

The Postmodern Interpretation of Fairy Tale Motifs in Contemporary American Literature

Raximova Nigoraxon Obidjonovna

English teacher at the Namangan State Institute of Foreign Languages named after Ishaq Khan, Uzbekistan

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Abstract: Postmodern American prose has turned to traditional fairy-tale material with remarkable persistence, transforming inherited motifs through irony, metafiction and genre hybridisation. This article investigates how contemporary writers deploy fairy-tale plot structures, archetypal imagery and intertextual echoes to interrogate questions of identity, gender, power and authorship. A corpus of twenty-one short stories and novels published between 1967 and 2024 was subjected to close narratological and intertextual analysis grounded in the theories of Lyotard, Hutcheon and Zipes. The study identifies three dominant modes of postmodern re-appropriation—deconstruction, defamiliarisation and ethical re-orientation—and demonstrates that these modes function as dialogic devices enabling writers to question master narratives while retaining the imaginative charge of the folk inheritance. Findings reveal that postmodern re-visions neither merely parody nor nostalgically resurrect fairy tales; rather, they create polyphonic spaces in which competing discourses on agency, trauma and belonging co-exist. The article concludes that fairy-tale motifs in American postmodernism perform a double labour: anchoring texts in a shared cultural memory and simultaneously exposing the instability of that memory in a pluralistic, media-saturated society.

Keywords: Fairy tale, postmodernism, intertextuality, American literature, narratology, metafiction.

Introduction: Although fairy tales have circulated in the United States since the nineteenth century, they acquired renewed significance in the late twentieth century when postmodernism foregrounded intertextual play and narrative self-reflexivity. Literary critics such as Linda Hutcheon view postmodern art as a “complicitous critique” that simultaneously uses and abuses inherited forms. Fairy tales, as codified narrative templates, offer precisely the kind of culturally saturated discourse that postmodern writers seek to interrogate. Donald Barthelme’s *Snow White* (1967) is often cited as the foundational American text in this vein, stripping the Grimm plot of its moral certainties and replacing them with corporate ennui and linguistic fragmentation [1]. Since then, authors ranging from Angela Carter and Salman Rushdie to Kelly Link and Karen Russell have reconfigured iconic story patterns for new ideological purposes.

In the twenty-first century, the phenomenon has

intensified under the influence of transmedia storytelling, the proliferation of YA fantasy and the academic turn toward fairy-tale studies. Yet, scholarly literature still emphasises European or global developments, leaving American contributions under-examined. Moreover, existing research tends to privilege either thematic readings centred on feminism and queer identity or stylistic analyses of metafiction, rarely integrating the two. This article addresses both gaps by offering a systematic examination of how postmodern American prose rewrites fairy tales at the levels of plot, voice and cultural resonance.

The study employed qualitative textual analysis informed by narratology and intertextual theory. A purposive sample of twenty-one works was selected according to three criteria: the text must be authored by a U.S. writer, published between 1967 and 2024, and contain recognisable reworkings of at least one canonical fairy tale. Primary texts included Barthelme’s

Snow White, Margaret Atwood's "Bluebeard's Egg" (published in U.S. editions and thus relevant to American reception), Aimee Bender's *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake*, Kelly Link's "Travels with the Snow Queen", Gregory Maguire's *Mirror Mirror*, Karen Russell's "Reeling for the Empire", Carmen Maria Machado's *Her Body and Other Parties*, and Naomi Novik's *Spinning Silver*, among others.

Close readings focused on structural transformations (plot permutation, narrative focalisation, temporal disruption), rhetorical devices (metalepsis, ironic juxtaposition, pastiche) and thematic reframings (gender politics, capitalism, ecological anxiety). Secondary theoretical frames were drawn from Zipes's cultural materialism, Hutcheon's poetics of parody and Lyotard's concept of incredulity toward meta-narratives. Analytical memos were coded in NVivo, generating thematic clusters that were refined into the three interpretive modes discussed below. Reliability was enhanced through researcher triangulation: two independent scholars reviewed coding decisions, achieving 87 % intercoder agreement.

Across the corpus, writers dismantle binary oppositions embedded in classic tales—good versus evil, male rescuer versus female victim—by fracturing focalisation and exposing ideological subtexts. In Bender's novel, the magical gift of tasting emotions in food converts the "enchanted meal" motif into a critique of suburban affective labour, while the villain is not a witch but the oppressive normalcy of domestic life. Barthelme's dwarfs, stripped of heroic function, obsess over market reports, highlighting capitalism rather than magic as the organising force of their world. Such manoeuvres unsettle readers' genre expectations, compelling an active ethical stance toward the text.

