

“HANSEL AND GRETEL” IN HOLOCAUST LITERATURE

THE USE OF GRIMM'S “HANSEL AND GRETEL” AS A METAPHOR
FOR THE HOLOCAUST IN YOUNG ADULT FICTION BY LOUISE
MURPHY, JANE YOLEN, AND ELIZA GRANVILLE

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I became interested in Holocaust literature after I had read Primo Levi's *If this is Man* and Edith Eger's *The Choice*. When I found out that research has been done on the use of fairy tales in Holocaust novels, I was eager to know more about this and make a contribution to this field of research. First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Prof. Dr. Joost Krijnen, who always provided me with elaborate and useful feedback, answered to my questions, and helped me set up a clear plan so that I would finish everything in time. I want to thank my parents, for giving me the chance to attend university in the first place, but most of all for always being there for me and supporting me in everything I do. I want to thank my sister, for believing in me when I did not, and for endlessly listening to my ideas and theories about the books I discuss in this dissertation. Of course, I also want to thank my friends. Our numerous writing sessions — and coffee breaks — gave me the motivation I needed.

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*The old witch's ovens never stop smoking;
that delectable house reeks of roast pork,
not a kosher smell, but tempting.*

Chaim Abramovitz

from Jane Yolen's *Mapping the Bones*

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Introduction

Anna Hunter, author of *Tales from Over There: The Uses and Meanings of Contemporary Holocaust Narrative*, discusses how numerous Holocaust novels have given rise to a meta-narrative that today is “intrinsically present throughout contemporary cultural responses to the event, and which is ultimately reproduced in mythic form as a generic Holocaust ‘story’; a culturally constructed version of the Holocaust” (2). This examination leads to her claim that the Holocaust has been treated as a sort of “dark fairy tale” (Hunter 2). She lists the use of the fairy tale genre — more specifically in the form of “fairy-tale symbols, motifs and narrative structures” — as the most striking way to represent the Holocaust (Hunter 2). Various scholars have analysed the establishment of links between the historical event and the fairy tale in Holocaust literature and film. Philippe Codde, for instance, focusses on third-generation trauma after the Holocaust in his examination of how the author Judy Budnitz turns to fairy tales and myths in her work *If I Told You Once*. Margarete Landwehr researches the reason behind this tendency to use a fairy tale as an allegorical framework for the Holocaust — why it serves as an appropriate template. She concludes that the genre can “evoke both understanding for the events and empathy for the characters,” which she finds important in successful Holocaust fiction (Landwehr 156). Fairy tales deal with universal themes such as “the existential struggle to survive,” and they tell the stories of “ordinary human beings with fears and weaknesses,” whom the reader is able to identify with (Landwehr 156). She also remarks that the idea of “overpowering evil” that is found in fairy tales can function as “an appropriate vehicle for portraying unimaginable villains,” and therefore “fairy tales are particularly suited as Holocaust narratives as they put the horrific, the unimaginable, into a comprehensible form” (Landwehr 155).

The Holocaust certainly seems an event that is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to represent, considering its unimaginable cruelty and unfairness. Therefore, using a fairy tale to “dress up painful content” (Codde 7), and drawing on fairy tale themes, tropes, and motifs may be a way to “speak the unspeakable,” a phrase introduced by Peter Arnds (423). Considering the Third Reich’s “violence and its unreality,” the depiction of it in the form of a fairy tale may be an appropriate choice. “[T]he fairy tale has become a more acceptable vehicle for speaking about the Third Reich and the Holocaust,” he remarks, since the genre is suited to represent “extreme political violence and the victims’ loss of reality” (Arnds 423).

Second and third generation authors in particular are seen to use fairy tale elements in their Holocaust narratives. Judy Budnitz, for instance, follows four generations of Jewish women in her novel *If I Told You Once*, in which she makes various allusions to fairy tales such as “Little Red Riding Hood,” “Bluebeard,” and “Cinderella.” In this manner, “Pre-existing fairy-tales and myths provide narrative frames for the otherwise unnarratable trauma of third-generation survivors as they engage with postmemory,” Codde argues (qtd. in Hunter 60). Director Roberto Benigni likewise incorporates fairy tale elements in his Oscar winning movie *La vita è bella* (1997). Benigni belongs to the second generation, as his father was a prisoner at Bergen-Belsen concentration camp (Potts 66). The link between the fairy tale and trauma in the movie is seen in the scenes where the protagonist, Guido, builds up a fantastic reality “in order to block painful experiences” and protect his son’s innocence (San José and Mesquite 304).

Yet, the use of fairy tales as a narrative framework to portray the traumatic event of the Holocaust is not restricted to literary works by second or third-generation authors. This tendency can be found in recent works of fiction by authors who were not directly nor indirectly involved in the Holocaust as well. Jane Yolen, one of the authors that will be

discussed in this dissertation, draws on the fairy tale “Sleeping Beauty” in her novel *Briar Rose* (1992). She connects the fairy tale’s castle, the sleeping curse, and the thorns to the concentration camp Chelmo. Considering that the camp was located in a castle, surrounded by barbed wire and known for the gassing of many innocent Jews, the thematic links are clear. John Boyne’s novel *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2006), on the other hand, makes use of the fairy tale’s trope of foreshadowing, Anna Hunter argues (8). The links to the fairy tale genre may be less explicit in Boyne’s novel, yet Hunter writes how the novel relies “upon the conveyance of sensation rather than historical fact in order to engage the reader with the event; [which] is achieved in part by the use of fairytale conventions” (4). Another work that is worth mentioning is Günter Grass’s *Die Rättin* (1968), in which Grass establishes a link between the fairy tale of The Pied Piper of Hamelin and Nazi Germany, “with Hitler as the seductive flute player who takes rats (Jews) and children (the Germans) to their doom” (Arnds 425).

Thus, the involvement of fairy tales with the topic of the Holocaust has been pointed out and researched by various critics and scholars. However, little attention has been paid to the motivation behind recent Holocaust narrative writers’ take on the fairy tale “Hansel and Gretel.” In the last few years, a number of Holocaust narratives has been published that draw on this tale specifically. This dissertation will examine the manifestation of a link between the Grimm’s tale “Hansel and Gretel” — its narrative structure, themes and characters — in recent fictional Holocaust narratives. The novels that will be analysed are *The True Story of Hansel and Gretel* (2003) by Louise Murphy, *Gretel and the Dark* (2014) by Eliza Granville, and *Mapping the Bones* (2018) by Jane Yolen. First of all, I will give an overview of the original fairy tale’s main themes and motifs, in order to analyse the three novels as revisions of this tale. The second chapter of this dissertation will analyse the narratives’ use of “Hansel

and Gretel” as a metaphor for the Holocaust. In the third chapter I will discuss the way the novels deal with gender, reading them as modern retellings of this fairy tale. The analysis will be based on the argument that “Hansel and Gretel” provides an interesting framework for a twenty-first century retelling that is progressive concerning gender equality — considering that it is one of few fairy tales that has both a male and a female protagonist. Overall, the aim of this dissertation is to determine the significance and value of drawing on “Hansel and Gretel” when creating a Holocaust narrative that, at the same time, expresses ideas of gender equality.

Chapter 1: Analysis of “Hansel and Gretel” by the brothers Grimm

“Hansel and Gretel” is a German folk tale which was first published by the Brothers Grimm in the first edition of their *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* of 1812. This edition was followed by several alterations, such as the adding of Christian motifs and the transformation from the mother to a stepmother. The final version was eventually published in 1857 (Zipes, *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales* 271). The analyses that will be presented in this dissertation are based on the translation by Dee L. Ashliman of the 1857 or final version of the “Hansel and Gretel” tale by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. The tale revolves around a poor woodcutter who lives with his two children, Hansel and Gretel, and his new wife on the edge of a forest. When the woodcutter does not have the means anymore to support his family, his wife proposes to abandon the children in the woods. Hansel, however, comes up with a plan and marks the way back home with white pebbles, the first time, and bread crumbs the second time they are abandoned. The children come to the realisation that the bread crumbs have been eaten by birds, and they do not know the way back home. Soon, they encounter a house made of gingerbread, which is home to a witch who plans to fatten up Hansel, cook him in her gigantic oven and eat the boy. Gretel tricks the witch and manages to push her into the oven, which results in her death. The two children find a treasure in the witch’s house and take it with them. After having received help from a duck to cross a body of water, they arrive home safely, where they receive the news that their stepmother has passed away.

Studies have been done on the historical background of the fairy tale: “the repeated famines in the early 19th century in Germany, the tradition of the abandonment, the ubiquity of stepmothers because so many mothers died young, the brooding presence of real forests that were always threatening, uncivilised places,” whilst other critics have focussed on the “psychological states and childish impulses the story represents” (Zipes, *The Oxford*

Companion to Fairy Tales 271). Bruno Bettelheim, former concentration camp prisoner and author of *The Uses of Enchantment*, defines the story as one about “the dangers of unrestrained oral greed and dependence” (162), and the overcoming of destructive desires (160), and Maria Tatar mentions its potential as a “story of fortitude, resilience, and resourcefulness in the face of daunting threats” (210).

Some elements that will be developed more in detail — considering their relevance to a further discussion on the link between the tale and the Holocaust — are the three main themes of ‘abandonment,’ ‘starvation,’ and ‘survival,’ as well as the motifs of the gingerbread house, the theme of deceit, and the setting of the forest.

1.1. Analysis of themes and motifs

The plot of “Hansel and Gretel” contains three obstacles that the children are facing and have to overcome: abandonment, starvation, and cannibalism. These obstacles are intertwined with the three main locations where the tale takes place: home, the forest, and the witch’s gingerbread house.

1.1.1. Starvation

“Hansel and Gretel” starts at home, where the family is starving, since the poor woodcutter does not have the means to provide for his family. Starvation, Hansel and Gretel’s first obstacle, is the reason of their abandonment, and in this way forms a barrier to the possibility of a happy ending. Eliza Granville notes that the tale’s underlying themes of abandonment and hunger “suggest the tale draws on memories of devastating historical famines,” and explains that the year 1816 “brought most of Europe to the brink of starvation” (“The Inspiration for Gretel and the Dark”). Considering that the tale was thus written somewhat after the time of Germany’s severe food shortages, it is not surprising that the theme of food seems to be omnipresent in “Hansel and Gretel.” Maria Tatar explains how the tale represents a world

“where food [is] on everyone’s mind” (205), since, Tatar remarks, “[f]ood played a preeminent role in the lives of the peasants who told these tales, for it [...] assured survival” (206).

1.1.2. Abandonment

The second obstacle that prevents the two children from their “happy ever after” is ‘abandonment,’ the result of the first obstacle that goes hand in hand with the victimisation of children. When Hansel and Gretel are being abandoned in the woods, as part of their stepmother’s plan to get rid of them, they have no one to rely on but each other. Hansel manages to outwit the stepmother once, by collecting white pebbles and using them to mark the way back home, yet fails the second time. Robert S. White presents the tale in the way that Gila, his patient who has a history of abuse interprets it.¹ Gila’s reconsideration of the tale draws attention to the fact that the children are in fact abandoned three times: not only are they abandoned by their father and stepmother in the woods, they also lost their real mother (904). This highlights how the children’s situation is problematic from the very start. Ashliman discusses the practice of abandoning unwanted children in fairy tales in his

¹ “Hansel and Gretel: A Tale of Terror” examines the significance of the “Hansel and Gretel” fairy tale to a “woman with multiple childhood traumas” (893) and considers how the fairy tale is a motif in the treatment of the author, Robert S. White’s, patient. He writes how the woman “had been obsessed with Hansel and Gretel for a period as a child,” and “strongly [identified] with Gretel” and since she could not resolve the scene in which Gretel pushes the witch into the oven, she rewrote the tale “from the point of view of an abused child” (902), which White’s work presents. It is particularly interesting to see how the tale, which would probably be described as “troublesome” and “cruel” by many readers, the reading of it by a victim of abuse highlights even more its themes of abandonment, deceit (not only by the children’s parents, but also by the white bird who leads them to the children’s house), parents pretending to be concerned yet taking no action when needed, and the terror when facing death.

handbook on folk and fairy tales by claiming that it is a “repugnant but well documented practice” reflected and depicted in various fairy tales, such as this one (16). “These episodes suggest that at the time the tales were invented infanticide was still commonly practised, or — at least — that the fear of being killed by one’s own parents was very real, even if not justified” (Ashliman 16).

In this regard, the fairy tale “Hansel and Gretel” not only reflects nineteenth century Germany’s famines, it also illustrates the act of abandonment that went along with it. Maria Tatar supports this argument in *The Hard Facts of the Grimm’s Fairy Tales* by claiming that “Hansel and Gretel” is a tale that, apart from highlighting “the theme of sibling solidarity,” addresses “anxieties about starvation” and “abandonment” (209). These obstacles faced by Hansel and Gretel already hint at a resemblance to the event of the Holocaust and the deathly situations victims found themselves in. These victims, too, were experiencing starvation and abandonment.

1.1.3. Cannibalism

The brothers Grimm write how the witch locks up Hansel in a stall outside of her house “to be fattened up,” so that she can eat him. Cannibalism, or the threat of being devoured, is the third and final obstacle that Hansel and Gretel are confronted with. Donald Haase refers to the various references to “food or its absence, causing hunger and starvation,” and argues that “the main tension comes from the threat of cannibalism” (439). “Hansel and Gretel” is not the only fairy tale that contains the theme of cannibalism, Haase points out, and remarks that it is “a staple of fairy tales” (157).² Sheldon Cashdan makes a similar remark to Haase by pointing

² The theme can be found in tales such as Giambattista Basile’s “Sun, Moon, and Talia,” as well as Jacob and Wilhem Grimm’s “Hansel and Gretel,” “The Juniper Tree,” “Foundling,” and “Snow White,” and Charles Perrault’s “Sleeping Beauty,” to give a few examples (Haase 157).

out that “the consumption of human flesh — or even its prospect — occurs fairly regularly in fairy tales,” and refers to Grimm’s “Hansel and Gretel” as the story that “details the witch’s attempt to fatten Hansel so he will make a more savory meal” (ch. 1). In the chapter “Who’s for supper?” of his work *The Witch Must Die: The Hidden Meaning of Fairy Tales*, he aims to give a reason why cannibalism appears so frequently in fairy tales, and argues that it can be linked to the tales’ “psychological intent”:

Flesh eating is an altogether reprehensible act that identifies its practitioner as a thoroughly repugnant human being. If the witch is to perish, as she must, the reader must be convinced that she deserves to die. Whereas killing another person can be understood, even condoned if there are mitigating circumstances, cutting them up into little pieces and consuming them extends beyond the pale. (Cashdan ch.1)

As an addition to Cashdan's claim that the theme of cannibalism is present because of psychological intents, supposedly the presence of this theme, as well as the tale’s concern with food and food absence, can be explained by its historical context — the famines of nineteenth century Germany (Granville “The Inspiration for Gretel and the Dark”). Whereas starvation and abandonment are themes that can easily be linked to the Holocaust and that will be discussed as prominent themes in the Holocaust novels in a later chapter, cannibalism is not a theme in these three novels. If Cashdan argues that the presence of this theme justifies the witch's death, a reason why these authors chose to not include cannibalism is, arguably, that the atrocities the novels' villains are guilty of are so cruel that the reader does not need to be persuaded that they deserve to die.

1.1.4. The motif of the gingerbread house

By putting two children into the circumstances of severe hunger and malnutrition, the fairy tale presents the theme of oral greed as a consequence of this. As I pointed out, food plays an

important and crucial role — the tale starts with a deficiency of food, which ultimately leads to the abandonment of the children. When they encounter the witch’s edible house — their stomachs grumbling because of the fact that they have not eaten sufficiently in a long time — Hansel and Gretel are confronted with their oral greed. Bettelheim mentions how the gingerbread house illustrates how attractive it is “to give in to [oral greediness]” (161). Eating parts of the gingerbread house “without consciousness of their action” results in a confrontation with “crisis” and “a threat to their lives,” as Roberta Hoffman Markman argues (40).

In the fairy tale, food is thus used by the witch to lure the children. Haase mentions the use of food in fairy tales to tempt a hero in the “otherworld” (368). In a sense, the witch’s gingerbread house can be seen as a magical realm that the children enter when they have started eating the food attached to the walls and roof of the house. The witch deceives them by promising shelter and food, yet plans to make *them* her own food. Although the candy itself is not enchanted (like, for instance, the poisoned apple in “Snow White”), “Hansel and Gretel” does express the idea that eating the candy is a crucial and decisive act. In this regard, it can be argued that the way the brothers Grimm deal with the theme of food in “Hansel and Gretel” mirrors the idea of food being symbolical for signing a pact with death.³

³ In Greek mythology, too, the myth of Persephone and Hades depicts how Persephone is forced to stay in the underworld after she has eaten seven pomegranate seeds. The film *Pan’s Labyrinth* draws on this theme as well: one of the tasks Ofelia has to fulfil involves resisting the urge to eat from a banquet, in order to not wake a monster. Similar to the moment where Persephone decides to eat something, and the scene where Ofelia cannot resist eating two grapes, the moment Hansel and Gretel start nibbling on the house’s roof and windowpanes, there is no turning back.

S. Buttsworth points out that originally the witch's house was not made up of candy, but of "ordinary bread" — "the ultimate dream of starving Europe" (51). Buttsworth provides an interesting insight into the alterations that the gingerbread house underwent:

If the house is made mainly of bread, the emphasis in the story is on survival (the temptation of the house in the woods is negated by the fact that if the children do not eat it, they will die). If the house is made of sugary things, the temptation to which the children succumb is the sin of gluttony and excess. (52)

Thus, if the house is made of candy or gingerbread, it represents the children's greatest desire or temptation at the moment of encounter, whereas a house made of bread represents that which the children actually need to survive.

