Ecological Thought in German Literature and Culture

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Chapter 20

Grimms’ Fairy Tales and its Eco-Poetical Impact on Christa Wolf’s Störfall

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When the Grimm Brothers began to take an interest in traditional fairy tales at the beginning of the nineteenth century, they did not focus on collecting and publishing genuinely “green” or “ecological” texts. However, they did make several modifications to the earlier versions which gave their Kinder- und Hausmärchen (KHM; Children’s and Household Fairy Tales) a unique style with a distinctive recognition value (cf. Pöge-Alder 2016: 27–38; Schmitz-Emans 2013a; Neuhaus 2005: 1–18; Wagner 2001; Freund 1996: 189–190). These partly editorial, partly literary revisions (cf. Martus 2009: 185–221; Rölleke 2004) also created a specific view of human-nature relationship that is popular to this day (cf. Stobbe 2016). This does not pertain to all of Grimms’ fairy tales, which are in fact very heterogeneous; some of the most canonized fairy tales, however, convey “concepts and representations of nature” that allow insights into “how the natural is defined and the connections between humans and the environment are characterized, and which values and cultural functions are assigned to nature” (Heise 2008: 146; cf. Wanning 2005 and 2006). Therefore, the specific human-nature relationship in Grimms’ fairy tales is analyzed in the first part.

The second part attends to the question, to what extent Grimms’ fairy tales constitute an eco-poetical impulse for the literature of the environmentally conscious 1980s (cf. Brenner 2004: 321). Textually, the expression “eco-poetical” aims at implications that, in regard to the human-nature relationship, can be deduced from references to fairy tales as well as from their linguistic-aesthetic realization. As an example, Christa Wolf’s novel Störfall is chosen, because it contains two intertextual references to Gimms’ fairy tales, which raise the question if thereby the text might create “counter-images of ecologically sustainable relationships between humankind and nature” (Goodbody 1999: 79)—a typical question in ecocriticism (cf. Zapf 2008 and 2016).
interpretive approaches are also crucial in this approach: (a) literature gives nature a voice, and (b) the deconstruction of cultural patterns (Goodbody 1999: 79). The focus is on the question to what extent these aspects are of relevance to Wolf’s *Störfall*, as well as on what kind of additional (eco-) poetical value the references to Grimms’ fairy tales hold.

**“GREEN” PERSPECTIVES ON GRIMMS’ FAIRY TALES**

German culture is famous for its fairy tale tradition, especially that of the Grimm Brothers. Since 2005, the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* are on the list of the UNESCO Memory of the World. Hence, children around the world grow up with typical fairy tales such as *Hänsel und Gretel* (KHM 15, Hansel and Gretel) and *Der Wolf und die sieben Geißlein* (KHM 5, The Wolf and the Seven Young Goats). Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm were neither the first nor the last to collect, edit, and rewrite fairy tales. Johann Gustav Büsching, Benedikte Naubert, and Johann August Musäus, for instance, had already published fairy tale collections in the late eighteenth century (Rölleke 2004: 21–22), and Ludwig Bechstein, among others, followed the Grimm Brothers in the middle of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, it was the Grimm Brothers who were strongly connected with a typical German fairy tale tradition, thereby offering a certain and rather characteristic view on nature and the world as a whole. Albeit central for fairy tales, this aspect is rather unexplored compared to feminist, psychological, or educational readings.