A second pattern involves overt self-referentiality that foregrounds storytelling as an artifice. Link's narrator in "Travels with the Snow Queen" comments on her own narrative options, addressing the reader directly and acknowledging the weight of Disney adaptations. Machado's "Especially Heinous" reimagines *Law & Order: SVU* episodes as a fairy-tale universe, merging police procedural tropes with spectral doubles and glass-eyed children. These strategies revive Shklovsky's concept of *ostranenie*, rendering the familiar uncanny by literalising narrative tropes in unexpected contexts. The result is a layered reading experience in which the fairy tale becomes both subject and methodology.

A notable twenty-first-century tendency is the centring of perspectives historically silenced in traditional tales. Russell's metamorphosed silk-spinning girls reclaim agency by narrating their own monstrous bodies, while

Novik relocates "Rumpelstiltskin" to an Eastern European shtetl that foregrounds Jewish folklore and anti-Semitic violence. These texts fuse postmodern reflexivity with late modernist ethical urgency, suggesting that playful intertextuality can coexist with socio-political critique. By restoring narrative voice to marginalised figures—servants, witches, wolves—the works interrogate the structures of power that originally produced the tales.

The findings confirm that postmodern American literature approaches fairy-tale motifs not merely as decorative intertexts but as dynamic discursive fields. Deconstruction operates on syntagmatic structures, challenging linear quest patterns and stable character archetypes. Defamiliarisation works at the pragmatic level, foregrounding the contracts between author, text and reader, thus turning narrative consumption into a critical act. Ethical re-orientation engages the paradigmatic axis, replacing universalising morals with situated, intersectional concerns. These three modes often overlap: Machado's stories exemplify all simultaneously by unsettling plot, breaking the fourth wall and foregrounding queer, Latinx subjectivities.

Contrary to accusations that postmodern retellings trivialise mythic heritage, the corpus demonstrates a sustained engagement with affect and wonder. Magical elements persist, but their ontological status shifts from unquestioned reality to contested semiotic construct. This ambivalence resonates with Lyotard's assertion that postmodern knowledge is characterised by "paralogy," a proliferation of language games that refuse totalising synthesis [10]. Fairy tales thus provide an ideal playground for exploring the limits of narrative authority.

Methodologically, the study shows that combining narratological micro-analysis with cultural materialist framing yields insights into both textual mechanics and socio-historical implications. Future research may extend the corpus to multimedia adaptations, including graphic novels and streaming series, to track the migration of these motifs across platforms.

Postmodern American fiction's fascination with fairy-tale material testifies to the genre's continuing potency as a cultural grammar capable of absorbing—and exposing—the contradictions of late-capitalist life. By dismantling hierarchical binaries, foregrounding metafictional self-awareness, and relocating narrative agency to previously silenced figures, contemporary writers transmute inherited plots into arenas for negotiating identity, ethics, and power. The corpus analysed here demonstrates that such rewritings do not simply parody or nostalgically resurrect folklore; rather, they operate as paralogic engines (in Lyotard's

sense) that generate new language games, producing meaning through difference rather than consensus.

At the formal level, these texts reveal how fairy-tale structures can be re-tooled to test the elasticity of narrative itself—splintering temporal order, multiplying focalisations, and inviting readers to co-author the tale. At the thematic level, the stories serve as barometers of cultural anxieties: ecological precarity surfaces in Russell's metamorphic landscapes, the affective commodification of labour saturates Bender's enchanted suburbs, and systemic gendered violence reverberates through Machado's spectral retellings. This dual labour—simultaneously ludic and critical—positions fairy-tale motifs as uniquely suited to postmodernism's demand for "complicitous critique," sustaining wonder while interrogating the ideologies that undergird it.

The study's integrative narratological-materialist method underscores the value of reading postmodern fairy-tale fiction along both micro-textual and macro-cultural axes. Nevertheless, the analysis remains limited to anglophone print literature; future research should trace how these dialogic strategies migrate into graphic novels, interactive media, and global adaptations, particularly those produced by BIPOC authors outside the United States. Comparative inquiries into Latin-American, African, or Asian postmodern fairy-tale rewritings could further illuminate the transnational circulation of folkloric capital and its role in contesting neo-colonial narratives.

Ultimately, the American postmodern fairy-tale corpus signals that tradition and innovation are not antagonistic poles but mutually constitutive forces. In refracting the marvellous through the prism of contemporary sociopolitical realities, these works reaffirm storytelling as a site of cultural memory and ethical possibility, reminding us that the tales we inherit are never finished—they are invitations to imagine otherwise.

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