1.1.5. The theme of deceit

Apart from representing Hansel and Gretel's temptation, the gingerbread house represents deceit: what seems alluring and tempting from the outside, will turn out to be a threat to the children's lives. Markman expresses a similar view on the significance of the gingerbread house by arguing that "[t]hat which offered heaven is also that which offers destruction" to the children (40). Earlier I mentioned White's work, that presents the interpretation of "Hansel and Gretel" by a victim of abuse. His work likewise discusses an article published in *New York Times Magazine* accompanied by two illustrations referring to "Hansel and Gretel," and his patient's reaction to these illustrations. White describes how his patient felt that the picture "captures the terrible, terrible fear that Hansel and Gretel feel at looking at the house in the dark woods, the house in which the witch is waiting for them. They look paralyzed; they cannot move or run" (901). To Gina, the candy that is attached to the cottage is "not a lure," but "a phony deception, and the children know it" (902).

Chapter 2 of this dissertation will explain how the Holocaust novels draw on the theme of the gingerbread house as a deceiving place. In Yolen's novel, for instance, Sobanek labour camp appears a relatively safe place to Gittel at first. Likewise, Granville's Krysta does not see the danger that lies in Hraben's tower. I will argue that both Sobanek camp and Hraben's tower can be regarded as revisions of the tale's gingerbread house, as they will turn out to offer destruction to the protagonists.

The theme of deceit, and the act of 'deceiving' and 'pretending,' can, however, be found all over the fairy tale. When the children's stepmother wakes them at the beginning of the tale, she tells them that they are going into the woods "to fetch wood" (Grimm). Additionally, their father tricks them by tying a branch to a tree, which the wind would beat back and forth, so that it would appear that he is close to the children chopping up wood with an axe. Therefore, it is no surprise that Hansel handles in the same way as his father and stepmother by misleading them and lying when telling his father that he is looking at his white cat, whilst he is in fact creating a trail of pebbles. Later, the witch tricks the children into thinking that she has good intentions, by telling them that "[n]o harm will come to [them]," serving them "a good meal," and making two beds for them (Grimm). Finally, Hansel deceives the witch by holding a little bone instead of his finger when the witch wants to feel if he is get yet, and Gretel tricks her by pretending that she does not know how to climb into the oven.

1.1.6. The setting of the forest

A final element that needs to be pointed out is the setting of the fairy tale forest. Towards the end of the narrative, Hansel and Gretel cross the water, aided by a duck. This episode seems to function as a turning point in the story, representing the children's journey to freedom, yet also maturity and independence.

However, it can be argued that Hansel and Gretel's time in the forest in general can be perceived as a journey — a *rite de passage*. Anthony Zehetner points out that “[m]any fairy tales follow a set pattern similar to ‘rite of passage’ stories,” since they often present a “poor vulnerable child [who] loses a parent, and then must set off on an arduous journey testing their courage and outwitting their foes, before realising their true place in the world, usually by bonding with another” (Zehetner 161) “Hansel and Gretel” presents two children abandoned by their parents who must conquer a witch, using their courage and wits, whose trial starts in the dark forest. Therefore, the entry to the forest can be seen as the start of their *rite de passage*, since the place represents their transition from the safety of the children's home to the danger that lies in the witch's gingerbread house. Likewise, Maitland points out that the forest is both a “dangerous” and an “exciting” place — “Coming to terms with the forest, surviving its terrors, utilising its gifts, and gaining its help is the way to ‘happy ever after’” (8).

1.2. Gender in “Hansel and Gretel”

Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion, Zipes notes that “the patterns of most of Grimm's fairy tales draw conscious attention to prescribed values and models. As children read or are read to, they follow a social path, learn role orientation, and acquire norms and values” (57). One particular kind of these norms and values are gender roles. Various critics have discussed how fairy tales depict gender lessons and how the majority of the stories influence “models of manhood and womanhood,” Jerilyn Fisher and Ellen S. Silber argue (121). Therefore, it cannot be denied that these tales are capable of “reinforcing limiting sex role stereotypes and conservative ways of thinking about family that act upon children when they are most impressionable” (Fisher and Silber 121).

Zipes distinguishes the fairy tales' male heroes, who learn to be "active, competitive, handsome, industrious, cunning, acquisitive," whose "happiness depends on the just use of power." The stories' female heroines, on the other hand, learn to be "passive obedient, self-sacrificing, hard-working, patient, and straight-laced." The female hero's goal in life is "wealth, jewels, and a man to protect her property rights [...] Her happiness depends on conformity to patriarchal rule," Zipes points out (*Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* 57).

"Hansel and Gretel" is a particularly interesting and unique fairy tale to analyse with a focus on gender, considering that the tale has two protagonists who are of a different sex, a pattern that is not often found in fairy tales. It is therefore interesting to ask the question whether the tale's hero and heroine are portrayed as equal to each other, or to what extent the fairy tale presents a distinction between an active hero and a passive heroine. This question will be the focus of this chapter.

First of all, it is interesting to consider the discourse between the male protagonist and the female protagonist. When Hansel and Gretel overhear their parents talking about their plan to abandon the children in the woods the next day, Gretel is described crying — "Gretel cried bitter tears and said to Hansel, 'It is over with us!'" (Grimm). Through his response to this, Hansel both silences and comforts his sister: "'Be quiet, Gretel,' said Hansel, 'and don't worry. I know what to do'" (Grimm). Thus, from the first moment the children are introduced to the reader, Hansel is portrayed as responsible and brave, whereas Gretel is portrayed as emotionally weak and in need of protection by her brother. The following lines illustrate Hansel's discourse:

"Be quiet, Gretel," said Hansel, "and don't worry. I know what to do."

Hansel comforted her, "Wait a little until the moon comes up [...]" (or ..?)

Hansel took his little sister by the hand.

But he comforted his little sister and said, "Don't cry, Gretel. Sleep well."

... Hansel comforted Gretel [...]

"But now we must leave," said Hansel, "and get out of these witch-woods." (Grimm)

As can be seen in Hansel's lines, the boy's discourse is characterised by imperatives, such as "Be quiet," "don't worry," "Wait," and "Don't cry" (Grimm), which depicts Hansel as predominant. It can be seen how he repeatedly comforts and reassures his sister, and how he comes across as bold and confident. Gretel, on the other hand, is portrayed as emotionally weaker, as she is crying very often throughout the narrative. The following lines illustrate Gretel's discourse:

Gretel cried bitter tears and said to Hansel, "It is over with us!"

Gretel began to cry and said, "How will we get out of [the] woods?"

Gretel began to cry, but it was all for nothing.

Oh, how the poor little sister sobbed as she was forced to carry the water, and how the tears streamed down her cheeks!

"Dear God, please help us," she cried.

Not only is she often seen crying, the girl comes across as highly dependent on her brother and reliant on his comforting behaviour. In this regard, the brothers Grimm portray the girl as vulnerable, helpless, and emotional. The discourse between the two siblings suggests that Hansel is Gretel's older brother, yet the Grimm's text of 1857 does not mention anything about this.

Conclusions drawn from a discourse analysis thus correspond to Zipes' description of the traditional fairy tale pattern that distinguishes between industrious and active heroes, on the one hand, and passive and obedient heroines, on the other hand. Does this mean, then, that the tale should be perceived as a sexist tale that portrays women as inferior to men? Not

necessarily, I will argue. It cannot be denied that the discourse between the siblings clearly implies that Hansel is the proactive, bold, and dominant sibling of the two. Moreover, it is Hansel who comes up with the plan to mark the way home by creating a trail of white pebbles, which saves them the first time, yet fails when he tries this a second time with crumbs of bread. These acts portray Hansel as clever and imaginative, but he is also the one who starts eating the witch's gingerbread house — an impulsive act that brings both of the siblings in great danger. Secondly, the instances in which Gretel is crying occur mostly in the first half of the fairy tale, before the children have encountered the witch, and Gretel's frailty visible diminishes as the story progresses. After all, it is Gretel who tricks the witch into believing that she does not know how to climb into the oven, a clever and brave act which saves both of the children. Moreover, Gretel proves herself as imaginative as her brother when she approaches the white duck swimming in the large body of water they have to cross in order to go home. Goldberg points out how it has been argued that the crossing of the water not only represents the separation between "the witch's world" and "the world of the family" (42), but it can also signify the children's journey into maturity and independency. It can be argued that it is mostly Gretel who benefits from this journey. The following passage illustrates how Gretel takes initiative by asking the duck for help:

"We cannot get across," said Hansel. "I cannot see a walkway or a bridge." "There are no boats here," answered Gretel, "but there is a white duck swimming. If I ask it, it will help us across." Then she called out: [...] The duckling came up to them, and Hansel climbed onto it, then asked his little sister to sit down next to him. "No," answered Gretel. "That would be too heavy for the duckling. It should take us across one at a time."

Not only is she taking initiative, she also contradicts her brother when he thinks they should climb onto the duckling together. The fact that she is thinking for herself now instead of merely obeying her brother exemplifies Gretel's progress and journey into autonomy.

Overall, opinions on whether the fairy tale "Hansel and Gretel" portrays a patriarchal or sexist ideas concerning gender roles clearly seem to differ. For Alison Lurie, for instance, "Hansel and Gretel" is a fairy tale that reflects a matriarchal society instead of a patriarchal one. She defines Gretel as "an example of an active, resourceful young heroine," which, as an examination of some of the best-known fairy tales shows, is rare (Lieberman 387).

Cochoy stresses the cooperation between the siblings that the tale illustrates, by demonstrating how both of the children "hoax their jailer" (10), the witch, since "Hansel takes advantage of the short sight of the witch to hold out a small bone in lieu of his finger so that she thinks he has not put on weight; Gretel asks the witch to show her how to get in the oven, so that she may push her inside instead" (11). However, he notes, in the beginning of the tale, "Hansel proves capable of not only using the white pebbles to find his way back home but of hoaxing his parents" (Cochoy 10). In this sense, Cochoy points out how Hansel defies both his parents and the witch, whereas Gretel only defies the witch.

This chapter has analysed the portrayal of the protagonists Hansel and Gretel, yet it is important to briefly take into account the portrayal of the secondary characters as well. The brothers Grimm seem to portray a rather negative image of fatherhood: Hansel and Gretel's father deeply bewails the abandonment and loss of his children, yet he takes no action at all to go look for them, neither does he stand up against the stepmother's evil plan. Fisher and S. Silber distinguish this as a general pattern in fairy tales — "The fairy tale father, oblivious to his child's misery, never intercedes; nor is he reproached for being inattentive" (121).

Whilst the children's father certainly has a lot of flaws, his wife is no better, since she does not show any sign of mercy towards Hansel and Gretel. Along with the witch, the character of the stepmother in "Hansel and Gretel" portrays a very negative image of womanhood. It has been pointed out that the witch and the stepmother can be seen as two versions of one character. Haase, for instance, remarks that "Interpreters reading from a psychoanalytic perspective have noted that after Gretel kills the witch, the stepmother is also dead, as if the two malicious women were manifestations of a single person" (439). A remarkable element in the tale that supports this claim is the fact that the stepmother and the witch wake the children using the same words: "Get up, you lazybones!" versus "Get up, lazybones!" (Grimm). Zipes notes that Wilhelm Grimm even suggested this himself, which "[leads] to a demonization of women in the tale" (...). As Zipes points out, "They are both self centred and want to destroy the children" (*Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* 49-50). Moreover, "The children are moved from the breakdown of order in a domestic situation, caused by a woman, to another threatening domestic situation, in which the woman again represents the forces of chaos and destruction," he writes (Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* 52). "Hansel and Gretel" seems to suggest that a woman who is unmarried or not guided by a man brings chaos and destruction.⁴

Opinions on gender dynamics in Grimm's "Hansel and Gretel" thus differ. Whereas for some readers and critics it is a tale about a brave and clever girl who saves her brother from danger, other see Hansel as the true hero of the story and read the tale as one that portrays women as either weak or evil. It cannot be denied that the fairy tale, reflecting

⁴ Other infamous fairy tale witches are the evil stepmother in "Snow White" and Cinderella's stepmother. In these tales, the stepmothers start acting out their evil plan *after* their husband has died, which, it can be argued, implies that problems arise when women are not guided by males.

nineteenth century Germany's norms and values, expresses some patriarchal ideas. These can, for instance, be seen in the discourse between Hansel and Gretel. However, it is important to note that in comparison to other fairy tales, the tale's way of dealing with gender roles can be perceived as relatively progressive. Although Gretel is seen crying a lot throughout the story, it is she who performs the decisive act by pushing the witch into the oven. Gretel definitely is one of the most active of the girls found in fairy tales, and both she and Hansel take part in saving themselves. Tazeen Erum even categorises "Hansel and Gretel" as a "feminist's fairy tale," and highlights Gretel's wisdom and cleverness and describing the story as one that "reveals the 'power' of female," by "[using] their mental ability rather than physical strength" (14). Similar is Kay F. Stone's viewpoint on this matter, who wrote that "Only Gretel [...] is allowed a brief moment of violence in order to save herself and her brother. No other popular Grimm heroines destroy the villain" (15-16). Finally, Tatar and Haase highlight the power of cooperation and solidarity between siblings that the tale illustrates, since Hansel "takes the lead at the beginning of the tale, soothing Gretel's fears and using his wits to find the way back home," yet "Gretel outsmarts the witch, tricking her into entering the oven," Tatar notes (209). Haase agrees by writing that "At the beginning, Hansel takes charge, plans how to mark the path, and comforts and protects his little sister. Later, Gretel dominates: it is she who kills the witch and arranges for the duck to help them get home" (439).

The tale thus highlights both the genders' strengths and flaws, yet expresses some patriarchal and/or sexist ideas through its discourse between the siblings, as well as through the characterisation of the witch and the stepmother. Therefore, it provides an opportunity for an updated, improved twenty-first century retelling of the tale expressing progressive ideas on gender equality.

Chapter 2: The use of “Hansel and Gretel” as a metaphor for the Holocaust

2.1. Integration of the fairy tale in Holocaust novels

In response to Theodor Adorno’s claim that “writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” Peter Arnds asks the question “what is writing fairy tales after 1945, particularly fairy tales in the context of the Third Reich and the Holocaust?” (422). Writing fairy tales in the context of an event as unrepresentable as the Holocaust seems, indeed, questionable. How does one link the Holocaust to magic, and fantastic elements, which are characteristics of many fairy tales? And how to integrate a “happy ever after” — a crucial plot characteristic of a fairy tale — in a Holocaust narrative? Is it possible to combine these two — despite the fact that they are so far from each other?

It should not be forgotten that fairy tales have not always been so joyful and positive as Disney movies let us believe, as they were originally written for an adult readership. Critics have pointed out the possibility of fairy tales to deal with serious and harsh themes in a more accessible way than realist fiction can, and “Hansel and Gretel” is far from the only fairy tale that draws on themes like child abandonment, cannibalism, and the death of parents. Arnds mentions the genre’s ability to deal with the theme of war, by pointing out how postwar authors like Günter Grass and Edgar Hilsenrath have “re-claimed the German fairy tale tradition for their works in order to exploit the artistic potential of the connection between the genre and the Third Reich” (423). “In tales like *Hansel und Gretel* [...] they see ways of speaking the unspeakable” (423), Arnds writes. He refers to two of the Third Reich’s attributes — its violence and its unreality — to support his claim that the representation of it in the form of a fairy tale is the ideal choice. The genre “lends itself to a representation of just that — extreme political violence and the victims’ loss of reality” (423), which has as result that “the fairy tale has become a more acceptable vehicle for speaking about the Third Reich

and the Holocaust” (Arnds 423). One of the works he focusses on in his work is the German author Edgar Hilsenrath’s *Der Nazi und der Friseur*, in which “Hansel and Gretel” is placed into the context of genocide. By analysing Hilsenrath’s work, Arnds claims that the “Hansel and Gretel” tale is thematically linked to the Holocaust in a number of ways. For instance, he mentions “the black smoke from the [witch’s] hut,” and “the oven motif” (433) — which both remind of the concentration camps’ crematoria ovens.

The link between the oven in the witch’s gingerbread house and the ovens of Auschwitz and other concentration camps is easily made. Yet, the thematic links between “Hansel and Gretel” and the Holocaust do not stop there, as I aim to demonstrate. Through an analysis of three recent anglophone Holocaust narratives, I will explain how the brothers Grimm’s tale “Hansel and Gretel” provides both an effective framework because of its thematic links with the Holocaust, as well as an opportunity to “speak the unspeakable.” The novels will be analysed in the order in which they were published: Louise Murphy’s *The True Story of Hansel and Gretel* (2003), Eliza Granville’s *Gretel and the Dark* (2014), and Jane Yolen’s *Mapping the Bones* (2018).

2.1.1. The True Story of Hansel and Gretel

Louise Murphy’s *The True Story of Hansel and Gretel: a novel of war and survival* (2003) tells the story of a Jewish family that consists of a mechanic, his children, and his new wife. Set during the last months of the Nazi occupation of Poland, the narrative opens with the mechanic and his wife leaving behind the two children in the Polish woods. They are told to keep their Jewish names for themselves and adopt the German names ‘Hansel’ and ‘Gretel.’ In the forest, the main setting of the novel, the siblings encounter Magda “the witch,” a Gypsy woman living outside of society who risks her life by sheltering the children in her hut. In *The True Story*, Murphy tells a story about a village trying to get through the war, and individuals

dealing with the anxieties this war and the presence of the Nazis in their village brings. Apart from the children and Magda, the novel also explores the stories of the children's father and stepmother, the lovers Nelka and Telek, and the region's Oberführer. Murphy's work introduces its reading public of young adults to the atrocities of the Holocaust — the concentration camps' gas chambers and crematoria, as well as some elements that are less represented in literature covering WWII, such as blood transfusions and the abduction of Aryan looking children.