Several fairy tales, like *Rothkäppchen* (KHM 26, Little Red Riding Hood), *Aschenputtel* (KHM 21, Cinderella), *Der kleine Däumling* (Little Thumbling), *Blaubart* (Bluebeard), or *Der gestiefelte Kater* (Puss in Boots), have European predecessors such as the fairy tales of Charles Perrault (cf. Uther 2008; Rölleke 2004). Nevertheless, Giovanni Francesco Straparola and Giambattista Basile also had important impacts on the European fairy tale tradition (cf. Bottigheimer 2009). Since the Grimm Brothers intended to create a collection of purely German stories, they initially removed these non-German fairy tales from their work as soon as they realized their origins. This endeavor, however, did not work out since fairy tales, like nearly every type of literature, have transnational sources, literary traditions, and writing conventions. They were a result of cultural transfers, crossed language borders, and were intermingled with themes and topics from other tales. *Dornröschen* (KHM 50, Sleeping Beauty), for instance, was first published by Charles Perrault in the seventeenth century. The question whether it was first passed on orally and later recorded in written form by Perrault or whether it was the other way around may be dispensed in this context. In fact, it is important to notice that Perrault’s fairy tales came to Germany not only in
written form but also by oral tradition. French Huguenot immigrants brought them as part of their orally transmitted children’s literature to Hesse, one of the German states that encouraged the religious refugees from France to settle there because Hesse, like Prussia, considered them to be educated, economically successful people. Originally, when the Grimm Brothers in Kassel started to collect and revise fairy tales in Kassel (which is situated in Hesse), they primarily did it for Clemens Brentano who planned a similar project with so-called folk and fairy tales, as in his poem and song collection *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. Since Brentano failed to print the collection on time, the Grimms decided to publish the fairy tales on their own (cf. e.g., Rölleke 2004: 32–37).

In the preface of the second edition in 1819, they described their fairy tales as a project aimed at protecting the literary oral culture from getting lost (cf. Grimm 2012, vol. 1: 11–15). The emphasis on a German oral fairy tale tradition was part of a politically motivated concept of “*Volksliteratur*” that had its roots, among others, in Johann Gottfried Herder’s emphasis on a genuine German literary tradition in the late eighteenth century (cf. Rölleke 2004: 25). In their preface, the Grimm Brothers used metaphorical pictures to frame their work within the notion of protecting the last relics of a formerly rich “*Volksliteratur*”-culture, calling it part of a once rich “nature”-folkpoetry. One such metaphor was the picture of a field that was destroyed by a storm with only very few ears of corn remaining, hidden in the hedges nearby. Poor people harvested and valued corn as a source of food for the winter or as a provision for the future. The same is true for old songs and fairy tales that had almost been forgotten and only survived in the memories of a few people, so the Brothers Grimm argue. For the corn, the hedges are a place that it can (temporarily) hold onto; this is what a seat by the oven, a quiet forest, or the human phantasy is for fairy tales (cf. Grimm 2012, vol. 1: 11).

Due to this preface, a far-reaching mental image was born—the image of an old woman telling orally recorded fairy tales to children. Engraved illustrations by Ludwig Richter (1803–1884) for Ludwig Bechstein’s *Märchenbuch* (*Book of Fairy Tales*; published 1853 and 1857), which includes many fairy tales of the Grimm Brothers, reinforced this picture and made it popular. Richter’s illustrations show typical elements of the Biedermeier period. In the picture entitled *Märchen* (*Fairy tales*), an old woman is leaning onto a cane surrounded by little children who are carefully listening to what she is telling them (see figure 20.1). The scene is pastoral. The children’s wardrobe is simple, the girls wear their hair loose with only a few accessories. They all sit in a glade with typical forest animals surrounding them such as little birds, a doe with her two fawns, and a squirrel. It is a picture filled with peace and harmony, also reflecting the romantic connection between fairy tale and nature. A similar picture, entitled *Hausmärchen* (*Domestic Fairy
300

Urte Stobbe

Tales), shows an old woman sitting in an armchair at home with a little child in her arms and older children sitting around her (see figure 20.2). Her gestures and facial expression show that she is in the act of telling a story. The atmosphere is comparable to that in the first picture. The main difference is the domestic surrounding with a big oven close to the group, potted plants on the windowsill, and a birdcage hanging from the ceiling. A dog and a cat are also listening, sitting nearby the children. Toys are neatly arranged on the floor. In the foreground, little dwarfs complete household chores and at the top of the picture, typical fairy tale motifs like a little goblin, a black raven, and a fairy queen in a carriage drawn by birds can be seen. It is the picture of the fanciful imaginations of an animated nature that arise before the inner eye when listening to fairy tales.

