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ENG 476

18 September, 2014

Virtues, Hard Work, and Justice

A common motif included in many fairy tales is the reward of physical gifts for esteemed and desired interior virtues. In the tale “Rawhead and Bloodybones”, told by Jane Muncy Fugate, the main character receives all of her gifts because she is a kind hearted and hardworking person. In other words, as Carl Lindahl once claimed, “the hero’s riches come as a reward for simply being who she or he is”. However, in a similar story told by Joseph Jacobs entitled “Cap O’ Rushes”, the main character is rewarded for her inner virtue but the reward is brought about through her own intelligence and fortitude rather than as a bestowed gift. Although both “Cap O’ Rushes” and “Rawhead and Bloodybones” firmly display the motif of inner qualities being acknowledged and formed into external features, the course of obtaining these rewards reveals entirely different atmospheres and attitudes toward the motif.

To begin, Jacobs’s tone toward Cap O’ Rushes’s true self being revealed is jovial and prideful because the heroine manages to succeed by the end of the story through her own willpower and cleverness. When Cap O’ Rushes finds herself thrown out onto the street she immediately goes to an affluent house in order to find work and provide for herself. These firm and decisive actions suggest that she has a plan in mind to improve her life. Therefore, her “dirty work” as a house maid is actually a brilliant choice because she is creating for herself future opportunities. By this we see that the celebratory tone the author takes is due to Cap O’ Rushes’s ability to be resourceful and self-sufficient. She is a driven girl who manages to succeed despite major setbacks by way of her hard work and subtlety.

Furthermore, the joyful pride that exuberates the “Cap O’ Rushes” tale stems from the willingness of Cap O’ Rushes to degrade her station and disguise her wealthy background. Once again, she makes a conscious decision to disguise her real identity so that she could eventually better her situation. She covers up “her fine clothes” with some “rushes” which allows her to appear common to those around her. This costume of sorts provides her the opportunity to “hide” her true identity so that nobody would connect the poor, dirty house maid during the day with the fine young woman attending the dance at night. Because of this intelligent ploy, she has created an opening to present her finer, higher class self for her own advantage. Because wealth and nobility was a part of Cap O’ Rushes’s identity from the outset of the story, she is seen as determined and ambitious. Therefore, her success is observed as a triumph, not just because she has managed to reclaim her status and win a husband, but also because she is willing to work hard and get her hands dirty to achieve it.

In contrast, the attitude of Fugate toward the young woman’s prosperity and happiness granted by way of the reward of physical traits for inward traits is one of pleasure due to the innate justice served. Unlike Cap O’ Rushes, the young woman in “Rawhead and Bloodybones” appears to have no actual intention of bettering or changing her life. This is not to say that given the chance for a better life that she would not take it, but she does not deliberately choose a course of action that would bring about an increase in her own prospects. Instead, she is forced into the “hard chore[s]” that were disdained by her wicked stepmother and stepsisters. Thus, all her hard labor is a reflection of her “obedient” and kindhearted nature rather than an indication of personal ambition. This apathy toward her own situation creates the perfect setting for the justice typical of Märchen in which our young heroine receives the gifts of beauty, wonderful smell and untold riches for the kindness in her heart. In contrast to Cap O’ Rushes, she is rewarded for simply being who she is.

In addition, the ending of “Rawhead and Bloodybones” where the young woman has achieved everything she could have ever wanted lacks the pride found in “Cap O’ Rushes” because the young woman does not purposefully disguise anything about herself. Instead, there is a pervading righteous mood since her physical beauty is masked by all the hard work she is forced to endure. In fact, the text describes her from the start as “Quite beautiful in her way, if you could look through the dirt and the ragged clothes”. The young woman was always beautiful but was unable to really shine because it was being repressed by her wicked stepmother and the dreadful labors she was forced to endure. When the first Rawhead and Bloody bones claims that “she was pretty and she was kind” and decides he is going to make her “the most beautiful girl in the world”, there is a feeling of vindication because the young heroine’s virtues have finally been released to blossom freely. This gift of physical beauty reflects who she really is, giving her a final justice over the difficult situation. Thus the transformation of the external features to match her beautiful heart is a pleasant reminder that no matter how terrible a situation is in life, so long as you have a good and kind heart, you will always be rewarded in the end.

Although there are many parallels between the two stories, “Cap O’ Rushes” and “Rawhead and Bloodybones” there are some very clear, distinct differences. They both contain a heroine who manages to obtain her goals and gain justice by the end of the story when her true identity is revealed. This creates a jovial and bright atmosphere in each story. However, the final feeling of pride found in “Cap O’ Rushes” is due to the success of the heroine’s fortitude and determination. On the other hand, the young girl in “Rawhead and Bloodybones” finally receives justice for her true, kindhearted self, generating a pleased and vindicated mood. In the end, though both girls succeeded in overcoming their trying situation, each story felt different because of the atmosphere surrounding and attitude toward the motif.