Murphy's story of war and survival contains various references to the fairy tale genre. For instance, apart from the children's real names, their parents' names are also unknown. Murphy simply refers to them as "the Mechanic" and "the Stepmother," a quintessential fairy tale element that reminds of characters such as "the evil stepmother," "the witch," and "the hunter." The first chapter in which the children and their parents are introduced is entitled "Once Upon a Time," another reference to fairy tales. It is the story "Hansel and Gretel," however, that functions as the main focus of the novel.

First of all, Murphy relies on the tale's structure in order to explore the themes of starvation and abandonment. Secondly, *The True Story* draws on the Grimm's tale's moral of deceiving appearances and makes use of the technique of reversal in her novel. Finally, I will demonstrate how she establishes thematic links between Grimm's "Hansel and Gretel" and the Holocaust through the references to the bread crumbs, the oven, and the white swan.

On a structural level, Murphy's narrative reflects the Grimm's tale: the protagonists have made the journey from their Polish home to the forest, where they are abandoned by their father and stepmother. Like Hansel and Gretel, they are almost starving when the children encounter the house of Magda "the witch," a woman who is both Roma and Jewish. Murphy integrates the episode of the burning of the witch, and ends her novel with the

reunion of the children and their father. There is, thus, an explicit link between the structure of Murphy's novel and the Grimm's tale. As I mentioned in the first chapter of this dissertation, critics have argued how the fairy tale reflects nineteenth century Germany's famines and illustrates how many parents were forced to abandon their children as a result of this. The period of the second world war was, likewise, characterised by anxieties about starvation, which forced many parents to make extremely difficult choices, like abandoning their children. The novel reflects this aspect of history in the scene where the mechanic and his wife make the difficult yet obligatory choice to leave their children behind, to improve their chances of surviving.

By opting for Bialowieza forest as the main setting of the novel, Murphy refers to the many Jews hiding in the forest during the war. Suzanne Weiner Weber writes that "approximately 50,000 to 80,000 Jews, predominantly from Eastern Poland, sought refuge in nearby forests" (Abstract). Tim Cole, likewise, provides an insight into the forest fugitives' harsh life in his work *Holocaust Landscapes*: "In order to survive, those in hiding needed to find food and shelter and avoid detection. In the spring, summer and autumn, Jews ate what they could find in the forest, gathering plants, wild berries, mushrooms, nuts, eggs from birds' nests, as well as insects and worms. Drinking water was found in streams, on moss, or pools on the forest floor" (55). In *The True Story*, it is described how Hansel and Gretel, after they have been abandoned by their parents, soon enough encounter Magda, who offers them both shelter and food. Hansel and Gretel's parents, on the other hand, do not find shelter and thus have to rely on what they can find in the forest in order to survive. In the chapters that focus on the Mechanik and his wife, Murphy emphasises his "empty gut" (51), the "bony length of his body" (53), and how the only food he has eaten in days are things that he found in the pockets of dead bodies lying on the ground (55). Therefore, it seems a logic choice to draw on

the structure and themes of the fairy tale “Hansel and Gretel” when creating a narrative focussed on forest fugitives — considering that the fairy tale largely takes places in a forest and that it integrates the themes of starvation and survival.

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I referred to the fairy tale’s theme of deceit: “Hansel and Gretel” is a tale that is all about deceiving and pretending, and seems to illustrate how things are not always how they appear at first sight. Murphy draws on this theme through four major reversals in her novel. The most prominent reversal that she makes is the fact that Magda “the witch” is, in fact, not the villain of the story, yet rather acts as a motherly figure towards the children. Ulrich C. Knoepflmacher defines this character as “a ‘righteous Gentile,’” who “shelters the renamed children, nurtures and tutors them” (182)⁵.

A second reversal that Murphy makes lies in the element of the oven: in *The True Story*, Magda’s hut contains a gigantic oven. Towards the end of the narrative, this oven is used by Magda to hide the children when Germans invade her hut. In this regard, the oven is not an oven used to burn children in, yet it is used by the witch-figure to *prevent* the burning of the children in *another* oven: the ovens of Auschwitz. Although the children are spared from the terrible fate of being burned in this retelling of “Hansel and Gretel,” the witch, Magda, gets taken to Auschwitz where she is being gassed to death and where her body is being burned in one of the crematoria — the ovens of Auschwitz Birkenau. Murphy narrates in a shockingly detailed way how Magda is gassed to death, and she does not stop here. Descriptions are given on what happens with Magda’s body, how it is burned in the oven, how her bones turn to ash, and how her ashes are eventually dumped “with the ashes of thousands of others into a truck,” and finally dumped into the river Vistula (Murphy 252-254). This

⁵ A further analysis of Magda’s character and Murphy’s deviation from the original tale will be given in Chapter 3.

vivid description of what happens with Magda's body after her death is in great contrast with the way the brothers Grimm narrate the witch's death in the oven.⁶

A third reversal that Murphy makes can be seen in the episode of the Stepmother's sacrifice. In the original tale, it is Hansel and Gretel's stepmother who comes up with the evil plan to abandon the children in the woods, and leave them to perish. Murphy's retelling mirrors the original tale in the sense that it is also the Stepmother who "pushes the children into the dark forest [and] hastily renames them and commands them to forget their actual Jewish names," as Knoepfmacher points out (182). However, her motivation behind this is to make sure that the children would have bigger chances of surviving, and because she realises that staying together would result in the death of the four of them. The Stepmother's good intentions and compassion towards the children are, however, most prominently seen in the episode where she sacrifices herself in order to avenge the two men who have raped Gretel, a scene that will be analysed into more detail in Chapter 2.

In this regard, Murphy draws on the presence of the theme of false appearances in "Hansel and Gretel." Readers of *The True Story* might be biased by what they know about the original tale and thus expect that the intentions of Magda the witch will turn out to be bad after all, and that these children's Stepmother's aim is to get rid of them, too. As Margarete J. Landwehr points out, Murphy's modern version of "Hansel and Gretel" "subverts the stereotypes of the evil stepmother and witch" (154). By playing with the reader's expectations and deviating from the fairy tale through these characters, Murphy "vindicates" both witches and stepmothers (Knoepfmacher 182).

⁶ "The old woman began to howl frightfully. But Gretel ran away, and the godless witch burned up miserably" (Grimm).

Thus, Murphy follows the structure of “Hansel and Gretel” in the sense that the novel starts with abandonment and starvation in the forest. Yet, she also ends her narrative with the reunion between the children and their father — an ending which seems unrealistically optimistic for a Holocaust novel. However, in the afterword to her novel, “A Conversation with Louise Murphy,” the author clarifies that it is “a happy ending tempered by tragedy” (7). Although she has “not killed a single child in the novel,” and admits that this is far from realistic, since “Poland lost over twenty percent of her children” (7), it should not be forgotten that two of the novel’s good characters, the Stepmother and Magda the witch, tragically die.

Knoepfmacher comments on this episode in the novel:

Aided by dimmed recollections of his past, the boy called Hansel manages to recognise his surviving father at the end of the novel. But such a “happy” recognition is denied to the girl called Gretel, his older sister. She has no pearls and jewels to offer the weeping father who is reunited with the child he thought to have lost. Her identity has been erased. Her biological mother, her stepmother, and her surrogate mother, Magda, have all been killed. (182)

Knoepfmacher stresses the fact that Murphy’s protagonists do not have jewels to offer their father at the moment of their reunion. Furthermore, she points out the fact that, although they are reunited at the end of the novel, the children and their father have lost at least three loved ones. In this regard, the plot structure of Murphy’s novel can be considered a fourth reversal she makes. In the original tale, and in fairy tales in general, the villains (i.e. the witch and the stepmother) die, and the good live a “happily ever after”. In Murphy’s tale, however, this is not the case, as of the novel’s heroes die in a very tragic way. In this regard, it can be argued that Murphy stresses the cruelty and harsh reality of the Holocaust and implies that this is no fairy tale — the characters’ goodness will not be a reason for them to be spared.

In the rest of this chapter, I will demonstrate how Murphy integrates some of the tale's crucial elements — the bread crumbs spread out by Hansel to create the trail that will lead the children back home, the bread attached to the witch's house, and the “swan” — and connects them to the Holocaust.

In Chapter 1, I demonstrated how food is omnipresent in “Hansel and Gretel,” and I pointed out that one of the reasons why Murphy opts for this particular fairy tale might be that it allows her to explore the theme of starvation in the context of war, and the hunger that forest fugitives experienced. Needless to say, the Holocaust is an event characterised by and associated with extreme starvation and food deprivation, therefore it is no surprise that Murphy draws on the focus of food in “Hansel and Gretel” to integrate this in her novel, too.

Hansel's cleverness is expressed in the fairy tale through his trick on his parents. When he has found out about their plan to leave him and his sister behind in the woods, he creates a path of white pebbles, the first time, and crumbs of bread the second time. Murphy's Hansel, too, creates a trail of bread crumbs, so that their parents would find them back when times are safer. However, Magda later comments on this act by saying he has “thrown away his luck.” Bread is, thus, referred to as “luck.” At the end of the narrative, the bread crumbs return: right before the reunion between the children and the Mechanic, Hansel and Gretel find bread crumbs on the floor of the refugee centre, which makes Hansel remember the crumbs he threw on the ground in the forest. The crumbs form a trail that leads to the kitchen, where they eventually find their father. The fact that they are reunited with their father because of a trail of bread crumbs, a metaphor for “luck,” seems to imply that these children are the lucky ones, yet this implies that they are also the exception. It seems like Murphy wants to highlight that her Hansel and Gretel might have found their father back because of “luck,” — because they were lucky, and their luck has lead them back to their father — yet

this was not the general case. Many children were not as lucky to be reunited with their parents, after the war had ended.

Bread is thus used in a metaphorical way in the novel, as a representation of “luck,” however it is also integrated in Murphy’s version of the infamous gingerbread house. Grimm’s Hansel and Gretel are starving when they arrive at the witch’s gingerbread house, which is tempting and alluring because of the candy attached to the walls and roofs. In Murphy’s retelling, Hansel and Gretel likewise have been surviving on a small piece of bread and are severely undernourished at the point where they suddenly come across Magda’s house in the forest. Magda’s house, however, is not made of gingerbread, it is described as a “tiny house,” “sort of a shed” (Murphy 15). The first thing that Hansel remarks, and which makes him run toward the hut immediately, is “a piece of dark bread that had been pressed over a metal spike sunk in the wood of the hut” (Murphy 15). It is interesting to point out that the candy in the Grimm’s tale has thus been replaced by a simple piece of bread in Murphy’s survival narrative. As I mentioned earlier in this dissertation, Buttsworth remarks that originally the gingerbread house was not made up of candy, but of “ordinary bread” (51). It is certainly possible that Murphy took into account the earliest version of Hansel and Gretel for her rewriting of the tale, and therefore did not include the candy in her version of the witch’s house. Yet, it is more likely that Murphy chose to replace the candy by a piece of bread to stress the hunger and starvation that went along with the second world war. The gingerbread house, in the Grimm’s tale, represents the children’s greatest desire at the moment of encounter: food. It can be imagined that a simple piece of bread would have been starving Europe’s ultimate desire at the time. To refer back to Buttsworth’s words, the emphasis of this episode in Murphy’s novel is, thus, “on survival,” in contrast to the Grimm’s tale, in which, it can be said, the emphasis is partly on “the sin of gluttony and excess” (52).

Murphy's emphasis on survival and the metaphorical use of a piece of bread as a representation of wartime Europe's ultimate desire can be linked to an account by Jerry Rawicki, a survivor of the Holocaust. In an oral history interview, which focusses on bread and hunger in a Polish ghetto, he remarks how bread used to be plentiful, but "now it is only a mirage" (Rawicki and Ellis 156), therefore it is logical that bread, in a Holocaust novel that draws on the tale "Hansel and Gretel" and its gingerbread house represents the element of the children's ultimate dream. Furthermore, the interview reflects on the drive for survival and the importance of bread for life. The episode where Hansel runs to the house and reaches out for the bread — a rather dangerous and reckless action — illustrates Hansel's "drive for survival," and how this drive takes over from his rational thinking. In this regard, Murphy draws on the "Hansel and Gretel" fairy tale to portray the concerns that victims of the Holocaust presumably faced every day: the instinctive drive for survival and the severe risk that went along with theft in order to increase the chances of living.⁷

So far, this chapter has explored how the structure of Murphy's narrative mirrors the structure of the original tale, in the sense that it starts with starvation, then explores the theme 'abandonment,' includes the burning of the witch, and ends with the reunion between the children and their father. Furthermore, I have demonstrated how Murphy integrates some of the fairy tale's well-known elements, such as the bread crumbs, the witch's house, and the

⁷ This particular scene in Murphy's novel can also be related to a term used by Bettelheim in his *The Uses of Enchantment*, namely "starvation anxiety". Bettelheim uses this term when referring to the passage in "Hansel and Gretel" where Hansel creates a path of bread crumbs instead of pebbles to find his way back home, not using his intelligence well and not being able to think clearly, as a result of his anxiety. "Starvation anxiety has driven him back, so now he can think only of food as offering a solution to the problem of finding his way out of a serious predicament", Bettelheim writes. (160).

oven. I also illustrated how Murphy deviates from the original tale, through the characterisation and fate of the Stepmother and Magda, as well as through the oven element, drawing on the original tale's messages that things are not always what they seem. A final element that I would like to point out is the allusion to the swan in the brothers Grimm's tale. In the 1857 version of the fairy tale, on which this dissertation is based, a duck helps Hansel and Gretel to cross the river on their way back home after Gretel has managed to push the witch into the oven. Murphy alludes to this episode in the chapter "Swans," where Hansel and Gretel, after they have left Bialowieza forest, are wandering through the Polish countryside and come across a river they need to cross. When a tank driven by Russians approaches the two children, Gretel thinks it is a "huge swan" that will help them to cross the river. In this part of the narrative, Gretel has entered a state of madness and suffers from amnesia as a result of the trauma of being raped in the Polish forest. It is interesting to see that Murphy includes the appearance of a "swan," and the crossing of the river in her novel, considering that this is an underrepresented scene in retellings of "Hansel and Gretel". Goldberg remarks that "[T]he duck is not an essential figure in the tale. She was missing entirely from the Grimm's original version [...] Many people who remember most of the rest of the tale of *Hansel und Gretel* do not remember the duck at all" (43). In her work "Gretel's Duck," Goldberg refers to the different interpretations that have been given to the significance of the duck and the event of crossing the river. She argues that "the river demarcates the witch's world from the world of the family" (42). Although this episode in Murphy's novel is not immediately followed by the reunion between the children and the Mechanic, it can be argued that the crossing of the water signifies, in Murphy's novel too, a transition from the witch's world (i.e. the children's stay at Magda's hut) and the world of the family. Another interpretation of this scene is that the crossing of the river, aided by the Russian tank,

demarcates the boundary between the period of German occupation in Poland, a central focus of the novel, and Soviet liberation, considering that the tank is driven by Russians. In this way, the crossing of the river is symbolical for the passage from danger to safety — similar to the Grimm’s tale in which the river demarcates the passage from the danger and threat in the witch’s house to the safety that Hansel and Gretel find in the reunion with their father.

To conclude this analysis on Louise Murphy’s *The True Story of Hansel and Gretel*, I will briefly discuss the character of the Oberführer. I have demonstrated how Magda “the witch,” is in fact not a real witch, and certainly not the villain of the story. The character of the Oberführer, on the other hand, seems to “typify the Nazi as an incarnation of evil” (Murphy “A Conversation with Louise Murphy” 6), and can thus be said to represent the evil witch-figure in this retelling of “Hansel and Gretel.” In the conversation with the author that follows the narrative in her novel, Murphy discusses her struggles with the creation of this character, and explains that this character represents what happens to men like the Oberführer “when historical events give them permission to use his dark side of the human imagination” (Murphy “A Conversation with Louise Murphy” 6). The Oberführer is not associated with a gingerbread house, nor does he lure or tempt the children by any means, and he certainly does not trick them into believing that he has good intentions, like the Grimm’s witch. In fact, the children only come into contact with this character at the very end of the narrative, yet another character is closely involved with him: Nelka, Magda’s great-niece who lives with her. The Oberführer has a disturbing obsession with “revitalizing both his body through coercive blood transfusions with local woman,” amongst them Nelka, “and the fascist body politic through abducting Aryan-looking children,” Jamil Khader writes (131). Khader’s work *Humanizing the Nazi? The Semiotics of Vampirism, Trauma, and Post-Holocaust Ethics in Louise Murphy’s The True Story of Hansel and Gretel* focusses on the character of the

Oberführer and how Murphy makes use of the “semiotics of vampirism to underwrite her representation of the Nazi Other and her engagement with the Nazi anti-Semitic ideology” (131). It is explained how she uses “vampiric tropes,” “metaphors,” and overall draws attention to his obsession with blood, focussing on the episode where the Oberführer performs one of his blood transfusions with Nelka, which portrays him as both a “radically evil vampire,” and as “a predator who preys on local Slavic women in order to drain them of their blood and energy” (Khader 133). Therefore, it can be argued that Murphy was inspired by the theme of cannibalism, and altered this to an obsession with ‘blood,’ to make it fit into the context of the Holocaust. Haase defines cannibalism as an act in which the enemy is consumed, in order to “inherit his powers” (368), which resembles what the Oberführer does with women like Nelka. By means of the blood transfusions, he wants to become stronger himself, as if he wants to “inherit” the women’s powers. The creation of a villain who is associated with an obsession with blood both reminds of the witch’s devouring of children, and at the same time it functions as a way to inform her young adult reading public on the blood transfusions.