Figure 20.1  Ludwig Richter. Märchen. In: Bechsteins Märchenbuch, first ed. 1853 and 1857; special edition about 1900: frontispiece.
In reality, many fairy tales underwent a multistage process of literary transformation; *Dornröschen* (KHM 50, *Sleeping Beauty*) is a typical example for this. After it had been published in Charles Perrault’s *Conte de ma mère l’Oye*, modified adaptations were released by the Grimm Brothers and further revised editions by Ludwig Bechstein. A comparison between the French version by Perrault (2012: 55–69) and the later adaptions by the Grimms and Bechstein shows that the basic story remains rather similar but becomes much shorter and is removed from its courtly embellishment—a young princess is cursed by a displeased fairy to prick her finger on the spindle of a spinning wheel on her fifteenth birthday which will cause her to fall into a deep sleep. Although her father tries everything to prevent her from being harmed, the curse comes true. The spell is stronger than every human precautionary measure, so the daughter and the whole castle fall asleep. A hundred years pass...
before a prince comes along and wakes her up (in Perrault’s version virtuously without a kiss, cf. Perrault 2006: 63).

This is not the place to name all changes in detail, but small alterations in the way that nature is represented in Dornröschen give an impression of a conception of nature that might be considered typical of the German fairy tale tradition. In Perrault’s text, the thorn bushes are impenetrable because of the evil fairy’s spell, which another fairy modifies so that a prince will awaken the princess a hundred years later. Hence, only the prince, not his entourage, is allowed to enter the castle (cf. Perrault 2006: 57–58, 61). In German versions, it is nature itself that undergoes a metamorphosis from an impassable prickly shrub to a flowering climbing plant (cf. Grimm 2012, vol. 1: 318), or to a rose bush that is blooming for the first time, and only lets the prince pass without prickling him (cf. Bechstein 1988, vol. 1: 244–245). After having repulsed all unwarranted intruders before, the bushes seem to know when the right one comes along and allow the prince to enter the castle on the hundredth anniversary of the maiden’s falling asleep. He is the chosen one and is able to pass through the thorns because he believes in the old stories that are orally memorized by the elder people—a typical romantic motif (cf. Grimm 2012, vol. 1: 317–318; Bechstein 1988, vol. 1: 244–245).

Fairy tales like Dornröschen show, that in German contexts the motif of a knowledgeable and wisely acting nature seems to be central. Furthermore, Grimms’ fairy tales reveal at least four central “green” motifs. Firstly, the motif of small creatures like fairies and elves who can either help or punish humans depending on their behavior and qualities. Fairies and elves have different cultural traditions but their dwelling in (and personification of) nature is similar (cf. Wolfzettel 1984; Schmitz-Emans 2013b). They support chosen people; their support is, however, often bound to a special promise; in case of breaking it or angering the little people, their support is gone and they might even become vengeful. Secondly, some fairy tales contain Christian notions, such as Die Sterntaler (KHM 153, The Star Money), or stand in the tradition of fables or legends, like Die Bremer Stadtmusikanten (KHM 27, The Town Musicians of Bremen). Often, the performance of the protagonists is exemplary, whether they appear as humans or as animals. Thirdly, the motif of a helpful nature due to moral reasons is central. Supernatural creatures, flowers, or animals are helpers in times of need, especially to those that previously showed good behavior toward the hardship of others, be it animals or an apple-tree that suffers pain from his apple-burdened branches, as in Grimms’ Frau Holle (KHM 24, Mother Hulda). Fourthly, animals and flowers can sometimes be bewitched—a motif that reaches back to Ovid’s Metamorphoses, but that has also found strong successors in Grimms’ fairy tales. In Die zwölf Brüder (KHM 9, The Twelve Brothers), the sister breaks white lilies in the garden and, thus, makes all her brothers transform into ravens; if she had known this, she
never would have broken the flowers. These central motifs, each in their own way, influenced fairy tales of many other authors as well.3

