with beauty, as Harriet believes when she meets Gabriel and Rémy Kercheval for the first time: “When Harriet got a proper look at the cousins she thought, *Seriously? Do they seriously have to look like this?* It was like looking at faces printed on banknotes—no, they were a pair of black pre-Raphaelite muses” (Oyeyemi, *Gingerbread* 152). This is also the case of Gretel Kercheval, who differs from Harriet in her stylish appearance: “She saw that the girl was of similar build and skin colour to her, but didn’t wear her hair in the dreadlocks typical of black peasants in Druhástrana. This girl’s hair was gathered up into a bun of modest size” (Oyeyemi, *Gingerbread* 76).

Beauty, therefore, could be a factor associated not with race, but with social position. As Pilcher and Whelehan argue, class can be perceived as “the pre-eminent source of social inequality and identity in contemporary Western industrialised societies, and relatedly, what the relationship is between class, gender and ‘race’” (13-14). The possibility of moving from one class to another is presented by Oyeyemi more accurately with Margot, who comes from a rich family and loses her privileges when she decides to marry into the Lee family. As Mills points out, “mobility operates on vectors of privilege and displacement, [...] while fortune might change in a moment, it is structured over lifetimes and generations.” At first, this is not the case for Margot, since she is rejected by her upper-class father. However, her family connections are used throughout the novel in order to help her and Harriet escape the kind of life the Lees have been trapped in for generations. In contrast, the Kerchevals do exploit their generational wealth, something Margot and Harriet systematically refuse to be part of.

In this loose contemporary retelling of “Hansel & Gretel”, Oyeyemi focuses once again on the importance of mother and daughter relationships, as well as family ones, while using them to explore poverty and its impact on those forced to immigrate. Work exploitation and the disparity between social classes is also emphasised in the novel as two prominent problems present in our society, problems which the female characters must fight against in order to find a stable home. Aside from tackling these struggles, *Gingerbread* creates a fictional world which closely resembles real life and yet differentiates itself in its magical atmosphere, with rumored haunted houses, evil fairies passing as children, talking dolls and distant countries which may or not exist.

4. Conclusions

As we have seen throughout this work, the revision of fairy tales in contemporary literature is a practice that celebrates their prominence and explores which values may still be applicable to the present and which may not. Fairy tales, both in their origins and in later retellings, work as a reflection of human nature and intricated human relationships, depicting life-turning events, such as the loss of a parent, the effects of poverty on low-class families or being trapped in an abusive relationship. Many contemporary retellings choose to depart from some of these tropes in order to examine other concerns, like the role gender, race and class play towards the formation of identities, filling the gaps for matters which may not have been even regarded in the literary canon.

Despite the revision of three completely different fairy tales, the three novels by Helen Oyeyemi that have been analysed have their effective deconstruction of traditional archetypes in common. *Mr. Fox* showcases the gender violence implicit not only in the original “Bluebeard” tale, but in many other contemporary fictional accounts, while also achieving a hopeful ending for a marriage which does not imply putting two women against each other for the love of the male character. Violence is a pivotal topic as well in *Boy, Snow, Bird*, perpetrated by family members, especially parents against children. This violence may be caused by the struggle to develop one’s identity in a demanding and cruel society which proves to be a hazardous territory for women, resulting in problems with self-image and damaged relationships with other women. If race is a determinant factor in this fictional setting in the 1930s, class occupies its place in the late 2010s in Oyeyemi’s *Gingerbread*. Replacing the appealing but deadly-trap house of “Hansel & Gretel” with a modern gingerbread factory which exploits the teenage girls working there under the pretense of escaping from poverty, Oyeyemi criticises capitalism and depicts the adversities undergone in the displacement of families.

Even though uncomfortable and slightly disturbing themes are confronted in the retellings, Oyeyemi’s novels are infused with the fantastic and magical atmosphere present in fairy tales, including imaginary characters coming into life, people who do not appear in mirrors, talking dolls and countries no one can fully confirm exist among other elements. By altering pre-existing worlds, Oyeyemi provides new interpretations which favour diversity and more positive views of differing identities, and also transforms female characters and their vision as wicked, too curious, or weak, depending on the tale being retold.

With an evident deep knowledge of primary sources, Oyeyemi crafts respectful transformations of said sources and makes stories her own, unique, at times disorienting work. Studied under the lens of postmodernism and considering her work from a feminist point of view, Oyeyemi experiments not only with tropes and her highlight of female characters, but with form, shifting narratives and presenting confronting point of views, experimenting with chapters varying in length or embedding stories within stories in the narration. Her various influences as Nigerian-born but London-raised author are palpable in that respect, breathing diverse cultures and characters into her novels. Oyeyemi, who seems unafraid of being playful and unexpected, has established herself as part of the new voices following the steps of authors who dared revisit fairy tales, such as Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood. However, Oyeyemi's ethnical background and her ability to provide a new perspective on traditional European fairy tales makes her stand from such authors, being part of a new generation.

As for the possibilities for further research, there is a lack of academic research on Oyeyemi's novel *Gingerbread* in comparison to her previous works, as well as on her collection of shorts stories *What Is Yours Is Not Yours* (2016), which could also be examined in connection to fairy tales. Oyeyemi could also be studied considering her use of magical realism in most of her works, such as in her most recent one *Peaces* (2021). Apart from this author, I believe the retelling phenomenon is finding its rightful place not only in adult fiction but in young adult literature, which could also be worth researching about. Many authors addressing younger audiences are transforming fairy tales into much more diverse stories, with queer revisions, such as *Cinderella Is Dead* (2020), by Kalynn Bayron, or *Girl, Serpent, Thorn* (2020) by Melissa Bashardoust, who is inspired both by Persian fairy tales and "Sleeping Beauty". Other authors are also setting fairy tales in new contexts, such as Marissa Meyer, who has written *The Lunar Chronicles Series* (2012-2016), locating classic fairytales in futuristic settings.

Personally, I consider fairy tale retellings an almost inexhaustible source of insight into contemporary society and the values that continue to shape us into a global community. Helen Oyeyemi has well proven to be an outstanding voice updating tradition, portraying changes in a globalised, diverse society, and earning her place in the new postcolonial British literature. I believe it is also the time to both celebrate and expect a generation of young writers whose perspectives will continue to enrich traditional storytelling and provide a mirror for new audiences to feel represented.

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