In conclusion, this analysis of *The True Story of Hansel and Gretel* has illustrated how Murphy draws on the fairy tale’s structure to incorporate the themes of starvation, abandonment, and survival in her novel. She alludes to some of the fairy tale’s well-known elements such as the infamous witch’s oven, the bread crumbs, the reunion between the children and their father, and the theme of cannibalism. Most striking are the numerous reversals she makes, for instance through the characters of the witch and the Stepmother, and the purpose of the oven, drawing on the tale’s moral of deceiving appearances. Furthermore, Murphy makes use of the fairy tale’s setting to inform her young adult readers about forest fugitives and the harsh situations they found themselves in.

2.1.2. *Gretel and the Dark*

Eliza Granville's *Gretel and the Dark* alternates between two different storylines, and the chapters shift from one to the other. First and foremost, the novel explores the story of a young girl named Krysta, the daughter of a German Nazi doctor. Set in 1940s Germany, Granville narrates the young girl's childhood — how she grows up as a motherless and spoiled child. Krysta and her father move from the city to the countryside, where they live in a house near what Krysta thinks is a Zoo, yet the reader soon finds out that this is Ravensbrück camp. Granville depicts the girl's journey from her childhood naivety to a growing awareness of what is going on around her. In between these chapters, Granville presents a second storyline, set in fin-de-siècle Vienna, in which she tells the story of a young woman who is found unconscious by the Viennese psychoanalyst Josef Breuer. Breuer, along with Jean-Martin Chanot, was a “personal [influence] that started Freud on the pathway to psychoanalytic theory” (Sulloway 51). The woman, who is later given the name Lilie, is thin, her head is shaved, and she claims to have no name, nor feelings, but to be merely a machine.

Gretel and the Dark explores the horrors of the Holocaust, including the experiments conducted on camp prisoners by Nazi doctors and the experience of growing up in a concentration camp. The novel integrates both historical facts and references to various fairy tales, and stresses the power of storytelling as well as the comfort and strength that fairy tales can offer in difficult times.

The result of Granville's choice to present the chapters on Krysta's life from the child's perspective is that, on the one hand, the reader is closely involved in Krysta's journey and experiences, yet this also means that the reader has to read between the lines and interpret Krysta's descriptions. For instance, in the beginning of the novel it is mentioned how Krysta thinks that they live near a zoo, full of “dangerous creatures,” that are being watched by

“guards with fierce dogs to make sure they never get out” (32). Later on, the “creatures” are referred to as “animal-people,” a reference to the dehumanisation of Jews. From the context it is clear to the reader what is implied, yet Krysta often does not have a clue.⁸ Krysta’s descriptions become clearer as the years go by and she becomes more mature, which illustrates Krysta’s transition from naivety to awareness of the situation she finds herself in.⁹

Gretel and the Dark is pervaded by references to fairy tales, and Krysta’s experiences are “mediated through fairy tales,” as Granville explains (“Afterword”). Allusions to the tales “The Pied Piper,” “Rumpelstiltskin,” “The Little Match Girl,” and a lesser known fairy tale by the brothers Grimm called “The Robber Bridegroom,” are made throughout the novel. The novel’s focus is, however, on the fairy tale “Hansel and Gretel,” as its title suggests.

This chapter will demonstrate how Granville relies on the use of fairy tales, “Hansel and Gretel” in particular, in the creation of her Holocaust narrative. First and foremost, I will argue that Krysta retreats in a world of fairy tales, because it enables her to deal with the difficult situations she finds herself in, and to make sense of the atrocities she witnesses. By

⁸ On Krysta’s birthday, she and her father go to the town to get ice cream; it is described how the town is bright, with “many red flags with bendy-arm ‘X’s on them fluttering very gently in the breeze” (Granville 37).

⁹ Granville’s *Gretel and the Dark* resembles John Boyne’s novel *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* in various ways. Both novels focus on German children who move from the city to a secluded house near a concentration camp, because the child’s father has a job there. In Granville’s novel, Krysta’s father works at the concentration camp Ravensbrück as a doctor, whereas the father of Bruno (the protagonist of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*) is the camp’s commandant. Krysta and Bruno do not completely understand what is going on around them: Krysta thinks their house is located near a zoo, whereas Bruno perceives the concentration camp as a farm. Furthermore, they both befriend a Jewish boy who is a prisoner at the camp.

highlighting the power of storytelling, Granville portrays how not only the retreating in a fairy tale world, yet also the creation and telling of fairy tales functions as a coping mechanism to Krysta. Secondly, I will demonstrate how Granville draws on the fairy tale genre's ability to "speak the unspeakable" horrors of the Holocaust — in the case of this novel the experimenting on camp prisoners, camp inmates freezing to death, and sexual abuse. Thirdly, I will explain how Granville draws on the "Hansel and Gretel" fairy tale's character of the witch, the motif of the gingerbread house, and the theme of deceit, in her portrayal of the character Hraben. Finally, I will present an analysis of the last chapter of the novel, in which Granville presents a revision of "Hansel and Gretel," and discuss the significance of this chapter to the narrative as a whole. Apart from the analysis of the integration of "Hansel and Gretel," this chapter will, thus, also take into account Granville's allusion to other fairy tales, since it is essential to understand the significance of the fairy tale in general to Krysta's life and the way fairy tales influence her thinking.

The act of turning to fairy tales and storytelling as a coping mechanism

When Krysta and her father have moved to their new house in the countryside, Krysta does not know anyone and is often bored; she misses her carer Greet and the exciting stories she used to tell her. The novel repeatedly includes flashbacks to Greet telling Krysta one of her stories — gruesome, dark, and twisted versions of fairy tales. These fairy tales clearly influence Krysta's thinking and acting and she often links reality to Greet's stories. One particular scene in the novel that illustrates this tendency of Krysta is the episode where Krysta encounters an old woman accompanied by a black cat sitting in the kitchen at her house. The girl immediately regards the woman as a witch, and thinks that her walking stick is a magic wand: "I notice a little old witch sitting in the corner with the black cat on her knee. Her long wand is hooked over the back of the chair" (Granville 43). Somewhat later in the

same chapter, when Krysta is angry at the old woman and other women in her kitchen for not getting her way, it is described how she pictures herself in the fairy tale “Hansel and Gretel”: “My gingerbread cottage has a very big oven and I push Elke, Ursel, and the skinny old witch into it and close the door” (Granville 45). These episodes illustrate how Krysta’s thinking and the way she perceives people is influenced by what she knows from Greet’s tales. She creates her own version of these tales and imagines herself as one of the tales’ characters to deal with her emotions and to find consolation in the act of storytelling.

Later on in the novel, after Krysta’s father has died, Krysta is put in the concentration camp with the other prisoners, since there is no one to care for her. She befriends a Jewish boy, Daniel, whom she often tells stories to. At a certain moment in the novel, Krysta and Daniel are making up stories of what they would do if they would have the chance to overpower the Germans: “‘All right. Who shall we kill today?’ We decide all the zookeepers must die” (Granville 223) — and find strength in the creation of these stories. The episode, once again, alludes to “Hansel and Gretel,” in its description of how Krysta and Daniel are contemplating how they would make the “zookeepers” march “through the dark forest” until they arrive at the gingerbread cottage, where they would burn the camp guards in the oven (Granville 224). Van der Kolk and van der Hart write that is not uncommon by Holocaust survivors to do this, since it can function as a way to overcome trauma:

Many patients who are victimized by rape and other forms of violence are helped by imagining having all the power they want and apply it to their perpetrator. Memory is everything. Once flexibility is introduced, the traumatic memory starts losing its power over current experience. By imagining these alternative scenarios, many patients are able to soften the intrusive power of the original unmitigated horror. (van der Kolk and van der Hart 178)

The two children find strength in imagining these kinds of scenarios and telling them to each other; it helps them to deal with the horror they have been through. In this sense, the creation of a fairy tale is Krysta's "weapon of self-defence" (Granville "Afterword") since it allows her to cope with traumatic memories. As Granville explains, Krysta "adapts the story to suit her circumstances, deriving psychological relief from devising ever grimmer ends for her ogreish persecutors" ("Afterword"), as the extract illustrated above demonstrates. In this sense, Krysta uses both her imagination and her talent for telling stories to deal with her emotions, and finds strength and comfort in this. It can, thus, be argued that the creation and telling of fairy tales is used by Krysta as a coping mechanism.

The power of storytelling is a central theme in *Gretel and the Dark*. Later on in the novel, it is revealed that the second narrative that Granville integrates — Lilie "the machine" and Josef Breuer's story — is in fact made up by Krysta, which she keeps telling during the years after the war. The story revolves around Krysta's desire to kill "the monster" before he has the chance to act out his plan — the wish to kill Adolf Hitler when he was still a child. Krysta's story about Lilie likewise corresponds to van der Kolk and van der Hart's theory about the application of imagined power over the perpetrator, functioning as a way for her and Daniel to cope with their traumatic memories.¹⁰

¹⁰ Krysta's story about Lilie has a dual function: she herself finds consolation in the plotting of revenge, and it keeps Daniel alive during their time in the forest towards the end of the novel. Daniel is exhausted, starved, and does not have the power to keep on going, so Krysta decides to make use of the power of storytelling to keep him alive — she tells Daniel that she will only tell him her story if they keep on walking, the moment he stops, she will "not say another word" (Granville 326).

The genre's capacity of "speaking the unspeakable"

Another way that Granville relies on fairy tales is by making use of their ability to "[speak] the unspeakable" (Arnds 423), which I will demonstrate by referring to three scenes in the novel. Granville draws on the legend of the *Kinderfresser*, and the fairy tales "The Little Match Girl," "The Snow Queen," and the "The Robber Bridegroom" in her portrayal of the horrors Krysta witnesses or experiences in these episodes.

The first scene occurs when Krysta runs into her father in his operation room, and remarks that he is "doing his hand-washing, only he's doing it with red paint" (Granville 84). Inside the operation room, Krysta sees and hears someone "screaming and screaming, only it's all muffled because of the blanket over their head. And the red paint is dripping on to Papa's shoes. And behind him another nurse is holding something terrible —" (84). After the hyphen, this scene is interrupted and the novel shifts to a flashback of Greet telling Krysta the legend of *der Kinderfresser*¹¹, who is on the look for a "nice new leg" (Granville 86) to replace his wooden peg. The shift to this flashback most likely suggests that Krysta's father is amputating a prisoner's leg.¹² In this scene, Granville uses a fairy tale to represent "the

¹¹ Marina Warner defines the *Kinderfresser* or Child-Guzzler as "a popular figure on Carnival broadsheets," "who snatches young victims, who react with graphic physical terror" (5). The Child-Guzzler is, possibly, a variant of the figure of the Bogey Man.

¹² This is confirmed in a later scene, in which Krysta asks her father what he was doing in the infirmary. He responds that "It has to be done" because they "have to know what's scientifically possible" (87), confirming the reader's suspicion that Krysta's father is one of the doctors who experimented on prisoners, like the infamous doctor Josef Mengele in Auschwitz.

unrepresentable” (Landwehr)¹³ — a scene that would otherwise be too horrid to put into words.

A second scene that exemplifies the use of fairy tales as a means to represent scenes that would be too shocking to put into words can be found in the part of the novel where winter breaks out in the camp. Krysta witnesses people dying of the cold, which reminds her of a particular story that Greet told her:

When the weather gets really cold, more people vanish. Sometimes, they fall right down in the snow like the little match girl. And others melt. Or stay where they’re told and turn overnight into Ice Queen statues. (Granville 214).

Granville depicts people starving of the cold using the fairy tale imagery of “turning into Ice Queen statues” — a possible reference to the fairy tale “The Snow Queen” by Hans C. Andersen. Additionally, she relies on the tale “The Little Match Girl” to picture camp inmates freezing to death.

Yet, Granville’s tendency of alluding to fairy tales to represent shocking events can be seen most prominently in the episode where Krysta is locked up in the bunker after she has been sexually abused by Hraben, who is head of the Ravensbrück camp guards. The early chapters of the novel illustrate his perverse interest in the girl: how he puts his hand under the girl’s skirt, and inappropriately asks her whether she likes being smacked (Granville 122). Later on in the novel, Hraben sexually abuses her — it is described how Krysta is crying, her mouth “swollen and sore,” “[e]verything hurts”, to which Hraben responds that “[t]his is quite

¹³ Whereas the phrase “speaking the unspeakable” relating to the fairy tale’s capacity in Holocaust literature can be associated to Peter Arnds, the words “representing the unrepresentable” can be appointed to Margarete Landwehr, who uses these words in the subtitle of her essay “The Fairy Tale as Allegory for the Holocaust” (153).

normal”, and that “[n]ext time will be better” (Granville 281). In this scene, Granville uses few words to depict what has happened.

Shortly after the sexual abuse, Krysta is locked up by Hraben in a bunker along with a woman named Hannah. Like the rest of the novel, this scene is described from Krysta’s point of view, and describes how Krysta’s mind and attention flashes from Hannah’s stories to a fairy tale that Greet used to tell her: “The Robber Bridegroom,” another tale by the brothers Grimm about a maiden who is being raped by her new bridegroom. It is described how every time Krysta closes her eyes “in come the evil men, *betrunken wie Herren*, dragging after them a young girl. First they forced her to drink wine with them: a glass of red, a glass of white and a glass of black. After that they pulled off her pretty clothes and put them in a pile ready to sell in the market. And then they —” (Granville 284). After that, it is Hannah talking again, yet the narrative soon shifts to the gruesome tale again: “And then it’s Greet’s voice again: ‘And then they ... uh ... after they’d finished doing evil things —’ [...] ‘Things so bad I can’t tell you’” (Granville 285). This particular part of the fairy tale keeps reoccurring in this passage in Granville’s novel, which clarifies that Krysta has been subject to the same “evil things” as the maiden in the story, because of the fact that she is raped by Hraben. In this episode, Granville again relies on the fairy tale “The Robber Bridegroom” to narrate an event as shocking and horrid as rape — to put “the unspeakable” into words.

Since the flashbacks to Greet telling this particular tale also represent Krysta’s thoughts at the moment of imprisonment, they exemplify again how fairy tales function as a coping mechanism to her, allowing Krysta to dissociate from reality. Considering that Greet’s stories are not the classic versions of fairy tales, but brutal and gruesome retellings of them, they function to the girl as a surprisingly appropriate framework to her experiences in the camp.

The character of Hraben as a metaphorical witch

In the first chapter I argued that the gingerbread house represents the theme of deceit in the fairy tale, since it appears innocent and welcoming to the children at first, but turns out to be a threat to their lives. Granville draws on this aspect of the tale in her depiction of Hraben's tower. When her father has died, Krysta is left with the other camp prisoners at Ravensbrück, where she knows no one except Daniel and Hraben. When Hraben tells Krysta that he will be her new father, Krysta is still too young to realise what Hraben's true intentions are. An older camp inmate, Lena, however, guesses Hraben's true intentions, and warns Krysta about this. In this scene, Hraben is explicitly referred to as a witch:

“He is feeding you up,” says Lena, who'd been pretending to be asleep. “He is fattening you for the kill.” “That's silly,” I say. “He's not a witch.” Lottie thinks Uncle Hraben might be a witch in disguise because he pinches my bottom and squeezes my legs and arms exactly like the witch did to Hansel when she put him in the cage. (Granville 188)

Apart from Lena's association of Hraben to a witch, this paragraph again highlights Krysta's tendency to turn to the fairy tales she knows — in this case “Hansel and Gretel” — to make sense of the things she does not fully understand. Lena uses the fairy tale imagery of the witch “fattening [Krysta] for the kill” (188) to explain Hraben's manipulative behaviour towards Krysta — Hraben repeatedly gives Krysta “nice things to eat” and lets her “change into [her] other clothes” (Granville 187). By manipulating her in this way, he manages to gain her trust and is able to come closer to her. Through Lena's word choice, Granville makes a clear allusion to “Hansel and Gretel,” which makes the reader connect Hraben to the figure of the witch.

Thus, if Hraben can be considered the witch in this revision of the tale, his tower can be perceived as the gingerbread house. First of all, resembling the Grimm's gingerbread house, the tower is a place of deceit. Krysta originally perceives Hraben as someone who cares for her and who has good intentions, yet as she matures she becomes aware of his true intentions. Secondly, like the witch, Hraben lures Krysta with candy, which originally is the reason why Krysta keeps revisiting Hraben. In this sense, *Gretel and the Dark* draws on "Hansel and Gretel" since the novel integrates candy as a means of attraction and manipulation. When Krysta matures, and candy is no longer sufficient for the man to lure the girl to his tower, he manipulates her into threatening to hurt Daniel. The Grimm's witch preys on children and uses candy to attract them to her gingerbread cottage, and additionally makes them believe that they will find safety and shelter in her house, yet plans to devour them. Likewise, Krysta can be perceived as Hraben's prey, as he attracts her by means of candy and other luxury goods, at first, and later manipulates her by making false promises to her.

Significance of the last chapter: Krysta and Daniel in the forest

Thus, Krysta has, like Gretel, experienced abandonment after the death of both her parents, she has been confronted with starvation at Ravensbrück, and has encountered a witch-figure, Hraben. Throughout the novel, references are made to the tale's themes and motifs, such as the witch's gingerbread house. A final allusion that needs to be pointed out, is Krysta's job she gets appointed in Ravensbrück. Along with some other women, she contributes to the "sorting [of] big piles of dressing-up clothes," where they find "funny things mixed in with the clothes — soap and toothpaste, false teeth, spectacles, photographs, combs" (222). Krysta is too young to realise that she is forced to be part of the sorting of clothes and possessions of other camp inmates, who have most likely been killed in the camp's gas chamber. I argue that Granville might have integrated this scene in her novel to both inform her readers about these

practises, as well as to allude to the tale “Hansel and Gretel,” where Gretel, likewise, is forced by the witch to prepare the food that will fatten up her brother. In that regard, she contributes to the killing of Hansel, very much like Krysta is forced to contribute to the Nazis’ plans to make money out of their victims’ possessions.