Fairy tales convey an anthropocentric view on nature which instructs the readers (especially children) to be more aware of others’ needs. The message is clear: all beings require respect. Those who value nature and care for other beings will be rewarded. It is also typical of many of Grimms’ fairy tales that it is mostly girls who behave in modest, gentle, and upright ways and are helpful toward others, be it animals, flowers, or humans. In return, animals help them in times of distress, like the birds in Aschenputtel (KHM 21, Cinderella, see figure 20.3) or the big bear in Schneeweißchen und Rosenroth (KHM 161, Snow White and Rose Red) that later turns out to be a cursed prince. Admittedly, there are also Grimms’ fairy tales in which male protagonists help and care about animals or understand the language of nature, such as in Die weiße Schlange (KHM 17, The White Snake) or Die Bienenkönigin (KHM 62, The Queen Bee). But these fairy tales were not canonized and are mostly unknown nowadays because apparently only the fairy tales with female protagonists

![Illustration of Aschenputtel or Aschenbrödel. In: Bechsteins Märchenbuch, first ed. 1853 and 1857; special edition about 1900: 204.](image-url)
have gained acceptance and popularity. This anthropocentric and gendered view on nature had already been inherent in the romantic era and was merely consolidated in the Biedermeier period.

Furthermore, there is a strong affinity for the woods in German culture (cf. Hettche/Merkel 2000; Lehmann 1999; Gruettner 1996; Weyergraf 1987) which can also be found in fairy tales—not least because many plots are located there. This strong connection between fairy tale figures and the woods is the reason why the characters of fairy tales in Günter Grass’ *Die Rättin* (1986, *The Rat*) start to slip out of their former roles and fight for their woods as their preferred space to live. This could be interpreted as an eco-poetic answer to the fear of *Waldsterben* during the 1980s (cf. Goodbody 2006: 399; Gruettner 1996: 222–225; Hunt 1992). Hence, Axel Goodbody considers Grass’ novel to be “the longest and most ambitious German work of environmental prose fiction,” with its main theme being “humanity’s self-destruction” (Goodbody 2006: 398, 400). Both, references to fairy tale tradition and the intellectual involvement with mankind’s nature, are also central in the following text.

**CHRISTA WOLF’S REINTERPRETATION OF GRIMMS’ FAIRY TALES IN STÖRFALL**

Christa Wolf’s novel *Störfall. Nachrichten eines Tages* (1987, transl.: *Accident: A Day’s News*, 2001) refers to Grimms’ *Brüderchen und Schwesterchen* (KHM 11, *Little Brother and Little Sister*) and *Die drei Männlein im Walde* (KHM 13, *The Three Little Men in the Forest*). Both are lesser known fairy tales but they are part of the so-called *Kleine Ausgabe* (*Small edition*; see Grimm 2012b: 73–83, 84–92) which is a special selection of fifty fairy tales published in 1825. Previous studies on Wolf’s novel focus on the literary representation of the nuclear disaster in Chernobyl (cf. Delisle 2001: 30–92; Heise 2006; Braun 2012), or on intertextuality in the context of feminist interpretations. According to Ute Brandes, Wolf’s novel encourages “reason, peace, concern, and civility” (Brandes 1989: 111–112) by using references to fairy tales. Thomas C. Fox considers the message pivotal that humans have to evolve concerning the perception of gender, which can be seen in the intertextual reference to *Brüderchen und Schwesterchen* (cf. Fox 1990: 474–475). When the first-person narrator reenacted the fairy tale as a child by claiming that she would not want to marry the king (see Wolf 1987: 89; trans. 2001: 73), this means “rejecting the Cinderella complex” (Fox 1990: 474). Therefore, Christa Wolf “revises and rewrites the fairy tale for her own purposes” (ibid.: 475). Brigid Hains observes that the text requires a wide cultural knowledge because of its numerous intertextual references and
that it can, in terms of Gérard Genette, be considered a palimpsest in which semantic spaces are consistently expanded (cf. Haines 1994: 158–159). The first-person narrator identifies herself with the good as well as the bad side of femininity in the context of *Brüderchen und Schwesterchen* and also pleads for overcoming the “masculine principle of thirst for knowledge at all cost” (cf. ibid.: 166–167). The following investigation draws on these results but adds another perspective by asking whether the references to Grimms’ fairy tales also imply ecological concerns.

