

Outline: Once upon a time

This paper will outline how the term, “*Once upon a time*” is able to denote and frame narratives of the imagined future, challenging the popular belief that the term situates actions, events and locations in the past. Many of our traditional European fairy tales begin with the phrase, *Once upon a time*, using it to distinguish a fairy story from other fantasy genres and other forms of faerie narratives. It is an unusual term, unique to the fairy story genre, and despite its old-fashioned phrasing, is used in contemporary re-tellings of fairy stories, whether they be written or oral accounts, dramatic productions, or film.

It is a key phrase to establish a setting beyond our here-and-now. *Once upon a time* is a cueing phrase that prepares us to experience something else. It leads us, as Tolkein asserts, from the Primary world into the Secondary world. This is possible through the imaginative process.

What is intriguing is that *Once upon a time* is a phrase that most people presume grounds the narrative as a story from long ago based in an era from long ago. Some traditional fairy stories, however begin with the phrase, “long, long ago” and this, as opposed to *Once upon a time*, deliberately places the narrative in a long-ago past time. A common belief is that *Once upon a time* refers to a past event from either the long ago to a few years, weeks or even a few days ago. Yet an extrapolation of the term will expose this as flawed understanding for *Once upon a time* may have any time frame, and be located beyond or outside chronology.

The gift from Indigenous Dreaming time

For us in Australia, with access to the chronology of the Indigenous Dreaming, we know time has neither being nor relevance. The stories of the Dreaming, be they myths or legends or explanations of events, situate the narrative so that it may have happened in the past, may be

Once Upon a Time and narratives of the imagined future

happening now and may happen in the future. For the Indigenous peoples what has happened before impacts the here-and-now as well as the future. What will be in the future will impact not just the here-and-now, but on our understanding of the past. In Indigenous Dreaming there is more than cause and effect, more than consequences and more than memory. It requires a significant shift in thinking to allow a meta-understanding of our place within the universe. In the realms of the universe and the imagination, we no longer have time or matter.

This gift of confronting and challenging a European concept of linear time has enabled us to continue to adjust the stories of our diverse heritages to tell the true core of the narrative so that it lives with us and within us. We carry fairy story with us as we do our daily life because we have been influenced by Indigenous Dreaming stories. We are able to carry a story for our selves and allow it to be the story that once did happen, is happening and may happen again. It is not history nor is it prophecy. It is story.

The gift from my mother

It was my mother who explained all this to me when I was a very young child. As a highly imaginative child and an avid reader of fairy stories, I wanted the stories to become true so I could live within the narrative. My mother's explanation was simple. The stories are true for they did happen at least once. Plus, the stories are yet to be true for they are likely to happen again and will probably happen in the future. It is the use of *Once upon a time* that distinguishes the time sequences as being fluid. In doing so, there are endless possibilities of time, including the intersection of past, present and future, and the possibility of repetition.

Thus, fairy stories must be included in the realm of narratives of the imagined future. The imagined future is a space beyond what we know, realize and can guarantee. It is not a space that

Once Upon a Time and narratives of the imagined future

is false for it has not yet happened. No-one can guarantee if it will or will not happen. A fairy story rests in the same pocket of possibility as any planned action, forecast or policy goal.

My mother also told me we cannot wait for the future to happen to us. We must, if we want an imagined future to happen, plan and implement the actions to bring it into being. This is the underlying concept within the term *Once upon a time*. It might happen, could happen and will happen if we set in place the series of events that will bring the future into the present. We know all this is possible because the protagonist in fairy stories sets out to do then does, a logical sequence of events to bring about the desired change of circumstance. If Kirsch (2012) is correct in proposing that fairy stories are really about “primitive wish-fulfillment”, then it can also be proposed that the story itself can be set in the future, when wishes, desires or dreams will be realized.

The gift of imagination

Fairy stories operate within the realm of the Imagination. It is the space in which anything can happen including events that defy currently known laws of nature, and as such it can accommodate a time sequence that is distorted, disrupted and yet-to-be. The imagination gives readers and writers the opportunities to play with and craft ideas and events that have not yet happened. It was the same in the time before the Brothers Grimm, Perrault and Shakespeare began collecting stories they heard and writing up their versions. The stories we are now told may have been wish fulfillments of the original story-tellers who, like us were hoping for a better future for themselves and their families.

Kirsch (2012) refers to the themes of fairy stories as memetic devices. Memes, a term coined by Richard Dawkins, refers to a unit of culture such as a belief, an idea, a taboo, or a

gesture. It is similar to a living organism and can be acquired by others through interactions and shared experiences. It need not be taught explicitly, but can be transferred to a 'new host' through social and cultural exchanges. Memes are not concerned with what is true. Rather, a meme lives because it is successful. Fairy stories are an example of a cultural meme. In their longevity they have proven their success as a narrative because their themes are universal across generations, eras and across cultures. Fairy stories are narratives of our own selves that we imagine can, and will, happen to us. They have a future focus.