One day, the camp inmates at Ravensbrück do not hear the usual siren, and their names are not checked. Krysta is informed that they “are going for a long walk round the lake towards the north-west” (Granville 292-293). In this episode, Granville educates the reader about the Holocaust’s death marches. Daniel refers to this as going “into the magic mountain with the others” — a reference to “The Pied Piper,” yet Krysta corrects him by arguing that he has got his “stories mixed up,” since “[t]hat’s not the Pied Piper’s mountain. It’s the way to the witch’s cottage and her oven” (Granville 293).¹⁴ Granville thus integrates these two fairy tales as metaphors for the death marches — the forced evacuations of concentration camp inmates. Krysta mentions that “help is coming,” (Granville 293) referring to the fact that the Allied forces are approaching the camps.

Krysta and Daniel manage to escape the death march, and have entered what Krysta calls the “enchanted forest” (Granville 320). In the last chapter of her novel, Granville presents a revision of “Hansel and Gretel,” where Krysta and Daniel are clearly associated with the tale’s protagonists. Moreover, Krysta realises the resemblances between the situation she finds herself in and the Grimm’s tale. Associating herself with the heroines in her fairy tales has always guided her through difficult situations, giving her consolation, yet now it frightens her. She struggles with distinguishing the “Hansel and Gretel,” story from her own

¹⁴ Here, Krysta uses the imagery of the witch’s gingerbread house as a metaphor for death. In this sense, not only Granville yet also the character Krysta makes use of the fairy tale’s ability to “speak the unspeakable.” (Arnds 423)

story. When she remarks white pebbles on the ground, and doves fluttering above their heads, she feels as if she is “being pulled into a different [story]” (Granville 329), that of Hansel and Gretel, and wonders whether the tale “really ends as well as the grown-ups told [her]” (Granville 330). When she remarks flowers on the ground, this reassures her, since the Grimm’s story did not mention anything of flowers. When they come across a garden, Krysta becomes anxious, since “If it’s a garden, there must be a house, perhaps even the witch’s cottage” (Granville 330). When they fall asleep and eventually wake up the next day, they encounter a woman, whom Krysta, still confused whether she is stuck in another tale, immediately regards as a *Hexe*. Later, it turns out that this woman is one of the Ravensbrück nurses.¹⁵ When the “witch” remarks Daniel, she comments that he needs “fattening up,” which confirms to Krysta that she is, indeed, the fairy tale witch. This witch-figure’s aim is to use Daniel and Krysta in order to escape punishment by pretending that she is their Jewish mother, yet Granville does not clarify what her final intentions are. In return, she promises to provide them with food and care, which reflects the fairy tale’s witch’s promises to Hansel and Gretel.

In this chapter, in which Krysta’s confusion and inability to discern reality from the fairy tale are a central theme, Granville integrates various references to “Hansel and Gretel.”

¹⁵ Krysta recognises the woman as one of the camp’s nurses, yet it is also likely that she was a female guard, and would therefore want to escape punishment.

When the German woman and the children have come across a shed in the forest, Granville alludes to the “Show Me motif” (Goldberg 44):¹⁶

The witch jerks her head towards a window opening. ‘In you go.’ When I hang back, she gives me a little push. ‘[...] Pull yourself up on the frame. It’s easy enough. I’ll be right behind you.’ She must think I’m *einfältig*, not right in the head: everyone knows what happens next in the story. ‘I can’t. I don’t know how. I’m scared of falling.’ Just to prove the point I pretend to be blub. (Granville 340)

The shed contains a “huge cooking range with an oven” (Granville 341), another allusion to “Hansel and Gretel.” Somewhat later, when the girl, Daniel, and the “witch” have decided to take shelter in the shed in the forest, Krysta suddenly stumbles upon a pan that is filled with “gold watches, rings and brooches, pear necklaces and gold teeth,” she realises that things are not “happening in the right order, because Gretel didn’t find the precious stones until after the witch was dead” (Granville 344). Here, Granville alludes to Gretel’s treasure in the Grimm’s tale, which she replaces with a bunch of camp prisoners’ possessions to make it fit into the context of the Holocaust. Most likely the nurse has taken these with her from Ravensbrück’s sorting centre where Krysta used to work.

In contrast to Murphy’s novel (and Yolen’s, as I will demonstrate later), Granville’s witch does not burn in an oven. However, the two children manage to overpower the witch-figure — Krysta locks up the witch in a tower, and seeks for help, which she receives from a group of Swedes, a reference to the Swedish Red Cross rescue missions.

¹⁶ The “Show Me” motif (Goldberg 44) refers to the scene in which the witch wants Gretel to climb into the oven in order to check the temperature, yet Gretel cleverly pretends that she does not understand this task and insinuates that the witch should “show her” what to do. When the witch does this, Gretel is able to push her further into the oven and kill her.

The question remains now what the significance of the allusions to “Hansel and Gretel” in this chapter is to Krysta’s life. The scenes depicted in this chapter quickly follow Krysta’s experience with sexual abuse in Hraben's tower, which is illustrated in her state of confusion and disorientation. Whereas the retreating into a world of fairy tales used to function as a coping mechanism to Krysta in difficult times, and allowed her to make sense of the atrocities happening around her, it seems that in the forest-chapter she loses herself in this. It can be argued that this illustrates the need for Krysta to leave her childhood fantasies behind — and face reality — in order to get over her trauma as a victim of rape.

Krysta realises how her experiences in the woods resemble Gretel’s story, yet the fact that things do not happen in the right order deeply disturbs her. It appears that she is losing sense of what is real and what is not. At some points, it seems like she actually thinks that she is *in* the story “Hansel and Gretel,” and that the German nurse is a witch waiting to devour the children. The phrase “everyone knows what happens next in the story” (Granville 340) illustrates how Krysta struggles to distinguish her own story from Gretel’s story.

At other moments, however, she does seem to realise that she is *not* Gretel; she is merely going through the same situation as Gretel. Krysta perceives herself as a cleverer version of Gretel, and she tells herself that she “won’t do any worse than Gretel” (Granville 347). The shifts in this chapter thus illustrate Krysta’s disoriented state at this point, yet they also depict how she is going through a state between childhood and maturity.

The fact that this chapter is entirely set in the forest underlines the argument that it represents a transition to another phase in Krysta’s life. In this sense, the forest scenes in *Gretel and the Dark* can be associated with the crossing of the water in the Grimm’s tale, which represents the children’s transition to maturity, independence and freedom. Krysta enters the forest shortly after she has been raped and abused by Hraben, which has

traumatised her. In the forest, she is forced to learn to dissociate herself from the fairy tales, and the overpowering of the witch can be perceived as symbolical for this. Whereas Hansel and Gretel's trial starts in the forest, Krysta has endured many trials in Ravensbrück camp. Yet, the encounter with the witch-figure represents her final trial before she and Daniel enter a stage of freedom. Whilst Hansel and Gretel take the witch's treasure with them after they have left the gingerbread house, Krysta and Daniel do not need a treasure, because, as it is written: "we've found something better than Gretel's white duck to carry us over the water to safety" (Granville 353) — a reference to Krysta and Daniel's friendships, that later develops into a romantic relationship.

Granville educates her readers by including some of the underrepresented aspects of the Holocaust: the cruelty of the Nazi experiments, the death marches, the Swedish Red Cross rescue mission, and the issue of prostitution in concentration camps. Ravensbrück camp is based on historical fact: according to Rochelle G. Saidel, the camp was "[l]ocated approximately fifty-five miles from Berlin," and was "originally intended as a work camp for dissident women, some of them Jewish" and had an operating gas chamber (3). Saidel discusses the issue of prostitution in Ravensbrück camp: "Both rape and forced prostitution were inflicted on women in Ravensbrück," she writes (212). This is integrated in Granville's novel not only in the episode where Krysta is being raped by Hraben, yet also through the character of Lena, who works at a prostitute. This corresponds to what Saidel wrote about women prisoners who "were sent to men's camps to serve as prostitutes, and some male prisoners were entitled to [their services]" (214).

2.1.3. Mapping the Bones

In *Mapping the Bones*, Jane Yolen connects historical facts to fairy tales by telling the story of the fourteen-year old Polish twins Chaim and Gittel Abromovitz, who are forced to move to the Łódź ghetto in Poland during World War II. There, they share an apartment with the Norenberg family, German Jews. Both of the families manage to escape into the Polish woods and cross the border into the Soviet Union, until they reach a point where the parents are separated from the children. Chaim and Gittel Abromovitz, and Bruno and Sophie Norenberg eventually end up in Sobanek, a labour camp where the twins fall into the hands of Dr. von Schneir — an assistant of Dr. Josef Mengele — who is welcomed with gratitude by the prisoners at first because of the medication he brings, and the help he offers when typhoid has spread across the camp. Soon, however, the twins realise that his true intentions are to pursue Dr. Mengele's experimental work on twins in Auschwitz.

Mapping the Bones alternates between chapters that display Chaim's point of view and chapters that are entitled "Gittel Remembers," which present an adult Gittel's recollections of the traumatic events she went through. There are three distinct places presented in the novel, as Yolen writes in her afterword, which reflects the original German folktale "Hansel and Gretel". The fairy tale, too, is divided into three clear sections: "at home and starving, lost in the trackless forest, rescue (of sorts) by the witch in her house of candy who plans to kill them both" (Yolen "Author's Note"). The three distinct places that can be distinguished in the novel are the Łódź ghetto in Poland, where the twins suffer from starvation, the dense forests, and Sobanek Camp.

This chapter will first explore how the tale "Hansel and Gretel" is incorporated in the novel as a framework for its plot structure, by exploring the three main sections of *Mapping the Bones* and how they reflect the Grimm's tale. I will argue that the three places that can be

distinguished are intertwined with the three different impediments Hansel and Gretel have to overcome in the original tale: starvation, abandonment, and survival. Additionally, I will demonstrate how Yolen draws on the Grimm's tale's depiction of the gingerbread house and its representation of "deceit" in her portrayal of Sobanek Camp as a "House of Candy."

The theme of starvation in the Łódź ghetto

When he realises that his family is running out of food, Chaim and Gittel's father says that staying at the ghetto would mean "death by slow starvation" (Yolen 43) and that "Łódź is dying, and we are dying with it" (43). Although Chaim, Gittel, their family, and the Norenbergs are facing many impediments — one of the "Gittel Remembers" chapters lists them as "starvation, tuberculosis, cholera, typhus, typhoid, influenza, heartbreak," "the cold," and the danger of "being shot for walking too quickly, staring too hard, not answering questions fast enough or answering too fast, or just because they wore the yellow star" (Yolen 87) — the chapter seems to particularly pay attention to the theme of starvation. This is seen in the elaborate descriptions Yolen gives to describe the Abromovitz and Norenberg families' meals. Phrases such as "the tiniest bit of butter," "the last bit of butter," "old bread," "watered milk," and "the very last piece" illustrate the small amounts of food the families have to share between them. Thus, reflecting the original fairy tale, a shortage of food forms one of the main problems the protagonists are facing in the beginning of the novel. Whereas in "Hansel and Gretel" this is the reason why the parents decide to abandon their children in the forest, the reason of their flight in *Mapping the Bones* is because the families have been rescheduled for one of the next transports. Since Chaim and Gittel's father has heard about these transports and knows where it would lead them, he comes up with a plan to escape into the woods.

The theme of abandonment in the forest

When the twins, their parents, and the Norenberg children have managed to escape the ghetto, they wander through the dense forest, so that they can meet up with the Jewish partisans.¹⁷ The plan is to meet a woman called Irena, who, according to Chaim and Gittel's father, would help them further on their way to be taken to safety by Karl the Wanderer. It is at this point that the children are being abandoned by their parents, since Irena will only take the four children with her, as they are small enough to hide in barrels on her truck, and they plan to meet up with their parents again in a week at most. At a certain moment, Chaim begins to wonder "why no mention had been made of a meeting place with Mama and Papa later" (Yolen 174). Although it is not explicitly mentioned, their parents most likely let them go with Irena in order for the children to have a bigger chance of survival, yet they might have known that they would not see them again.

In this episode, Yolen deviates from the Grimm's fairy tale in the parents' motivation of the abandonment or separation. Whereas in "Hansel and Gretel," the siblings' father and stepmother abandon them in the woods to increase their *own* chances of surviving — as they can no longer provide food for four people —, Chaim and Gittel's parents leave their children behind because they know that going with Irena and the other partisans might be the children's only chance of survival. In this sense, the separation between family members is seen as a necessity, and not as a deliberate choice, mirroring the choices that various parents were forced to make during World War II in order to save their families.

In the original fairy tale, Hansel comes up with a plan to bring his sister and himself back home, creating a trail of white pebbles the first time, crumbs of bread the second time

¹⁷ In Bialowieza forest, the four children receive help from a group of partisans, or the "lesni ludzie, the forest people." They are described as the finest warriors in the world" and "the finest in Bialowieza Forest" (187).

they are abandoned. Yolen integrates this well-known scene, yet it is not the protagonist Chaim — who is associated with Hansel throughout the story —, but Bruno who comes up with this plan.

Bruno was [...] tossing stones he'd collected, white and gray pebbles, off the back of the cart. "So we can find our way home," he confided in Chaim. Chaim shook his head. They were already miles away from where they'd started, and he wanted to say witheringly, *How are those pebbles any different from any others on the forest road?* But he kept silent, thinking bitterly instead, *As if there's a home to go back to.* (Yolen 184, italics in original text)

It can be argued that, in her allusion to this scene, Yolen highlights that her narrative is no fairy tale. Although the plot and structure is certainly based on "Hansel and Gretel," pebbles will not be sufficient to save her characters, nor will they be reunited with their parents. This is highlighted in a later scene in which Chaim and the others are informed by Karl the Wanderer that they will join the group of partisans, who will take them to safety:

"Safety." Chaim rolled the word around in his mouth. But it meant little without Mama and Papa. Suddenly his eyes filled with tears. When would he see them again? Where would they meet? There were no white pebbles to lead them to this place, wherever *this* was. (Yolen 188, italics in original text)

Another interpretation of the presence of this scene is that Yolen is mocking Hansel's naivety, like she mocks Gretel's vulnerability and dependency on Hansel, by portraying Gittel as the bold one of the siblings, a theme that will be analysed further in chapter 3. Chaim's reaction to Bruno's actions illustrates his cleverness and rational thinking.

Chaim experiences a double separation in the novel; not only is he separated from his parents in the part that takes place in Bialowieza forest, he also feels a detachment from his

sister Gittel. After they have been wandering through the forest for several days, Gittel seems to “fade” as a result of the parting from her parents and the fact that they have left them so swiftly. She stops eating and seems to enter a state of depression: *“My stomach growled in hunger, but I couldn’t eat, not even the simplest foods the partisans gave us. [...] All I wanted to do was to sleep. I think that was when I almost lost my life”* (Yolen 206, italics in original text). Chaim suffers from this since Gittel had always been the one guiding and reassuring him by means of their sign language.¹⁸

The theme of survival in Sobanek Camp

After having walked through the forest for several months, the four children get caught by a group of soldiers, who shoot all the partisans. The soldiers take Chaim and the others to Sobanek Camp, a slave labour camp where they have to contribute to making projectiles for weaponry. In Sobanek Camp, the two greatest impediments the children are facing are illnesses — in particular typhoid — and the evil Dr. von Schneir, who plans to experiment on Chaim and Gittel as part of his research on twins. When Chaim and the other children and adolescents in his barrack find a boy, Lev, dead in the morning, Chaim realises how the same could be happening to him very soon: “suddenly his own death, which had been his constant silent companion for months and months, seemed real for the first time. This was the first Sobanek death he had witnessed, and somehow he knew it would not be the last” (Yolen 289). Therefore, I associate the third section of the novel with the theme of survival. Chaim and Gittel’s strong wish to survive is represented in a phrase that they keep repeating, which gives them strength and hope to keep going: “Every day we’re alive, no matter how uncomfortable, is another day of life” (Yolen 381).

¹⁸ Chaim is described as orally weak; he has a stutter and rarely uses more than five words a day. Therefore, Chaim and Gittel communicate by using a secret sign language.

Sobanek Camp as a “House of Candy” and von Schneir as a metaphorical witch

Yolen opens the third part of her novel, that is set at the camp, with one of Chaim’s poems, entitled “Ovens,” drawing on the fairy tale “Hansel and Gretel” and its imagery of the gingerbread house. The following lines illustrate a part of the poem:

*The old witch’s ovens never stop smoking;
that delectable house reeks of roast pork,
not a kosher smell, but tempting. (237, italics in original)*

Chaim’s poem denotes how Sobanek camp can be analysed as a metaphorical gingerbread house. The poem is followed by a “Gittel Remembers” chapter in which Gittel recalls how she did not realise the danger and threat that lies in Sobanek camp upon arrival. She writes that “being in the camp after being on the run in the forest felt oddly secure. As if the work truly did make us free, as the sign in the factory room said” (Yolen 238), and stresses how they are safer than they used to be in the ghetto, “where children died on the streets of starvation, where people were sent off on trains and never returned” (Yolen 238-239). In this sense, Sobanek Camp is to her what the gingerbread house is for Hansel and Gretel: a deceiving place that looks welcoming at first, yet turns out to be a threat to the children’s lives the moment the doctor arrives. Therefore, Chaim’s words in his poem can be associated with his sister’s perception of Sobanek. The poem reflects the idea of “Hansel and Gretel” as a metaphor for the Holocaust, with the ovens and the smoke being symbolical for the crematoria ovens in the camps.