Grimms’ *Brüderchen und Schwesterchen* thematizes the question whether one should always give in to personal desires even if this endangers oneself and others. It is the sister who tries to keep the brother from appeasing his thirst because she can hear a warning from the wells that whoever drinks the water will be turned into an animal. She manages to prevent her brother from drinking twice; however, the third time all warnings are in vain and he is transformed into a fawn. Even after this, he still does not listen to his sister and plays in the woods even though his life is in danger due to people hunting there. He tempts fate but as if by divine providence, he unwittingly leads the royal hunting party to the hut in which the siblings had taken shelter. The king falls in love with the sister, marries her, and takes her and the fawn to his castle where she soon gives birth to a child. Everything could be perfect if it was not for the evil stepmother from whom the siblings had fled. It was she who poisoned the waters in the woods and it is also she who is envious of her stepchildren’s happy lives. In her opinion, the place next to the king is entitled to her own daughter; therefore, disguised as a chambermaid, she makes her stepdaughter take a deadly steam bath after she delivers her baby and places her own daughter, in the shape of the queen, into the king’s bed. At first, the king does not notice anything until the nursemaid draws his attention to the fact that the real queen—it must be her ghost—always goes to the baby’s bed at night and also pays attention to the fawn. From her concern for the baby and the fawn, the king becomes aware just in time that this has to be the real queen. After that everything falls into place: The real queen comes back to life with God’s help, the stepmother and her daughter are punished, and the brother changes back into a human being at the end, so that the siblings live happily ever after. Thus, the fairy tale is also pivotally about the fact that one should not be fooled by appearances but always be alert.

Two typical romantic elements can be found in this fairy tale: The sister, unlike her brother, has the ability to hear the language of nature, combined with the typical notion at this time that females have a privileged approach to the element of water (cf. Schmitz-Emans 2013b; Kramer 2016). After he is turned into a fawn, the sister still sees her brother when looking at the animal. She does not only take care of it as if it were her brother—in her eyes, the fawn is and will always remain her brother. This intimate attachment was also
chosen as a frontispiece of the second edition of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* from 1819 by Ludwig Emil Grimm (1790–1863), Jacob and Wilhelm’s brother (see figure 20.4). The angel in the background with a white lily in each hand illustrates the love between the siblings as something pure and innocent, and virtually blesses it. Furthermore, the fact that the sister still holds on to her brother even after the king espoused her shows that the boundary between humans and animals had not yet been conceived as insurmountable. Just like in Greek and Roman mythology, the possibility of metamorphosis is accepted as part of the numinous reality of fairy tales.

This romantic approach, however, is not what Störfall is related to; references to the fairy tale take place on at least three levels. On the one hand, there is the title that mentions a relationship between siblings which is also mirrored in the story Störfall, since it is about a first-person narrator who feels responsible for her brother’s welfare. On the other hand, there is the contrast between the siblings. In both cases, the sister is the one who assumes responsibility for both of them, while the brother follows the pleasure-principle. Something that is laid out in the fairy tale but emerges dominantly in Wolf’s text is the clairvoyant gift of the female protagonist—a basic characteristic that can, for example, also be found in Christa Wolf’s Kassandra (cf. Delisle 2001: 35). In Störfall, the first-person narrator connects this to accusing her brother, a scientist, of being driven by the thirst for knowledge and the voracity for progress without considering the consequences. She is very worried about him—not only because he is in surgery due to a brain tumor but also because of his mostly careless attitude toward dangerous technologies like nuclear energy. She wants him to restrain his voracity and his thirst since she is able do this, too (cf. Wolf 1987: 59; transl. 2001: 47). At the same time, she is sensible to the fact that there are only poor alternatives: dying of thirst or being transformed, nuclear energy or Waldsterben to meet the humans’ increasing energy needs (cf. Wolf 1987: 87; transl. 2001: 71). Nevertheless, she still tries to warn her brother of the consequences—but in vain, just like in Brüderchen und Schwesterchen. The first thing the brother feels after waking up from anesthesia is “thirst” (transl. 2001: 105; Wolf 1987: 125). Just as in the fairy tale, it is thirst, a human’s basic need. However, it still leaves an uneasy sensation that it is thirst, of all things, that the brother feels first. It is immediately suggestive that also his thirst for knowledge and thus his voracity for researching on and on, has not (yet) been appeased.

