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Close Reading Assignment

*Rapunzel* by: Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm

### **Part I: Context**

Brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm originally wrote none of the Grimm Fairy Tales. The brothers went all over Germany searching for German fairy tales because they wanted to display them “so as to ‘glorify the greatness of the German popular tradition,’ as Professor Jack Zipes, a translator of *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm* has put it” (Grimm xv). The story was first published by the brothers in 1812 as part of “*Kinder- und Hausmarchen (Children’s and Household Tales 1812)*” (Zipes 416). It is an adaptation of *Persinette* by Charlotte-Rose de Caumont de La Force, which was originally published in 1698 (“Rapunzel”). The story *Rapunzel* was very similar to most of the other Grimm fairy tales in that it involves a beautiful young woman, a bitter old witch, and it has several morals behind it as *Cinderella*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, and *The Sleeping Beauty* do. However, *Rapunzel* was also very different from these stories because the witch’s desire is driven by childlessness rather than material jealousy as the other stories.

But the Grimm Brothers’ “Rapunzel” is the tale that combines the evil figure’s malignancy with childlessness—the witch wants the baby,

whereas in “Snow White” she is jealous of her beauty; in “Cinderella,” of her rivalry with her own daughters, the ugly sisters; and in Perrault’s version of “The Sleeping Beauty,” she resents being replaced in her son’s household by his new, lovely, and sweet wife, where she plans to have her cooked; the Grimms later deleted this episode. (Warner 331)

It is almost as if the brothers wanted to stray from their traditional “evil witch” story to make the witch easier to sympathize with.

## **Part II: Text**

**A. Setting:** As the story begins, it is set deep in a forest between two houses: one belonging to a man and his pregnant wife, and the other belonging to a bitter witch who wants a baby to take care of. When Rapunzel is moved to the tower, the story describes it to be in the midst of a wood. There is no real indication of the country or state it takes place in, but I believe it is safe to assume it is placed in Germany, seeing as the Grimm Fairy Tales are generally German Fairy Tales. Because it is in a forest though, it could easily be visualized anywhere with a lot of trees, even here in Georgia! Many of the other stories have the same general setting. When writing about her experience illustrating a picture book based on *Rapunzel*, Tina Scharf Hyman said “I was careful to include many of the visual stuff that had the feel of other Grim stories—the witch’s pet ravens, the interior of the peasant couples cottage, and the misty, mysterious, dark piney forests through which so many Grimm characters must find their own path” (Haase 299).

The dark forest setting of this story and many other Grimm stories give a universal tone of fear, evil, and really just an overall darkness. The dark feel gives the Grimm stories their general reputation. Flannery O'Connor's "true country" theme shows in most of the Grimm fairy tales because the stories had the same setting most of the time: a dark forest in Germany, which must have been where people there were most comfortable. I have never been to Germany, though I plan to someday and I do not know what Germany looks like, but I do know that people generally tell stories about places that they are familiar with. Just as O'Connor only wrote about the south, these German fairy tales all take place in a dark forest in Germany. It is really all about comfort. Toward the end of the story, Rapunzel is sent to a desert to live in misery until the prince finds her and they go to live in his father's kingdom.

**B. Character:**

- a. Rapunzel- Rapunzel is the protagonist in the story. She is named after a kind of salad leaf, also called rampion, which her father stole from the witch for her mother during pregnancy. She had long blonde hair that, by the time she was twelve, was long enough to climb up as a rope to the top of a tower. "Rapunzel had beautiful long hair that shone like gold. When she heard the voice of the witch she would undo the fastening of the upper window, unbind the plaits of her hair, and let it down twenty ells below, and the witch would climb up by it" (Grimm 92). Though the story does not specify, it is assumed that she does not know her birth mother and father, as she was given to the witch when she was born. Rapunzel calls

the witch “mother Gothel,” as she is the only mother (or any person) she has ever known. Rapunzel develops a relationship with the King’s son after he discovers her in the tower and wishes to marry her. They have twin children together by the end of the story.

- b. Mother Gothel**- Mother Gothel is the antagonist in the story. She is “a witch of great might, and of whom all of the world was afraid” (Grimm 90). The story does not give a physical description of her except to say that she is a witch and that people fear her. The only relationship she has is with Rapunzel, who is her stolen and isolated “daughter.”
- c. The King’s Son**- The King’s son is not given a name in the story, but when he is riding through the woods, he hears Rapunzel singing. He immediately wants to meet her. When he sees how the witch gets into the tower, he imitated her when she is gone. Rapunzel and the Prince develop a relationship and plan to be married, until the witch finds out and he develops and sadness when he hears she has taken Rapunzel away. He jumps from the window and survives but blinds himself, which separates them for several years until he finds her and their twin children in a desert and her tears heal his blindness.
- d. The Father**- Rapunzel’s father is a minor character in the story. He is not described physically, but he is perceived to be a very loving man. He risks being caught by the witch in her garden to get ransom for his wife because he loves her so much.