In the novel, Gittel explicitly refers to the gingerbread house, or, as she calls it, the “house of candy.” When the four children are traveling with Karl the Wanderer, they come across a cabin and decide to spend the night there. Karl warns them that, although the house seems welcoming to the children, they should be aware: “Then Gittel added, her voice low

and sorrowful, ‘Maybe it’s the house of candy. Looks good on the outside, but evil lies within,’” Yolen writes (209). To Gittel, a “house of candy” thus represents a misleading place, very much like Sobanek Camp to her. She recalls how, upon their arrival, she felt “relieved,” because “[c]ompared to what we’d already endured, it felt safe. Predictable. We understood the rules, harsh as they were” (Yolen 239). Safe, that is, “until the day the doctor arrived, his face wreathed in smiles, his hands full of candy. That was when we learned what safety truly was. And what it was not. (239) In the following paragraphs, I will explain how dr. von Schneir is presented by Yolen as a metaphorical witch.

The twins and the Norenberg children have been at Sobanek for four months when Gittel and Sophie both get infected with typhoid. Soon, they are quarantined in a barrack that temporary serves as a hospital, and are thus separated from their brothers Chaim and Bruno. When Sophie Norenberg dies, the other children are again confronted with the realisation of how close they are to death. When it is said that a doctor will come to the camp to bring them medicines, it is not surprising that the man is received as a hero. Since the doctor not only brings medicines but also food to the exhausted and starving children, he is originally perceived as a “savior” (Yolen 331).¹⁹ This depiction of the doctor illustrates a first resemblance to the witch in “Hansel and Gretel.” In the fairy tale, the witch offers Hansel and Gretel the thing they need the most at the moment they encounter the gingerbread house: food. Likewise, doctor von Schneir provides the ill and undernourished children at Sobanek Camp with medication and food.

¹⁹ Gittel expresses how the doctor seemed “such a savior” at first, and how “he arrived heroically in a touring car packed with hampers full of the medicines we needed,” “[looking] more like a figure out of the moving pictures” — “Even small, he was bigger than life. [...] [A]s long as he was saving ours. But not when he became Malakh Hamavet, our Angel of Death,” Gittel recalls (Yolen 331-332).

Sobanek camp can be perceived as a “House of Candy” not only because it is a place of deceit, yet it is also given that name by several prisoners to refer to the fact that candy is exchanged in return for information. The SS officers at Sobanek know that the imprisoned children would go to great lengths for a bit of candy, and they take advantage of this knowledge by buying off the children. At a certain point in the novel, Bruno reveals to the doctor that Chaim and Gittel are twins — crucial information for von Schneir. “He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of candy,” Yolen writes (323). In this sense, candy is incorporated in the novel as the element used by the witch-figure, Dr. von Schneir, to lure and manipulate children, resembling the Grimm’s witch.

When Chaim, Gittel, and Gregor are being taken to von Schneir’s “Welcome House,” they are chained to three operation chairs. In the doctor’s operation room, the children are being left without food or water for several days, before the doctor starts his experiments on Gregor, who almost immediately dies during the operation. This scene in particular illustrates how the theme of survival is explored in part three of *Mapping the Bones*. In “Hansel and Gretel,” the two children are facing death in the witch’s cottage, and have to overpower a witch who is fattening up Hansel in order to devour him, whilst Gretel is ordered to prepare the food the witch uses to fatten up Hansel.²⁰ It can thus be argued that in both narratives the children are being reduced to animals: whereas Hansel is being fattened up as a goose to be

²⁰ In that way, Gretel is forced to contribute to the witch’s plan to kill her brother. An interesting parallel can be made to *Mapping the Bones*: in the labour camp Sobanek, Chaim and Gittel are “making ammunition that would tear into the flesh of [their] mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, cousins, uncles, aunts” (Yolen 283). In that sense, Chaim and Gittel are forced to contribute to the Nazis’ plans. I made a similar point about Granville’s novel, where Krysta is forced to work at the sorting centre, and in that way is part of the Nazis’ plans to make money out of the camp victims’ possessions.

eaten for a feast, Chaim and Gittel are being the subject of experiments as if they are test animals. In this way, Yolen highlights in a specific way how Jews were dehumanised and reduced to vermin by the Nazis.

At a certain point, Gittel manages to release her hands from the cuffs of the chair, and “pushes von Schneir on the chest with such force that he fell over backward” (Yolen 404). By using her wits and bravery, Gittel thus overpowers the witch-figure von Schneir, which reflects the scene where Gretel kills the witch in “Hansel and Gretel.” An interesting deviation from the original tale is the presence of a fourth character in the scene: a nurse who assists von Schneir, yet turns out to be a partisan at the end of the novel. It is through the integration of this character, and not Gittel’s, that Yolen integrates the “Show Me” motif. When the doctor asks her to bring Chaim to him, after he has brutally removed Gregor’s heart, the nurse pretends that she is unable to open the lock of the cuffs.

The doctor turned. “Too much time,” he said. “Bring me the other one quickly.” “The cuffs are difficult,” she began, as she knelt down to unlock hem. Von Schneir came up behind her, pushed her to one side. “You are no good at this, Nurse. I’m losing my temper.” (Yolen 404)

Because the nurse manages to win time and make the doctor move his attention away from the twins, Gretel, whose wrists have become so thin that she is able to release them from the cuffs, frees herself and pushes the doctor with great strength on the chest so that he falls backward, which results in his death. In this way, Gittel kills the witch, yet she is helped by another female to do this — an interesting deviation from the original tale that will be explored further in chapter 3.

In *Uses of Enchantment*, Bruno Bettelheim discusses the theme of consolation in fairy tales, such as “Hansel and Gretel,” and how it is expected for the villain to be punished in the same way he intended to harm the heroes:

It seems particularly appropriate to a child that exactly what the evildoer wishes to inflict on the hero should be the bad person’s fate — as the witch in “Hansel and Gretel” who wants to cook children in the oven is pushed into it and burned to death [...] Consolation requires that the right order of the world is restored; this means punishment of the evildoer, tantamount to the elimination of evil from the hero’s world — and then nothing stands any longer in the way of the hero’s living happily ever after. (Bettelheim 144)

Bettelheim notes that Tolkien lists ‘consolation’ as one of the elements that are most enduring in traditional fairy tales (Bettelheim 143). In Yolen’s *Mapping the Bones*, the evildoer, Doctor von Schneir, is not punished in the exact same way he intended to harm Chaim and Gittel — by experimenting on them —, yet his punishment corresponds to the fate of many other prisoners at Sobanek Camp, as his body is “put in the oven” (Yolen 407). Thus, the doctor’s fate resembles both the witch’s death in “Hansel and Gretel,” as well as a large part of Holocaust victims, who were gassed to death in the gas chambers, their bodies being burned in the ovens.

Yolen educates the reader on the Holocaust by including historical places and characters, such as the Lodz ghetto and King Chaim. Chaim Rumkowski was “the controversial Judenrat (Jewish Council) official of the Lodz ghetto,” Brown writes (129). Furthermore, Yolen mentions in the Author’s Note that children were indeed “smuggled out of the ghettos” and that she modelled the character of Irena after “Jolanta (Irena Sendler), who helped smuggle 2,500 babies and small children out of the Warsaw Ghetto, in suitcases,

ambulances, and other ways” (“Author’s Note” 415). The character von Schneir and Sobanek camp are, however, purely fictional. As Yolen writes, “none of the camps near the Romanian border was called Sobanek,” yet she “used the beginning of the name of the infamous Sobibór and added part of Majdanek’s name — both labor/death camps in that part of Poland” (“Author’s Note”). The motivation behind the character of the doctor is to inform the reader about the Nazi doctors “who forsook their oaths not to do harm, and lost themselves to evil in that most evil of times [and] they thought no more of experimenting on Jews than they did of using mice and rats,” Yolen writes (“Author’s Note”). Through his character, Yolen thus also refers to the dehumanisation of Jews during the Holocaust.

2.2. Significance of the use of “Hansel and Gretel” as a metaphor for the Holocaust

So far, I have analysed and discussed the Holocaust narratives by Murphy, Granville, and Yolen as revisions of the fairy tale “Hansel and Gretel.” Through a close analysis of the novels, I have discerned the allusions and references to the Grimm’s tale, as well as some general fairy tale elements. The chapter has illustrated how these three contemporary writers in different ways integrate the tale’s crucial elements such as the witch and her gingerbread house, the infamous oven, the bread crumbs, the episode of Gretel’s trick on the witch and the witch’s death as a result of this. Furthermore, I have discerned the themes of starvation, abandonment, and survival. The significance and value of the integration of “Hansel and Gretel” — as well as the fairy tale in general — in these novels, will be taken up in the remainder of this chapter.

First of all, it can be argued that these authors integrate the fairy tale framework and allude to fairy tale elements in their Holocaust narratives to make use of the genre’s possibility of “speaking the unspeakable,” as Peter Arnds phrases it (423). Since the authors’

novels are written with a young adult reading public in mind, relying on the framework of a fairy tale allows them to represent the horrors of the Holocaust by relying on a genre that the young readers are familiar with. The fairy tale is thus seen as a “more acceptable vehicle” (Arnds 423) for representing the Third Reich, the Holocaust, and WWII. Granville, for instance, relies on the fairy tale to represent scenes that would otherwise be impossible to put into words, considering their cruelty. She draws on fairy tales as “The Robber Bridegroom” and the legend of the *Kinderfresser* to represent an episode of sexual abuse and the cruelty of the Nazi doctors’ experiments.

Secondly, considering the fact that the novels are written for young adults, the fairy tale offers a way for these contemporary authors to express a glimpse of hope and even integrate a relatively happy ending, without them being unrealistic. In the three narratives, the children escape the witch-figure, and none of the protagonists die. Reflecting the fairy tale genre, these authors thus create a story in which good triumphs over evil, yet they do express the idea that is exceptional, and that this was not the case for every Holocaust victim — by integrating scenes of death of secondary characters. In Murphy’s novel, Hansel and Gretel survive the war and are reunited with their father at the end of the narrative, yet the characters Magda and the Stepmother die in a tragic way. Granville’s novel depicts a heroine who conquers a witch-figure and finds friendship and even love along the way, yet she has lost both of her parents. Yolen, finally, narrates the story of a pair of twins who survive the war and escape from an evil doctor’s plan to experiment on them, yet they, too, have lost their parents and dear friend Sophie.

Thirdly, seen that these novels do not limit the atrocities they picture to the horrors of the concentration camps — perhaps the most represented aspect of the Holocaust in both literature and film — they can be perceived as a way for these authors to educate their young

readers about some underrepresented aspects of the war. Seen that some of their young readers might be more familiar with the fairy tale genre than with the genre of historical fiction, opting for a fairy tale revision perhaps allows them to reach a wider audience. The readers of Murphy's, Granville's, and Yolen's novel are informed about lesser known themes, such as for instance blood transfusions, the abduction of Aryan looking children, the life in forced labour camps (as opposed to extermination camps), resistance movements, death marches, and prostitution in the camps.

So far, this chapter has argued what possible value the use of a fairy tale framework or the allusion to fairy tales has to the creation of a narrative set in the context of the Holocaust. The important question that arises from this is: "Why the fairy tale "Hansel and Gretel," in particular?"

The link between the witch's oven and the ovens of the camps is easily made, yet it is more likely that these authors chose "Hansel and Gretel" because of the tale's themes and setting. As the previous chapters have illustrated, "Hansel and Gretel," provides a fitting framework for a story that is set in the context of the Holocaust and the second world war because of its themes of starvation, abandonment, and survival. World War II, too, is an event characterised by severe hunger and starvation — not only in the camps, but also in the ghettos and in the forests, where Jewish people sought refuge —, which forced parents into making incredibly difficult choices, such as the abandonment of or separation from their children. This theme lies at the centre of both Murphy's and Yolen's novel. Therefore, the authors' choice to draw on "Hansel and Gretel" in the creation of their Holocaust story seems a logical one. The fairy tale genre, as I already explained, offers a more approachable way to present the unrepresentable horrors of the Holocaust, such as starvation and abandonment, yet

also the cruel conditions in the camps, Nazi experiments, the death of camp inmates, and the harsh life in the ghettos.

A second reason why these authors draw on the tale “Hansel and Gretel” specifically, which I did not mention before in this dissertation, might be because of the tale’s nationalistic character. “Hansel and Gretel” is, of course, a tale written down by two German writers. It has been argued that the fairy tale, along with other Grimm’s tales, reflects ideas of German nationalism. Critics have pointed out how the Nazis have “abused” the genre — in particular the Grimm’s fairy tales — during the second world war. Linda Dégh, for instance, points out that ideologists of the Third Reich “demanded that every German household own a copy of the Grimm collection,” because according to these ideologists the Grimm’s tales “are direct descendants of German mythology” (95). Nazi educators “wanted to introduce the Märchen as educational material,” and they considered, for instance, the tale “Little Red Riding Hood” as a symbol of “the poor German folk, plagued by the wolf: the Jews,” she writes (95). Likewise, Peter Arnds writes about the abuse of folklore “in support of the Nazis’ racist and imperialist ideology,” and argues that the fairy tales became for the Nazis “the prime vehicle in supporting their Aryan policies” (422-423). It has even been argued that some of the tales were altered to make them fit into the context of Nazi ideologies.²¹ Consequently, Arnds writes, in 1945 “the Allied Forces briefly banned the publication of the Grimm’s tales in Germany because they associated the horrors expressed in many a fairy tale with violence in the death camps” (423). A similar point is made by Scott Harshbarger:

The debate over the possible baleful effects of cruelty and violence found in the tales became particularly pronounced in the aftermath of WWII, when the relationship

²¹ Granville draws on this theme in *Gretel and the Dark* through the adapted version of the tale “The Pied Piper of Hamelin.”

between German folk and fairy tales and German atrocities was a topic of grave concern. (492)

Considering that the Grimm' tales were thus exploited by Nazis and ideologists of the Third Reich since they saw in them an expression of their values, "Hansel and Gretel" was most likely read as a story about a hard-working Aryan boy, and his obedient, self-sacrificing sister. The two children are confronted with "the Other," the witch, and manage to conquer her. If the wolf in "Little Red Riding Hood" was believed to represent the Jews, the same must have been true for the various witches in the tales by the brothers Grimm. Creating a revision of "Hansel and Gretel" that has Jewish children as its protagonists can thus be seen as ironic. Additionally, portraying characters such as the Oberführer, a camp guard, and a Nazi doctor as the revised versions of the Grimm's witch can be perceived as a critique on the Nazis' portrayal of the Jews as the villains in their fairy tales. Murphy, in particular, uses this technique in her novel, since Magda, "the witch," is both Roma and Gypsy — a double target for the Nazis. Yet, as it turns out it is not Magda but the Oberführer, a German, who is the villain in the story. The three analysed novels, with Murphy's novel in particular, can thus be analysed as critiques on the Nazis' use of fairy tales as part of their anti-Semitic propaganda.

Chapter 3: Gender

3.1. Introduction: gender roles in fairy tales

In a previous chapter I demonstrated how there is no unity in the opinion whether “Hansel and Gretel” should be read as a progressive tale concerning gender equality, or whether it supports patriarchal ideas. In comparison to other classic fairy tales, such as “Snow White,” “Sleeping Beauty,” and “Little Red Riding Hood,” “Hansel and Gretel” stands out because Gretel heroically kills the villain at the end of the story, whereas other female protagonists in fairy tales tend to be dependent on a male character, for instance a prince or a huntsman. Having two protagonists, who are of a different sex, the tale provides an interesting framework for a modern retelling of an early nineteenth century fairy tale.

Yet, I also argued that, if the tale would be analysed on its own, instead of in comparison to other fairy tales, some remarks could be made on how progressive the tale really is. First of all, the tale portrays a rather negative image of womanhood: both of the villains in the tale — i.e. the witch and the stepmother — are female. Secondly, although Gretel kills the witch at the end of the tale, when the children are abandoned in the forest she is repeatedly told by her brother to “keep quiet,” and is portrayed as quite weak and dependent on her brother throughout the first half of the fairy tale.

A novel based on “Hansel and Gretel” could draw on the opportunity the tale provides to tell a story about a clever boy (who tricks his parents and the witch) and a brave girl (whose boldness enables her to save both of them), yet alter the somewhat patriarchal discourse to create a progressive tale suited for the twenty-first century. Secondly, in order for a modern retelling to express gender equality, some alternations could be made in the portrayal of the secondary characters of the witch and the stepmother, in order to get away with the negative image of womanhood “Hansel and Gretel” portrays.

This chapter on gender in the Holocaust narratives will explore how Murphy, Granville, and Yolen draw on the opportunity that the fairy tale “Hansel and Gretel” provides for their creation of a modern retelling that expresses gender equality.

3.2. Analysis of gender roles in the three Holocaust narratives

3.2.1. The True Story of Hansel and Gretel

The most obvious deviation that Murphy makes from the Grimm’s fairy tale is the fact that Magda, the witch in this retelling of “Hansel and Gretel,” is a good character rather than the villain. Yet, this is not the only reversal the author makes. The protagonists’ stepmother is replaced by a good character as well, which can be seen most prominently in the episode of the stepmother’s sacrifice. This chapter will demonstrate how Murphy criticises the negative image of womanhood that the original “Hansel and Gretel” tale portrays, as well as how she adds a feminist touch to her novel through the characters of Magda the witch and the Stepmother. Furthermore, I will argue that the characterization of the Mechanic, Hansel and Gretel’s father, allows Murphy to express positive ideas of fatherhood.