A third narrative interconnection between Störfall and the fairy tale can be found in the fact that the first-person narrator progressively remembers how she and her brother reenacted the fairy tale Brüderchen und Schwesterchen when they were children. This gradual process of remembering is linguistically realized by sentences that are pushed into the narrator’s consciousness, which she initially cannot relate to: “How fares my child / how fares my fawn” (transl. 2001: 71; “Was macht mein Kind / was macht mein Reh” Wolf 1987: 86). A little later, she contemplates about whether the forests have really already been damaged as much as is claimed in the media when reporting about Waldsterben (cf. Briggemeier 2004), and she remembers a discussion with her brother about questions of ecologically sensible lifestyles. Thereby, the sentence from the past, emphasized by italic letters, comes to the fore again with a continuation: “How fares my child / how fares my fawn / two times I’ll come and then nevermore” (transl. 2001: 71; “Was macht mein Kind / was macht mein Reh / nun komm ich noch zweimal und dann
nimmermehr” Wolf 1987: 87). However, it is only when the third and last warning from the fairy tale crosses her mind that she suddenly “figure[s] out where this passage comes from, who says it, and how that entire memory is connected with the basic pattern of this day. I had to laugh out loud. Little Brother and Little Sister” (transl. 2001: 72; „wo dieser Spruch vorkommt, wer ihn sagt und wie diese ganze Erinnerung mit dem Grundmuster dieses Tages zusammenhing. Ich habe auflachen müssen. Brüderchen und Schwesterchen” Wolf 1987: 87–88). Her subconscious mind had established a connection between the present and the past, and thus the relationship between the siblings evolves to a mythical level.

Moreover, the fairy tale does not only match the basic patterns of the day, but of the siblings’ entire childhood, if not even their entire life together: “That fairy tale transported us to unfathomable depths of sadness when we were children and yet we always felt compelled to come back to it” (transl. 2001: 72; “Dies Märchen hat uns als Kinder in abgrundtiefe Traurigkeit ver- setzt, und doch mußten wir immer wieder zu ihm zurückkehren” Wolf 1987: 88). It comes to the narrator’s mind how her brother had asked her to let him drink from the water but

the springs warned us with their babbling voices, which I translated for you: Little Brother, don’t drink [. . .]. That was always the point where my heart-rending sadness set in, and often, often did I try to talk you out of your thirst, but we both knew how the story went, didn’t we, and we couldn’t do anything to change it. (Transl. 2001: 72)


It is the knowledge of the run of things, the inescapability of a truth that is deeply rooted in the fairy tale, which is that everybody does what they have to do. However, the fairy tale is modified in a crucial point. The brother starts to mistrust his sister, begins to think that she is the wrong one, “and then I had to resort to the most powerful formula we knew, kept for the most pressing of emergencies. May I drop dead if I’m not the real sister” (transl. 2001: 73; “und da mußte ich zur stärksten Formel greifen, die wir kannten und die wir für die allerdringendsten Notfälle aufhoben: Tot umfallen will ich, wenn ich nicht die richtige Schwester bin” Wolf 1987: 89). The brother, however, does not let it go: “Upon which you were silent for a little while, Little Brother, and then asked cautiously: Have you dropped dead? And I said with a sad, sad heart: No. And thus had been proven that which should never have needed proving” (transl. 2001: 73–74; “Darauf schwiegst du

It is the sister’s sadness that the brother would rather mistrust her than to think about the consequences of his actions and taking her warnings (more) seriously.