- e. The Mother- The mother is also minor, but she is assumed to be pregnant because the witch demands their unborn child in return for her stolen vegetables. She seems to have a needy quality, because she becomes dramatic when she decides she wants some of the rampion. "I shall die unless I can have some of that rampion to eat that grows in the garden at the back of our house" (Grimm 90).
- f. The King- The King is only mentioned in the story as the Prince's father.
- g. The Twins- The twin children of Rapunzel and the Prince are only mentioned to be a boy and a girl.

**C. Point of View:** The story is told in a third-person omniscient point of view, where the reader can understand the feelings of all characters. The reader can easily look at all three major characters points of view and even the fathers as well. When the mother asks the father to get her the rampion, the father's point of view is that he would rather steal vegetables for his wife than see her die because he loves her. When Rapunzel sees that she has allowed a man into her tower, at first she is afraid until he tells her that her beautiful singing drew him to her, at which point she decides she likes him more than Mother Gothel and wants to marry him. When the Prince hears Rapunzel's singing, it is clear that he finds it beautiful because he consistently comes back to listen. "The King's Son wished to go in to her, and sought to find a door in the tower, but there was none. So he rode home, but the song had entered into his heart, and every day he went into the wood and listened to it" (Grimm 92). When the witch finds out that Rapunzel

had been with a man in her tower, it is clear she is angry because of the actions she does to them both.

**D. Style:** The language in the story makes “sound echo sense” in several places, but a specific one is: “So he went in the twilight again; and as he was climbing back, he saw, all at once, the witch standing before him, and was terribly frightened, as she cried, with angry eyes, ‘How dare you climb over into my garden like a thief, and steal my rampion! It shall be the worse for you!’ (Grimm 90). Underlined in the quote are several words that give the feeling of fear to the reader. Twilight, witch, terribly, frightened, cried, angry, dare, thief, and worse have negative connotations to them that give the story its sense. This part is clearly a fearful part in the story, because the father has just been caught stealing from a witch’s garden, and the words used make that feeling evident. This mood of fear foreshadows that the story will become unhappy. It also foreshadows one of the themes: That stealing, no matter what the reason, leads to consequences.

**E. Tone:** The tone of the story is generally dark and unhappy because the bulk of it is about a young girl who never knew her parents and has lived isolated in a tower with a witch all her life, which is really just impossible to make out to be a happy situation. I think the reader is expected to feel the same way I do about the story. It is an unhappy story. The only happy part is when Rapunzel and the Prince fall in love. However, the witch quickly interrupts the happiness, and then the story goes back to unhappy. Of course, the story has a happy conclusion, but it becomes happy only in the last two paragraphs of the story. Therefore,

with the exception of the two very short happy parts of the story, it is a very unhappy, dark, fearful feeling story.

**F. Conflict and Plot:** There are several conflicts in the story of several types. The first conflict is that the mother desires the witch's rampions. The conflict is solved by creating a new one: the father steals the rampions and the witch catches him and demands their unborn child. This conflict is solved by creating yet another conflict: the witch takes the child, but she grows to be beautiful and the witch fears that she will stray from her. Again, the conflict is solved by creating another: the witch locks her in a tower, but Rapunzel sings and attracts a young man who comes and falls in love with her. Here is where the conflicts become more complicated. Rapunzel wants to leave with the prince but cant, so they devise a plan. However, before the plan can be followed through, the witch finds out and punishes them both. Rapunzel is sent to a desert where she gives birth to twins, and the Prince is overwhelmed with grief so he jumps out the window and becomes blind from the fall and does not find his Rapunzel for several years. Concluding from all the smaller conflicts, I think the essential conflict in the story is the witch's jealousy of the ability to be beautiful and bare children. She is jealous of the mother, which is why she demands her child in exchange for her rampions. Then she is afraid of Rapunzel's beauty so she hides her from the world (and men) so that she can guarantee that she will be as unfortunate as the witch was. However, the witch failed in her attempts and when she finds this out, she sends Rapunzel far away where she believes the Prince will not find her so as to guarantee Rapunzel's unhappiness, which she again fails at. The

exposition of the story would have to be the witch taking Rapunzel to the tower. The action develops by causing Rapunzel to find the only man she has ever met, the Prince, attractive and endearing, which causes her to have a relationship with him. The climax is when the witch finds out about her affair and punishes them both. The resolution is when the Prince finds Rapunzel and their children, Rapunzel heals his blindness with her tears, and they live happily ever after.