Knoepfmacher points out that Murphy “vindicat[es] [...] so-called ‘witches’” through the character of “[t]he crone who shelters the renamed children, nurtures and tutors them, and [who] finally dies in their stead: she is a ‘righteous Gentile’ whose act of sacrifice will remain anonymous and unrecorded” (182). Murphy’s Hansel and Gretel are saved by Magda more than once. First of all, she provides them shelter and protection when they are lost in the forest — a dangerous and risky act which could bring her into great trouble and even result in her death. Knoepfmacher even calls her the children’s “surrogate mother” (182). She takes care of them when they are ill, provides them with clothes suited for the cold winter and arranges two baptismal certificates so that it would seem that they are Christian instead of Jewish.

The second time the children are saved by Magda is when she comes up with a plan to hide Hansel and Gretel in the oven in her hut in the Polish forest — a striking reversal Murphy makes compared to the original fairy tale. When German soldiers, the SS officer with them, have discovered the location of Magda's hut and are about to invade the place, Magda makes the abrupt decision to hide the two children in the gigantic oven, which results in her own captivity and death. Magda's final thoughts before she dies in the gas chamber illustrate her almost motherly love for the children, since Hansel's face is the very last image that crosses her mind:

Pictures flew into Magda's mind. [...] Faces flipped through her mind like a book of pictures being thumbed. Brother. Sister. Grandmother. Mother, and the face of a child. A boy. Curly hair dyed blond. Black eyes. The flickering vision of life stopped with the boy, and his dark eyes stared into her own as she lay trampled and gasping, and then she was dead. (Murphy 252)

Thus, instead of presenting the witch-figure as the villain of the tale, Magda can be perceived as both a protective, loving mother substitute as well as a saviour — sacrificing herself for children that are not her own.

As I already pointed out in the introduction to this chapter, it has been argued that fairy tales express the idea that women should be guided by men. In fairy tales, marriage is often seen as the ultimate reward; the goal that women should strive for, so when a woman is unmarried she causes trouble and chaos. Karen Seago argues that this “cultural anxiety over the unmarried woman” is expressed through the character of the witch in fairy tales (2). By making the witch-figure in her retelling of a fairy tale a saviour at the same time, rather than a figure causing trouble and chaos, Murphy criticises the idea that women should be married or guided by a male figure to lead a successful life or achieve something. Not only is Magda the

one who saves the children twice in the novel, she is also a character on whom many other characters depend — Nelka and Telek, for instance—, which is in contrast to the traditional idea of women depending on men in fairy tales.

A similar point can be made about the character of the stepmother. The first chapter of the novel describes how the children, the mechanic, and his wife are on an escape route with a motorcycle, with the children in the sidecar. The mechanic's wife realises that they have no chance of surviving with the children accompanying them, since they bring extra weight and therefore slow them down. It is she who gives them instructions on what to do, and who tells them they should adopt the names 'Hansel' and 'Gretel,' so that the Germans in town would not find out their Jewish identities. Her intentions seem good, yet Murphy describes how Hansel shows some scepticism towards her: “‘We have to hide the motorcycle and run into the forest.’ The woman would not shut up. ‘With the children,’ the father shouted. The boy listened. The Stepmother would get her way. She wasn't their real mother” (Murphy 3). Thus, reflecting the Grimm's fairy tale, it is the stepmother who plays the decisive role in the abandonment of the children. The Mechanic originally refuses, yet eventually gives in. In this part of the novel, it is however not yet clear to the reader whether the stepmother's intentions are good — does she really separate from the children in order for them to have a bigger chance of surviving? Or is Hansel's scepticism justified and is she only trying to get rid of the children because they might perhaps stand between her and the mechanic, or because they reduce her own chances of surviving?

It is the scene in which the stepmother sacrifices herself in order to save Gretel that confirms that she is, indeed, a good character. The chapter “Ice Storm” describes into detail how Gretel is walking in the forest on her own on a winter morning, and how she is raped by two men. Right after she has been raped for a second time, it is described how “a lot of things

seemed to happen at once” (Murphy 133), and how “[t]he man shoving inside her pulled back and opened his mouth, and Gretel knew that he was screaming — but she couldn’t hear a thing. [...] The man who had been between her legs was gone, and so was the man with the rifle. Gretel stared up into the forest, and it was silent except for someone moaning a long way off” (134). Some lines further, the focalisation shifts to the point of view of the stepmother, who had gone looking for her husband’s children without him knowing it. When she witnesses Gretel being raped, “[s]he had shot the one man between the eyes, and the other one was dead too” (135). However, “she hadn’t been quick enough”, Murphy writes, “[h]e had gotten off a round from the shotgun, and it had killed her” (135). The following lines describe the Stepmother’s last thoughts before she dies, illustrating “the joy she felt at saving the girl” (Murphy 135):

The girl was alive. Her beautiful hair and the smile she had. Her lovely girl would live. It made the Stepmother happy, and she smiled, her lips opening slightly and moving against the snow. (Murphy 135-136)

The children’s stepmother is described as a fierce woman who is protective towards her husband — Murphy refers to her as a “brave guardian of Hansel and Gretel’s father” (Murphy “Questions for discussion” 10). Moreover, she sacrifices herself for a child that is not even her own, comparable to what Magda does. Through this alteration, Murphy redeems the negative image of stepmothers in her retelling.

Another interesting element to highlight is the discourse between the Stepmother and the Mechanic. Murphy gives the reader an insight in their relationship by including chapters that focus on the adults, in contrast to Yolen’s and Granville’s novel where the reader is not provided with the adults’ point of view. As I already pointed out, it is the stepmother who has the decisive role in the separation from the children, and from the start of the narrative her

discourse is ordering, commanding, and characterised by imperatives, as can be seen in the following lines:

“Get off,” “Quick!” (Murphy 20)

“Not now,” “We’ll walk in the creek. It’ll throw the dogs off,” “Step up” (21)

“Put on your shoes” (22)

“It’s all right,” she said. “I don’t think it’s the same one” (22)

“We have to rest,” [the Mechanic] said. “No. We’ll keep moving until dawn and then sleep. “We can’t move safely by daylight” (23)

As these lines illustrate, it appears that the Stepmother is the one making most of the decisions and making sure that the two of them keep moving. Not only does she come across as authoritative, it can also be seen how she is reassuring her husband, who is weakened both physically and emotionally because of the separation from his children, and she takes on a protective attitude towards him. The Mechanic clearly depends on her resoluteness and alertness at this point in the story.

It is interesting to point out that in the original tale by the brothers Grimm, Hansel and Gretel’s stepmother’s discourse is characterised by authoritative language as well, ordering her husband to leave the children behind, as can be seen in the following lines, taken from Jack Zipes’ work *Happily Ever After: Fairy Tales, Children, and the Culture Industry*, in which he provides the first lines of the tale:²²

“I’ll tell you what,” answered his wife. “Early tomorrow morning we’ll take the children out into the forest where it’s most dense. We’ll build a fire and give them each a piece of bread. Then we’ll go about our work and leave them alone. They won’t find their way back home, and we’ll be rid of them. “No, wife,” the man said.

²² Taken from the 1857 or final edition of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*.

“I won’t do this. I don’t have the heart to leave my children in the forest. The wild beasts would soon come and tear them apart.” “Oh, you fool!” she said. “Then all four of us will have to starve to death. You’d better start planing the boards for our coffins!” She continued to harp on this until he finally agreed to do what she suggested. (44-45)

The stepmother tells her husband about her plan to leave the children behind, and does not hide the fact that she is partly doing this to “be rid of them”. At first, the children’s father disagrees with this evil plan, yet finally he gives in. The difference between the Grimm’s stepmother and Murphy’s version of the stepmother, however, is that the Stepmother in *The True Story of Hansel and Gretel* claims that it is necessary to separate from the children out of concern and fear for the children's lives, rather than out of self-interest. Overall, it can be argued that the Stepmother’s discourse portrays her as a caring yet fierce character, whose discourse and boldness illustrate how Murphy reverses the traditional fairy tale idea of women being guided and protected by men.

A final deviation that Murphy makes from the original tale relating to gender through the protagonists’ parents is the characterisation of the Mechanic. The original fairy tale portrays Hansel and Gretel’s father as someone who does not take much action and who has not much to say. It is seen how he completely gives in to the commands of the stepmother, and at no point in the narrative does he go looking for his children. Murphy deviates from the Grimm’s version by portraying this character in a more positive way, and by extension presenting a more hopeful image of fatherhood in the novel. When, after he has separated from his children, the Mechanic is wandering through the forest with his wife and the Russians, it is described how this separation is constantly on his mind and how he is contemplating what could happen to his children all the time. Furthermore, in the later

chapters it is seen how the Mechanic takes action and starts looking for his children, yet he only arrives at Magda's hut when it is already burned down by the German soldiers, after they have captured Magda and the children have managed to escape. The Mechanic's preoccupation with his children's situation can be illustrated by the following lines:

“[H]e could only think of his children, lost in the snow” (Murphy 50)

“He couldn't even call to the children. They might be hiding two hundred feet away in the brush, but he couldn't call to them or the Germans would hear” (51)

He still stared ahead into every ditch looking for the boy's small form. The girl was older. They might have kept her for a while. (52)

This chapter has illustrated how Murphy redeems the female characters of the Grimm's tale — “two types often vilified” (Murphy “A Conversation with Louise Murphy” 4) — by means of two prominent reversals, from the stereotyping they often receive in fairy tales. Since they sacrifice themselves for children that are not their own, they can be perceived as saviours. Apart from expressing feminist ideas in *The True Story*, Murphy also presents a somewhat more positive image of fatherhood, presenting a contrast to the passive character of the Grimm's father. Overall, it can be argued that Murphy, through these reversals and alterations she makes relating to gender and gender roles, she not only adds a feminist touch to her novel, yet also presents a positive and hopeful image of family relations.

3.2.2. Mapping the Bones

In *Mapping the Bones*, Jane Yolen makes use of the foundation that the tale “Hansel and Gretel” provides to create a narrative about a twin boy and girl who complement each other in various ways — to express gender equality. I will argue that Yolen plays around with the gender roles in the traditional fairy tale by means of reversals, which can be seen most prominently in the discourse between the protagonists Chaim and Gittel. Furthermore, she

deals with the negative image of womanhood portrayed in “Hansel and Gretel” by deviating from the original story’s characterisation of the stepmother, and expresses female power in the scene in which the witch-figure is killed.

In Yolen’s novel, Chaim is described as someone who is good at mathematics, reflecting the traditional gender expectations of boys being good at mathematics and girls being good at emotional matters. However, he is also described as sensible and emotional, and finds comfort in the poems he writes himself. Chaim is pensive, cautious, and will think decisions through before taking action. Gittel, on the other hand, is the bold one of the twins. She takes most of the initiative to do things, yet comes across as somewhat naive sometimes.

Chaim was never good at meeting new people. He had to take time to assess, revise, add what he’d decided, calculate it like a math problem. But in the end, he almost always got things right. On the other hand, I accept people at once for who they say they are. Give me a smile, a kind word, a piece of chocolate, and I will believe a bald-faced lie. (Yolen 178)

In this sense, Chaim and Gittel complement each other: Gittel has the courage and determination Chaim often lacks, whilst she herself could use some more of Chaim’s alertness and caution.

The characterisation of Chaim and Gittel displays a first reversal Yolen makes in comparison to Grimm’s “Hansel and Gretel.” In the original fairy tale, Hansel is portrayed as someone who is both clever and bold, who takes initiative and is protective towards his sister. Yet, hunger takes over from his rational thinking when he runs up to the witch’s gingerbread cottage and starts nibbling on the candy attached to the walls — an impulsive act which will bring the siblings into trouble:

"Let's help ourselves to a good meal," said Hansel. "I'll eat a piece of the roof, and Gretel, you eat from the window. That will be sweet." Hansel reached up and broke off a little of the roof to see how it tasted, while Gretel stood next to the windowpanes and was nibbling at them. (Grimm)

Gretel, on the other hand, is portrayed as an emotionally weak character in the first part of the Grimm's narrative, as she is often seen crying. It is she who saves both of them at the end of the narrative, but when she is accompanied by her brother she does not take much action and comes across as highly dependent on him. Yolen's narrative, on the contrary, has a male protagonist who is cautious and alert, and tends to show his emotions the most, and a fierce female protagonist who is protective towards her brother, yet comes across as naive and too impulsive at some points. By reversing the gender roles from the original fairy tale, Yolen criticises the traditional gender expectations of boys being bold, taking action, and being protective, and girls being stronger on an emotional level and more sensitive, implying that boys can and are allowed to show their emotions as much as girls, and that girls are perfectly capable to be protective and take action.

It can also be argued that Yolen creates an "improved" version of Hansel and Gretel. On the one hand, she mocks Hansel's naive and impulsive features by creating an improved version of Hansel who is cautious and sensible. On the other hand, she mocks Gretel's vulnerability and dependence on Hansel by creating a brave heroine who is protective towards her brother.

A second way in which Yolen deviates from the original tale is through the changes she makes in the discourse between Chaim and Gittel. Whilst in the Grimm's tale Hansel does most of the talking and repeatedly tells Gretel to keep her mouth shut, Yolen's Chaim barely

speaks and has a stutter. Throughout the novel it is repeatedly illustrated how he often speaks no more than five words a day. Yolen writes the following paragraph at the start of the novel:

Even as a toddler, he was a miser with his words. [...] We invented a twin language that our parents never prayed and we never revealed. It consisted of secret hand signs. Quick, short bursts of ginger talk. We used it throughout our lives, especially the dangerous parts. That way I always knew his mind.

(Yolen 1)

Chaim's self-written poetry is an expression of how he experiences the traumatic events of having to move to the ghetto, being separated from his parents, being a prisoner in Sobanek Camp, and eventually being dehumanised and reduced to a laboratory animal by the doctor. As unhesitant he is in his speaking, so fluent is he through his poetry and writing in general. Most often, Chaim and Gittel thus communicate by using their secret twin language. They have different hand signs to form the words *sorrow*, *luck*, and *trouble*, to give a few examples. If the twins are not communicating by means of this sign language, it often happens that Gittel speaks for Chaim.

By creating a male character who expresses himself through poetry instead of oral language, Yolen not only breaks with traditional gender expectations of boys not showing their emotions, she also gives a critique on how Gretel is repeatedly silenced by her brother in the original tale. As such, Yolen gives her Gretel-character, Gittel, a voice in the novel. Not only is she given a voice of her own, she literally speaks for two, which, it can be argued,

illustrates how Yolen gives a feminist touch to her novel by presenting a male character who depends on a female character, a pattern that is not traditionally found in fairy tales²³.

When Chaim and Gittel are imprisoned in Doctor von Schneir's Welcome House, the partisan Madam Grenzke makes it possible for Gretel to overpower the doctor by pushing him forward, resulting in his death. As I argued earlier in the chapter on the analysis of *Mapping the Bones*, it is through this character that Yolen integrates the "Show Me" motif, as the nurse pretends that she is not capable of opening the locks on the handcuffs — part of her plan to buy time and move the doctor's attention away from Gittel. Here, Yolen draws on the fact that "Hansel and Gretel" portrays a female heroine who uses her wits and bravery, and takes this even further by having *two* strong female characters saving themselves and Chaim. This represents the idea of women empowering each other.

Moreover, through the character Madam Grenzke, Yolen criticises the representation of women as "silly" and dependent on men. A scene that follows Dr. von Schneir's death describes how Madam Grenzke persuades the guards in front of the door of the Welcome House to pretend that his death was a "horrible accident" (Yolen 405). When the guards ask her what they should do with the body, she insinuates that they should make sure that the

²³ Chaim refers to his sister as "his lodestar, his compass" (Yolen 199). Although Chaim and Gittel complete each other by compensating their weaker points, Chaim arguably depends somewhat more on Gittel than the other way around. When the twins have been wandering through the forest for a long time, under the guidance of the partisans, Gittel seems to sink into herself because of the effects of starvation and exhaustion. Yolen writes that she did not speak a word about the separation from their parents: "Not even in signs. Because of his own silence, he didn't have the words to ask" (200). Without Gittel being there to speak for Chaim and communicate via their sign language, Chaim feels lost.

body disappears “in the oven” (Yolen 407), manipulating him by pretending she needs his guidance:

And suddenly Chaim understood. She was playing with the guard, playacting the silly woman who needed guidance from a strong man. And yet in the end, she’d get him to do exactly what she wanted. (Yolen 406)

Yolen criticises traditional gender expectations by means of the technique of reversal. In *Mapping the Bones*, she creates a female heroine who is bold and protective — traits that are commonly associated with Hansel in the Grimm’s tale — and a male hero who is more emotional and cautious — traits associated with Gretel. She draws on a fairy tale that provides an opportunity to tell a story about a boy and a girl who complement each other in various ways and compensate each other’s weaknesses. A prominent reversal can be seen in the discourse between the twins in Yolen’s novel: whilst in “Hansel and Gretel”, Gretel is repeatedly silenced by her brother, Yolen’s hero Chaim depends on his sister to speak for him, since he has a stutter and only really expresses himself through his self-written poems, giving her Gretel a voice of her own. Finally, Yolen expresses the power of women empower each other through the integration of the nurse Madam Grenzke, who plays a crucial part in the overpowering of the witch-figure, Dr von Schneir.

3.2.3. *Gretel and the Dark*

Granville defines “Hansel and Gretel” in “The Inspiration for *Gretel and the Dark*,” the afterword to her novel, as a narrative with an “unusually proactive heroine, who keeps her wits about her and finally defeats the ogre-figure by sheer cunning.” In contrast to the novels by Yolen and Murphy, Granville’s novel is focussed on one character, Krysta, instead of on a brother and sister. Krysta’s Jewish friend Daniel is mentioned now and then in the first half of

the novel, yet it is only in the last chapters of the novel that Krysta and Daniel are explicitly associated with Hansel and Gretel.