This, in turn, is connected to the narrator’s sadness about the fact that humans cannot find a way to abolish potentially self-destructive technologies. Ursula Heise puts it like this: “[S]he questions in her mind what the cultural and perhaps even evolutionary origins might be of the fascination with technology and the disdain for nature and human life that leads up to disasters such as Chernobyl” (Heise 2006: 184). The first-person narrator had already intuited as a child how things are with human nature: “Oh, this early susceptibility to sad verse. This early fear of the dark side of our nature, from which we can never liberate ourselves except through death and destruction” (transl. 2001: 74; “Ach, diese frühe Anfälligkeit für den traurigen Vers. Diese frühe Angst vor der schlimmen Kehrseite unserer Natur, von der wir uns nie anders als durch Mord und Totschlag befreien konnten” Wolf 1987: 89–90).

Is there not—and this is the pivotal question in Christa Wolf’s novel—a more peaceful way to reach a beneficial coexistence and a less (self-) destructive interaction with oneself and the social and natural environment? The fact that humans are not yet fully developed also prompts one of the two motifs: “The long-sought missing link between animals and the really humane being is ourselves” (transl. 2001: [without page number]; “Das langgesuchte Zwischenglied zwischen dem Tier und dem wahrhaft humanen Menschen sind wir” Wolf 1987: 7), a quotation from Konrad Lorenz.

The novel describes the contents of the first narrator’s consciousness in the course of a whole day. She is confronted with “accidents” on four accounts. Beside the two obvious instances, the nuclear reactor disaster in Chernobyl and her brother’s brain tumor, the narrator reflects malfunctions in her use of language when single words lose their original meaning or when the catastrophes interfere with her words, for example, with the word “cloud” (transl. 2001: 27; “Wolke” Wolf 1987: 37; cf. Delisle 2001: 37). Finally, the fourth account is the fact that she is contemplating about whether the human urge for self-destruction could also be considered a malfunction of human evolution (cf. transl. 2001: 50–51, 65; Wolf 1987: 63–64, 80; cf. also Delisle 2001: 83–90; Braun 2012: 76–83). In the face of all four malfunctions, or “accidents,” the first-person narrator feels helpless and powerless on different levels. The realization that human “greed” cannot be eliminated suffuses her with “sorrow” (transl. 2001: 108; Wolf 1987: 129).

A potential approach to solving the problem comes to light toward the end of the novel with a reference to another one of Grimms’ fairy tales when,
shortly before going to bed, the sorrows about her brother sink in once more. Her subconscious mind again starts to work:

“The voice read me to sleep with the passage from the fairy tale in which the true queen is turned into a duck. Now that night the kitchen-boy saw the duck come swimming up the drain, and it said: How now, lord king, art asleep or waking.” (Transl. 2001: 108–109)

“Da hat mir eine Stimme bis in den Schlaf hinein die Stelle aus dem Märchen vorgelesen, in dem die wahre Königin in eine Ente verwandelt ist. In der Nacht aber sah der Küchenjunge, wie eine Ente durch die Gosse geschwommen kam, die sprach: Königsohn, was machst du, schläfst du oder wachst du.” (Wolf 1987: 130)

A text passage from Die drei Männlein im Walde (The Three Little Men in the Wood) is used here. In the disguise of a duck—that is, in form of a common bird—the queen demands of the king to be considerate and attentive; he should be careful not to share his bed with the wrong bride—the same motif as in Brüderchen und Schwesterchen. The fairy tale’s title is not explicitly mentioned, which could, on the one hand, be due to its lack of poetic surplus value. On the other hand, this allows for a much more direct reference to the political situation; because the question why Christa Wolf uses a “prince” (“Königsohn”) instead of a “king” (“König,” Grimm 2012, vol. 1: 113) can either be explained with a memory lapse, or that she did this in order to facilitate a reference to the so-called real socialism of the GDR—the novel was written and published during the late stages of East Germany (GDR). The text can be interpreted as a message to Erich Honecker, the GDR’s head of government at the time, whose decisions as a “prince” were depending on the USSR (the “king,” so to speak). The text can be read as an indirect reminder of his responsibility to carefully examine whether a wrong queen/bride was foisted on him in the form of atomic technology—“wrong bride” because it proves to be something that can bring along danger and destruction.

