

Gretel: Heroine or Victim?

By Zachary Denny

When they are young, most children are read the fairy tale “Hansel and Gretel” by the Brothers Grimm. They are told of two courageous children who are abandoned in the woods and are taken in by a kindly old woman. However, the woman is a wicked witch intent upon eating the children. In a stroke of brilliance, the heroine, Gretel, manages to trick the witch into getting close to the oven, and Gretel shoves the witch into the oven where she then roasts alive. The children flee the lair to live in a cliché, but loved, happily-ever-after ending, or so it is thought. In the poem “Gretel in Darkness” the poet, Louise Glück, writes of what Gretel’s life has become after the encounter with the witch. It is assumed she is now grown up and has moved on with her life, but such is not the case. It can be argued that Gretel is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD for short.

Firstly, what is PTSD? It is classified as an anxiety disorder. The disorder typically appears after a person is exposed to a traumatic event such as a serious accident, war, or a violent assault (“PTSD” par. 1). The common symptoms include disturbing and reoccurring flashbacks and nightmares, numbing of the events that have taken place, sadness, fear, anger, and typically high levels of anxiety (“PTSD” par. 3). It can even have a delayed onset of years after the event takes place. Studies also show that women are at a higher risk for experiencing PTSD than men (“Post-Traumatic” par. 18). Gretel is shown to exhibit many of these symptoms throughout the poem.

The first and most common symptom that Gretel exhibits is the reoccurring flashbacks and nightmares. “I hear the witch’s cry/break in the moonlight through a sheet/of sugar: . . .” (Glück 1-3). The line from the poem shows that Gretel frequently still hears the witch’s death cries while she is sleeping. Through “we are there still and it is real, real,/that black forest, and the fire in earnest,” it is obvious that Gretel often has night terrors and feels that she has in fact never left the witch’s lair, that she is still trapped (Glück 23-24). During her waking hours she has a feeling of anxiety.

When it comes to Gretel’s anxiety, it can be argued that she is physically numb to her traumas, but she still feels much anxiety. It is very evident that Gretel experiences high levels of anxiety. Her anxiety is borderline paranoia: “Am I alone? Spies/hiss in the stillness . . .” (Glück 21-22). She feels that she is not alone, that there is someone watching her intently, always. “My father bars the door, bars harm/from this house, and it is years” (11-12). Years after her experience, Gretel still feels uneasy: “This is the world we wanted./All who would have seen us dead/are dead” (Glück 1-3). Gretel was assuredly fine for some time after her experience, perhaps even happier than ever due to the positive outcome of the horrors she saw, but eventually her happiness waned and the dark memories began to sink in evidence by the poet’s lines of “. . . in our father’s hut/we sleep, are never hungry./Why do I not forget?” (Glück 8-10). Gretel wishes she could move on and put the past behind her, but despite trying, Gretel cannot forget the witch.

Gretel also supports the statistic that females are more likely to develop PTSD than males. Both siblings were in the same dark place, and both almost had their lives taken.

Even you, my brother,
summer afternoons you look at me as though
you meant to leave,
as though it never happened (Glück 13-16).

It is evident that Hansel seems to have coped with the ordeal quite well while Gretel is slowly becoming unhinged. However, the point can be argued that while both siblings experienced similar atrocities at the hands of the witch, Gretel dealt with the brunt of the cruelty. Hansel was simply kept caged and fed constantly so that he would become plump enough for the witch to eat. Gretel, on the other hand, was forced to become the witch's slave. The witch also decided that instead of just cannibalizing Hansel that Gretel would make a nice addition to her feast. Gretel goes to the point of no return by being the sibling who actually murders the witch by locking her in the oven. Gretel was forced to do what Hansel could not. Gretel became a murderess while Hansel was fortunate enough to play the victim. In "But I killed for you. I see armed fires, the spires of that gleaming kiln," Gretel is envious, but also angry at her brother (Glück 17-18). She envies that he is able to let go of the events but angry that she must suffer the burden alone when she killed the witch to help save him. Even Gretel's tone in the lines suggests that she feels a sense of animosity towards her brother.

Gretel was a courageous young girl who had to act quickly in order to save her and her brother's lives. But despite being the hero of the story, Gretel is faced with a problem that may never completely be fixed. It is safe to say that Gretel is in fact a victim of post-traumatic stress disorder. She exhibits countless symptoms associated with PTSD and her experiences were the

breeding ground for the disorder to appear. The happily-ever-after of fairy tales may not be as happy as it appears.

2014 Schulenburg Campus *Emerging Writers Contest* Winner



Works Cited

Glück, Louise. "Gretel in Darkness." *Literature: Reading, Reacting, Writing*. Ed. Laurie G. Kirszner and Stephen R. Mandell. Boston: Wadsworth/Cengage Learning, 2011. 839.

Print.

"Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: The Management of PTSD in Adults and Children in Primary and Secondary Care." *PubMed.Gov*. National Center for Biotechnology Information, U.S. National Library of Medicine. 2009. Web. 2 Mar 2014.

"PTSD." *American Psychiatric Association*. American Psychiatric Association. 2014. Web. 2 Mar 2014.