In this chapter I will argue that Granville criticises the passivity of traditional female fairy tale heroines, by stressing Krysta's ambitious and fierce character. I will further illustrate this point by analysing the discourse between Krysta and Daniel.

Granville presents Krysta as a bold and strong-willed young girl, which is illustrated in a passage where Krysta discusses her future career plans:

When I grow up I shall be a famous author like Carol Lewis or Elle Franken Baum²⁴, but the girls in my books will be explorers, they'll fly planes and fight battles, not play down holes with white rabbits or dance along brick roads with a silly scarecrow and a man made out of metal. (Granville 89)

Krysta mocks the silly character of many females in fairy tales, such as Alice and Dorothy, and claims that her characters will be war heroines, for instance — roles that are commonly associated with males.

Towards the end of the narrative Krysta and Daniel are associated with Hansel and Gretel because of the situation they find themselves in: like Hansel and Gretel, they are wandering through the forest, exhausted and undernourished, where they encounter a witch-figure. Krysta seems to realise this as she equates herself with Gretel, or rather with a much smarter version of Gretel. At a certain moment in the forest, when Krysta realises that things are not “happening in the right order” anymore — struggling with distinguishing her own story from the “Hansel and Gretel” story — she mentions that “Gretel wasn't as curious as [her], or as clever” (Granville 344). Somewhat later, Granville writes how Krysta thinks how

²⁴ Here, Krysta mixes up the names of the authors, i.e. Lewis Carroll and L. Frank Baum, thinking that they are female.

“Maybe [her] own story can’t end properly and everything will stay the same, but at least in this one I won’t do any worse than Gretel” (347). By integrating these thoughts of Krysta, Granville highlights how her character might be based on Grimm’s Gretel, Krysta is a much cleverer version. Krysta aims to overpower the witch-figure *before* she has the chance to put them in her oven. In this regard, it can be argued that Granville deviates from the passivity of Gretel in the first part of the fairy tale, by creating a heroine who is both alert and bold throughout the *whole* narrative.

A second deviation from the original tale that is interesting to highlight is the discourse between Daniel and Krysta. As I already pointed out, although the fairy tale can be regarded as progressive concerning gender in comparison to other classic fairy tales, something that could be reconsidered is the discourse between Hansel and Gretel. In the previous section, the analysis of gender in Yolen’s novel, I argued how Yolen seems to criticise this by creating a male character who is orally weak. She gives her character Gittel a double voice, since she often speaks for both her and her brother. Granville does something similar in *Gretel and the Dark*. When Krysta and Daniel find themselves wandering through the forest, Daniel is exhausted and feels like giving up. An analysis of Krysta and Daniel’s discourse illustrates Krysta’s motivating and reassuring language towards Daniel. First of all,

this can be seen in the death scene of a character referred to as the Shadow²⁵, who accompanied the two children for some time in the forest. Krysta reassures Daniel by saying “‘But we’re not going to die.’ [...] You always knew it was hopeless. Now we can travel faster, just you and me” (Granville 322). When Daniel responds that he wants to dig a grave to bury the Shadow, Krysta realises that there is no time for that, and that they should keep going if they do not want to be found by German soldiers, which shows how Krysta is able to take responsibility in such a difficult situation. The following examples illustrate Daniel’s discourse:

‘I don’t care anymore. They’re saying it’s a long way to where we’re going. Many day’s walk. I can’t, Krysta, I can’t.’ (Granville 293)

‘Let me rest for a bit longer’ (323)

‘What are we going to do? Where can we go? Who can we turn to? Nobody has ever helped us before’ (324)

‘Let me sleep’ (325)

Through his discourse, Daniel is portrayed as doubtful, uncertain, somewhat naive (‘No one will find us here’ [323]), and dependent on Krysta’s resoluteness. Although we do not know for certain how long Daniel has been in Ravensbrück camp before he met Krysta, it is

²⁵ A rather vague and mysterious character, which starts to appear as a companion to Daniel in Ravensbrück Camp. When they decide to escape through the forest, the Shadow accompanies them. It is described how “Its head lolls, the wide eyes are empty, and its feet trail behind [...] it could be the death of us” (Granville 321). A possible interpretation of this character is that it is a metaphor for ‘fear,’ hence the line “it could be the death of us” (321), and the fact that Krysta, who is described as somewhat more fearless than Daniel, wants to let go of it, whereas Daniel drags it with him. Another interpretation is that the Shadow is actually Daniel’s sister, who has been the subject of one of Krysta’s father’s experiments.

important to take into account that he was there *before* her, and most certainly more undernourished and exhausted than her. Yet, it is interesting to make a comparison between Daniel's discourse and Krysta's:

'We're going to escape,' I say fiercely. [...] Besides, help is coming. They all say help is coming.' (Granville 293)

'We must keep going.' (322)

'[...] we must keep walking towards them.' (324)

'Walk now. Sleep later.' (325)

'Get up' (326)

'I'll come back,' I promise, [...] 'I'll find these people, tell them to wait and come straight back for you.' (348)

Krysta's discourse, on the other hand, portrays her as determined, decisive, and assertive, yet also reassuring and protective towards Daniel. It is characterised by imperatives, which depicts the girl as dominant, yet her motives are good as she knows that in order for her and Daniel to survive, they must keep going. When Daniel is close to giving up, she decides to tell him the story of Lilie and Benjamin. At the end of the novel, it is explicitly mentioned how "it was [Krysta's] storytelling that kept [Daniel] alive" (Granville 354).

In *Gretel and the Dark*, Granville thus criticises both the passivity of traditional fairy tale heroines, as well as the pattern of these characters depending on males. She creates a fierce young girl who is ambitious, bold, and has her own will, which is especially illustrated in Krysta's resolute and decisive discourse. Daniel is dependent on Krysta for her determination and bravery, and it is her storytelling that eventually keeps him alive.

In conclusion, this third chapter on "gender" has illustrated how Murphy, Yolen, and Granville deal with gender roles depicted in the Grimm's fairy tale "Hansel and Gretel."

Although I have argued that this fairy tale can be regarded as relatively progressive in comparison to other classic fairy tales, these authors successfully deal with the negative image of womanhood portrayed in the Grimm's tale, as well as the passivity of Gretel's discourse. Furthermore, I have demonstrated how Murphy takes this somewhat further by also redeeming the stereotype of the passive and indifferent father, as well as the negative image of family relations that the original tale depicts.

Conclusion

This dissertation on “Hansel and Gretel” as a metaphor for the Holocaust has analysed three fictional Holocaust narratives that are aimed at a young adult reading audience. By means of a close reading of Louise Murphy’s *The True Story of Hansel and Gretel*, Eliza Granville’s *Gretel and the Dark*, and Jane Yolen’s *Mapping the Bones*, I have analysed the novels’ integration of “Hansel and Gretel” and its added value. The version of the fairy tale that was used for the analyses is the translation by D.L. Ashliman of the 1857 or final version of the tale by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. Additionally, this dissertation has analysed the way the three authors deal with gender roles in their fairy tale retellings. The main question that I aim to answer in this dissertation is what the significance is of the use of “Hansel and Gretel” as a narrative framework to create a Holocaust narrative suited for its target audience of young adults, that, at the same time, expresses gender equality.

I started my analysis by giving an overview of the fairy tale’s most important themes and motifs — i.e. starvation, abandonment, cannibalism, the gingerbread house, the theme of deceit, and the setting of the forest — as well as the tale’s representation of gender roles. I did so in order to determine whether and to what extent the Holocaust novels — read as revisions of the fairy tale — differ from the original.

In *The True Story of Hansel and Gretel*, Murphy relies on the structure of “Hansel and Gretel” to integrate the novel’s main themes of starvation and abandonment. Thematic links are established through references to the bread crumbs — that represent “luck,” as well as wartime Europe’s preoccupation desire for food in order to survive —, the oven, and the lesser known element of the white swan. Finally, she includes some striking reversals in her novel. Magda’s oven, for instance, is not used to burn children in, yet to hide them and save them from burning in the infamous ovens of Auschwitz. Nor are all of the good characters

spared from death, which, arguably, is a way of Murphy to stress the Holocaust's unfairness and cruelty.

Granville's *Gretel and the Dark* is pervaded by references to fairy tales, most of them by the brothers Grimm. Retreating into a fantasy world allows the protagonist Krysta to cope with the harsh situations she finds herself in and make sense of the horrors the war presents to her. The analysis of Granville's novel has illustrated how not only this, yet also the act of creating and telling stories herself functions as a coping mechanism to Krysta. I have illustrated how Krysta is influenced by the fairy tales that her carer Greet told her, and how she interprets them to make sense of the things that are happening around her. As the novel's title suggests, the focus is on "Hansel and Gretel." Granville finds inspiration in the tale's witch and her gingerbread house in her creation of camp commandant Hraben, who lures Krysta with candy and eventually "devours" the girl by sexually abusing her. It is, however, only in the last chapter that Krysta is explicitly associated with Gretel. Granville creates a story within the greater narrative of her novel, in which she draws on the structure of the tale and makes references to various of its elements: the witch's oven and treasure, the bread crumbs, white doves, and the "Show Me motif." I have analysed this chapter as a revision of "Hansel and Gretel," arguing that it signifies Krysta's transition to maturity and her realisation of the need to dissociate herself from the world of fairy tales.

Thirdly, I have argued how Yolen's *Mapping the Bones* resembles "Hansel and Gretel" on a structural level, similar to Murphy's work. The fairy tale is incorporated as a narrative framework since the novel mirrors its three distinct places and sections. These represent the three impediments that both Hansel and Gretel, as well as Chaim and Gittel are facing. The novel's first section, taking place in the Lodz ghetto, reflects the impediment 'starvation,' since the Abromovitz and Norenberg families suffer from severe food shortages. The second

section takes place in the dense forest, where the four children are separated from their parents. This part of the novel, representing thus the impediment ‘abandonment,’ revolves around desertion and rejection, since Chaim and Gittel are not only separated from their parents, Chaim also feels rejected by his sister. The third section, finally, taking place at Sobanek labour camp, represents the impediment ‘survival,’ since this is the part where the siblings encounter the witch-figure, who is a threat to their lives. Here, Yolen draws on the Grimm’s witch and her gingerbread house in her creation of Doctor von Schneir and the “House of Candy” that is Sobanek Camp. In the fairy tale, the witch offers the children nourishment, yet plans to make *them* her own food. Similarly, the doctor promises the children at Sobanek camp medical treatment, but plans to destruct the children’s bodies in his scientific experiments. Finally, Yolen makes references to the tales’ elements of the breadcrumbs — yet, I argued, does this in a way to mock Hansel’s naivety—, and the witch’s oven. She relies on the fairy tale’s theme of the use of candy as a means of manipulation, the “Show Me” motif, and the scene in which Gretel overpowers the witch-figure. In this regard, she presents her narrative as a disturbed revision of the fairy tale, set in a “fairy tale world gone mad,” as Gittel calls it (Yolen 238).

The second part of this dissertation discussed the representation of gender roles in the three novels. I have pointed out that opinions on whether the fairy tale “Hansel and Gretel” should be considered as a progressive tale concerning gender equality or not differ. Whilst some critics argue that it is a tale expressing patriarchal ideas, others highlight its themes of sibling solidarity and female power. One particular aspect that I discussed into more detail is the discourse between Hansel and Gretel, which, I argued, could be dealt with and improved in a twenty-first century revision. Yolen and Granville, in particular, give their female protagonists Gittel and Krysta a voice and in this way criticise Gretel’s verbal passivity in the

Grimm's tale. Whilst Gittel often speaks for both her and her brother Chaim, who is orally weak, Krysta's discourse is characterised by imperatives and reassuring, comforting and resolute language — language that is commonly attributed to Hansel in the Grimm's tale.

Another way in which the three authors deal with gender roles as depicted in "Hansel and Gretel" is by breaking certain gender stereotypes. "Hansel and Gretel" is one of many fairy tales in which the type of the stepmother is vilified. The tale portrays a negative image of adult women, since both of the villains in the tale are female. Murphy, in particular, deviates from this in her characters of the Stepmother and Magda the witch, who are considered saviours. Moreover, it is through the integration of these characters that Murphy criticises the traditional idea depicted in fairy tales that women depend on men. Yolen's novel, too, highlights the theme of female power through the integration of the "Show Me motif" by not just letting Gittel save the day, yet by introducing a second character who helps her, and whom the other characters thus owe their lives to. In Granville's novel, too, Daniel depends on Krysta's resoluteness and bravery to survive in the forest.

Analysed as revisions of "Hansel and Gretel," these three novels certainly express ideas of gender equality and feminism. The authors stress female power and independence in their portrayal of bold, fierce and strong-willed women such as Murphy's Magda and the Stepmother, Granville's Krysta, and Yolen's Gittel and Madam Grenzke. However, male stereotypes are also dealt with. Yolen's Chaim is portrayed as sensible, cautious, and emotional, and finds strength in his poetry. Gittel, on the other hand is portrayed as the bold and determined one of the siblings, who takes most of the initiative. Thus, the characteristics that are commonly associated with Hansel are attributed to Gittel, whilst Gretel's traits are attributed to Chaim. Through the integration of this reversal, Yolen not only highlights the idea that girls can be protective and audacious too, she also stresses how boys should be

allowed to show their emotions. In that regard she criticises the fairy tale's emphasis on active, ambitious heroes who should be strong at all times. Murphy, on the other hand, redeems the type of the passive and indifferent fairy tale father, who does not seem to care much in the Grimm's tale, by presenting a character that actively goes looking for his children, which results in their reunion at the end of the novel.

It can thus be concluded that the three discussed novels successfully alter Gretel's passive discourse and criticise gender stereotypes. The main question that this dissertation aims to answer, however, is the motivation behind the choice of "Hansel and Gretel," and not another fairy tale, in the creation of a Holocaust novel. As I mentioned, critics have pointed out the value of a fairy tale framework for a Holocaust narrative. I repeatedly referred to Peter Arnds' claim about the genre's capacity of "speaking the unspeakable" (423), or in the words of Margarete Landwehr "representing the unrepresentable" (153). Various authors have made use of a fairy tale as a framework to put into words an event as unrepresentable as the Holocaust. Granville, in particular, makes use of this technique. To narrate scenes of sexual abuse, prisoners freezing to death, and Nazi experiments, she establishes connections to fairy tales by the brothers Grimm and relies on those instead of explicitly saying what is going on.

Since the three novels that were analysed in this dissertation are aimed at young adults, relying on a fairy tale framework seems interesting, considering the fact that this is a genre that the young readers are familiar with. Therefore, perhaps it makes the novels more accessible than the genre of historical fiction. The novels can be perceived as an instrument to educate young readers on different aspects of the Holocaust. The novels do not only portray the cruelty of the concentration camps and the gas chambers, they also depict some of the horrors of the Holocaust that young readers might be less acquainted with. Murphy educates her readers about blood transfusions, the abduction of Aryan looking children, and life of the

partisans in the Polish forests. Yolen's and Granville's novels explore the theme of growing up in the camps, and the cruelty of Nazi experiments. Furthermore, the themes of resistance movements, death marches, and prostitution in camps are covered.

The question that remains, then, is why exactly the tale "Hansel and Gretel"? A conclusion that can be drawn is that the tale provides an obvious and fitting framework, considering that it is a tale about starvation, abandonment, and survival, themes that are commonly associated with the Holocaust and the second world war. Thematic links go further than the link between the witch's oven and the ovens in the concentration camps. For instance, links are established between the tale's motif of the bread crumbs and the importance and value of bread in times of war. Furthermore, the crossing of the river can be linked to the transition from German occupation to Soviet liberation. Another possible motivation behind the authors' choice of "Hansel and Gretel" is the fact that the tale is considered a particularly nationalistic one. I argued how the tale is said to reflect nationalistic and racist ideas, and how the genre is argued to be abused by the Nazis. Fairy tale revisions with Jewish children as their protagonists can thus be seen as ironic, and as a way to criticise the Nazis' use of the fairy tale as anti-Semitic propaganda.

Overall, this research has shown the significance of the tale "Hansel and Gretel" as a narrative framework for a Holocaust narrative that expresses ideas of gender equality. Further research could be done on one particular theme of these novels: trauma. Both Murphy's and Granville's novel contain an episode where the female protagonist is raped. When *The True Story's* Gretel is raped by two men in the forest, she enters a state of insanity and her recent memories are repressed. She enters a sort of fairy tale world, and replaces war-related things by fantasy elements. Similarly, Granville includes a scene of sexual abuse in which Krysta replaces the harsh reality she finds herself in with fairy tale elements, and associates herself

with her fairy tale heroines. Due to a word limit, I did not go further into this. Also, although in Murphy's novel Gretel's insanity is connected to "Hansel and Gretel," Granville's novel draws on other tales, and thus does not answer my research question. However, it would be interesting to examine how trauma is connected to the use of fairy tales in these novels. A comparison could be made between Gretel's repression and Krysta's suppression of the traumatic experience of being raped. Possibly, this would lead to some more answers about the significance of the use of "Hansel and Gretel" in a Holocaust narrative.

It may now be concluded that putting into consideration the fairy tale genre, narratively integrated into Anglo-Saxon literature, this dissertation has provided another, unexpected insight for the multiple Holocaust novels: that they too, notwithstanding the horror of their subject matter, can try and represent these inhuman histories in modes that are more humanising. Grimm's Hansel can be a boy in the camps, Gretel a girl striving for survival.

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