Fundamentally, fairy tales show “how things truly happen in this world” (Lüthi 2005: 81). At the same time, Grimm’s fairy tales often contain a warning of the evil in this world—and that we can—and have to—resist it. They are, supported by a simple and at the same time allegorical language, of timeless exemplariness (cf. Freund 1996: 189–190). Accordingly, Die drei Männlein im Walde can be interpreted as lesson to learn that rulers also have to be vigilant, must not be deceived by appearances, and, above all, that they have to be able to see who the true bride is, that is, who actually cares about their fellows and takes on responsibilities. In Christa Wolf’s Störfall, this fairy tale message is being reinterpreted in an ecologically concerned way, because at the end it is woven into the story’s present-day. It is evocative of an essentially critical attitude toward technological developments, because it
cannot be ruled out that technological progress might constitute an expression of the urge of self-destruction.

By using intertextual references to two of Grimms’ fairy tales, Störfall transports a clear ethical and political message. If the solidarity between humans is supported by care and a sense of responsibility, our interactions with the environment can also improve. Everybody would be more attentive to the potentially self-destructive dangers of technological progress and the “blind spot” of human civilization, the pleasure in taking risks, would become visible. A solution can only be reached holistically and concerns all levels of dealing with oneself and others: It is all about overcoming one’s own self-alienation, improving human interactions, as well as about the relationship between humans and nature. Moreover, it is about the personal responsibility not only of the king in the fairy tale but of every human being to examine alleged certainties. Everybody has to put up with the question from the fairy tale, if one is—metaphorically speaking—asleep or awake.

CONCLUSION

Green readings of Grimms’ fairy tales reveal the idea of a knowledgeable and wisely acting nature with the ability to morph, helpful little creatures or other (super-)natural beings that reward good behavior toward other beings, an anthropocentric and gendered view on nature, and, last but not least, a close metaphorical connection of fairy tales and woods. Some of Grimms’ fairy tales communicate the clear message that nature’s good and helpful side only appears to those who have a “good heart” and/or are attentive to the needs of others, be it humans, animals, or plants. Some of their fairy tales comprise a “green” basic idea also because nature is conceived of figuratively; through this personification and the possibility of metamorphosis, creatures of nature become equivalent fellow beings of humans. Christa Wolf’s Störfall works with complex references to two fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm that go beyond the aforementioned motifs and mental connections associated with human-nature-relations. Brüderchen und Schwesterchen and Die drei Männlein im Walde are functionalized in the sense of an ecologically oriented message. Approaches to a solution that can effectively prevent the emergence of more deadly technologies can be deduced from the basic conflict that both fairy tales are dealing with. The story in Störfall ends with the Kassandra-like first-person narrator’s request to be alert to any attempts of deception. The human urge for self-destruction can be faced by finding new forms of interaction which are characterized by care and a sense of responsibility for others.

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NOTES

1. It would go too far to claim that this ethical message was an invention of the Grimm Brothers because the basic idea can, for example, also be found in Perrault’s *Die Feen* in which two sisters behave completely differently when facing a fairy in the shape of an old, needy woman—one of them is rewarded for her kindness, the other is punished for her arrogance (cf. Perrault 2006: 90-94). What seems to be new and different in Grimms’ fairy tales, however, is that the message to help those in need also applies to other beings in nature. Concerning this observation, there are no comparative studies that can support it on a basis of a comprehensive examination.

2. Bechstein’s fairy tale collection contains a quite similar story entitled *Die Goldmaria und die Pechmaria* (DMB 11, *Golden Mary and Pitch Mary*).

3. “Green” motifs in the aforementioned sense could be also find in Wilhelm Hauff’s *Das kalte Herz* (1827, *The Cold Heart*), *Das hässliche Entlein* (1843, *Ugly Duckling*) by Hans Christian Andersen, and, last but not least, Oscar Wilde’s *The Happy Prince* (1888, *Der glückliche Prinz*), to name but a few.

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**Grimms’ Fairy Tales and its Eco-Poetical Impact on Christa Wolf’s Störfall**