**G. Verisimilitude:** Although it is a wonderful fairy tale, I do not find it believable. I do not think anyone except a child would be able to imagine him or herself in the story because it does not give enough detail of the surroundings. The only things I find myself relating to are some of the general themes of the story. “The fairy tale in effect warns against keeping young women in the dark as the old witch has done. The story is clearly on the side of the lovers—with the added angle that it’s giving its support to sex education” (Warner 331). This really just makes me think about my “sex talk” with my mother when I was 14, entering high school. I agree with the idea of sex education because I firmly believe that if people (specifically young women) are not at least educated on the subject, they are more likely to experiment with it.

### **Part III: Subtext**

There are a couple symbols in *Rapunzel*: the rampions, and the tower. I think the rampions symbolize desire with a negative connotation. The witch has the rampions growing in her garden, and she has desire growing inside her. She wants a child. In addition, the mother desires the rampions so much that she asked her husband to risk everything to steal them from the witch. It symbolizes the idea that we should not give

in to all of our desires if they require negative actions to obtain them. The tower symbolizes ignorance. The witch isolated Rapunzel from everything in the world by putting her inside a tower with no way out for her. The witch may have been trying to protect Rapunzel (in a way), but it only made her ignorant to the consequences of different actions.

I think the essential theme of the story is as Marina Warner said, the idea that ignorance is not protection. Keeping children and young people in the dark about the dangers of the world (more than just sex), will not protect them from it. They will somehow find out about these things and if they go into it with no education about it, they will suffer consequences (Warner 331). Another important theme is not to give in to unnecessary desires. The mother gave into her desires for the vegetables and the father gave into his desire to make the mother happy, and they lost their child because of it. I think the readers should ultimately learn not to give into desires, and to educate themselves or their children before allowing the actions to be done.

#### **Part IV: Critical Approaches**

Although I am not very fond of the New Critical method, I really think that is the best way to look at this story because it is a fairy tale and no one really knows who the original author was or what his or her background was. All you can really do is look at the text itself because that is all you have at hand. You could look at the Grimm brothers' background, but because they are not the original authors of the story, you cannot rely on their background to tell you anything about the story itself.

On the other hand, you could look at the story with a Feminist approach, as *Fairy Tale Romance* did.

In certain other types of story, the girl's active role in winning or securing a lover is almost as evident as in the case just cited. Rapunzel, though imprisoned in a tower and thus unable to set out in search of a man, cooperates in fetching up her suitor to her window by responding to his request that she let down her hair for him so that he may join her. In the Grimms' version of the story, the girl is portrayed as being innocent about love and desire. (McGlathery 137)

Many of the Grimm fairy tales give the idea that a woman's biggest role in life is to find a man, and Rapunzel gives that same idea. Although the stories are very old, even back then women had more than just the role of finding a husband. They took care of the children; they took care of the household; women basically kept the family in one piece. The woman typically had the emotional role in the family. Whereas in this story, Rapunzel is portrayed as helpless without the Prince in the tower, and again in the desert because she does not find her way back until the blinded Prince finds her.

The story could also be looked at as a Christian (which I am not) by comparing it to parts of the Book of Genesis. The rampion garden could easily be looked at as the Garden of Eden. Instead of a desirable fruit, there is a desirable vegetable that the mother really wants and is tempted by, so she sends the father to get it for her and in

that way gets them both in trouble, just as Eve gave Adam the fruit. The witch (though unlikely), could be looked at as God. She punishes the mother and father for eating her vegetables just as God punished Adam and Eve for eating the forbidden fruit.

### **Part V: Secondary Sources**

Warner, Marina. "After 'Rapunzel'." *Marvels and Tales* 24.2 (2010): 329-35.

*EBSCOhost*. Web. 5 Nov 2011.

This source was very helpful in understanding the story in the New Critical approach because it talked a lot about the inner workings of the story. It very clearly states a general theme that the author believes to be true: "The fairy tale in effect warns against keeping young women in the dark as the old witch has done. The story is clearly on the side of the lovers—with the added angel that it's giving its support to sex education" (Warner 331).

It also gives a good idea of how the story differs from other stories by the Grimm brothers:

But the Grimm Brothers' "Rapunzel" is the tale that combines the evil figure's malignancy with childlessness—the witch wants the baby, whereas in "Snow White" she is jealous of her beauty; in "Cinderella," of her rivalry with her own daughters, the ugly sisters; and in Perrault's version of "The Sleeping Beauty," she resents being replaced in her son's

household by his new, lovely, and sweet wife, where she plans to have her cooked; the Grimms later deleted this episode. (Warner 331)

The showing of how the stories are different is another sign that you should look at the story with New Criticism because there is not a definitive background to look at.

McGlathery, James M. *Fairy Tale Romance: The Grimms, Basile, and Perrault*.

Chicago, Illinois, USA: University of Illinois, 1991. 120-21, 136. Print.

This Source used many different approaches, but one of them was called *Fetching Maidens and True Brides*. The name is self-explanatory.

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Though this is the only part of the source that talks about Rapunzel in a feminist way, it does analyze other Grimm stories as well. The source gave a very clear idea of what the author thought to be the way the story views women.

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