The gift of hope

A key aspect of fairy stories is hope. Hope is on-going belief that there is a future. The protagonist (e.g. Hansel, Gretel, Little Red Riding Hood) hopes that their circumstances will provide a fortunate result. As we listen and read the story, we also want this result for the protagonist. We hope the miserable events will be overcome and that all will be well. We are anticipating the future event on their behalf. Every time we come to a re-telling or a re-reading we hope that the presenting circumstance will have changed and, realizing it has not, we are hopeful that it will be resolved in the future. *Once* it happened, and *once* is not singular, nor is it final. *Once* might change. We continue to hope it does.

Hope is the central meme of fairy stories. Brown (2008) explores ideas of the German philosopher Bloch who suggests "Only hope understands and also completes the past, opens the long, common highway" that moves from present circumstance into the future. Hope is not only the goal, it is the motivation. Hope remains at the heart of desiring a future for the fairy story protagonist and for our own self. If this were not so, we would not want to chart our way through adversity. Hope and the planning for a future is the partnership of reasoning,

Once Upon a Time and narratives of the imagined future

developing self-awareness and imagination. Bloch refers to this as the ‘utopian function’ of fairy stories accessed through imaginative processes.

Because hope emerges from the imaginative processes “it has a quality which is forward-directed, a call to action to bring about an ‘objectively real possibility’” (Kirsch: 2012). It is simply future focus. If hope is found in both present and future time patterns in fairy stories, then hope is not bound to a specific time frame from the past, but remains a condition of being that can happen in the future. Fairy stories, though formed from the imaginative process, are the link that instructs hope to move from it-may-be-possible into the world of it-is-possible.

Once, and once again

When the fairy story begins with *Once* we are assured that it did, or will happen. We have been coerced to believe that *Once* is singular. But this is not so. *Once* may be multiple, but, just this once, this one time is more important than other times. We give it importance for a special event did happen once. Or maybe twice, or maybe more than that. *Once* lets us know that if it happened, it can happen again. So a *Once* event, an event that we will remember because it is special, can happen in the future. It no longer is a prescribed event or point in time. *Once* disrupts the taken-for-granted assumption that fairy story is a matter from the past. *Once* has no tense, neither past nor present nor future, and thus what ever phrase is placed with *Once* alerts us immediately that we must imagine the broadest possible context for the story that follows.

Upon

Upon provides the transient, kinetic and random possibilities we know can, and do, happen within the world. Peterson (2007) proposes that *Upon* is an old English term that is still

Once Upon a Time and narratives of the imagined future

used in conjunction with time, and attached “to any time-related term where we would now use *on* or *at*”. This word *Upon* coupled with *Once* implies that what was [and is] to follow was something that happened at some former time. Peterson (2007) cannot assert that the events that follow the phrase did or did not happen at some former time because *Upon* is not dependent on *Once* to specify an actual time or era.

The word, *Upon* signifies a specific point which may be outside, above or beyond the flow of regular or chronological time. Although it sits in a discrete frame, it is supported by other incidents within a time span and is adjacent to another moment of time. *Upon* also tells us an event is waiting to happen. Incubating. Wanting to happen. Waiting to be pushed to happen. *Upon* designates an immanent event. *Upon* tells us that this incident that is about to happen has been ear-marked and set aside to happen just for us. We anticipate the event and know it is just about to happen. It has not yet happened, but will unfold in the soon-to-be future. In the next moment to bring the future into being.

Time out of time

The segment, *a Time* is the pivot of the phrase. It may be this or that time, time away from what we have in the here-and-now. More importantly *a Time* refers to episodes or events that are not measured as we define time. Time is really a descriptive measure we use to reckon and account for the accumulation of our own memories and to mark off the span of our own longevity. Your time and my time may overlap at some stage, but what you configure to be the passage of time is different to how I experience it. Metaphysics will propose that time may be looped into an infinite spiral of never-ending, always intersecting cross-overs. This notion fixes time into a linear quality, like a ribbon that flows inside a space. But, *Once upon a time* offers more than this. Accepting that we have the ability to locate the fairy story events in the past or present or future, we are also able to go beyond and outside this chronology. Time can be disrupted and scattered. Events can overlap and coalesce. The order can change or be repeated.

Once Upon a Time and narratives of the imagined future

Fairy stories take us comfortably away into a time-space that is as chaotic or as ordered as we wish it to be.

More importantly, *a Time* tells us that time in the fairy story has to be measured differently to the time of the here-and-now. It is *a Time* just as 'a story' is different to 'story'. It is the marker and the signifier that cues us to prepare for something outside the ordinary. This being so, time within the fairy story has its own laws. Remember Rip van Winkle? The laws of time in the fairy realm, in imagination and in fairy story are completely different to what we could ever conceive. This is the majesty of *a Time*, for as rulers of how we interpolate ourselves into the story, we can rule and command the flow of events and the passage of time.

The gift of possibility

Once upon a time moves us comfortably and quickly out of the here-and-now. It directs us to what is immanent and into a narrative of our imagined future. We can take charge of the elements of the story, and alter what we need to fit our intended outcome. We manage the outcome by drafting and re-drafting the story in the re-tellings we give to our own selves. We are at liberty to alter what went before, for the purpose of the story is to lift us into another space of possible being. *Once Upon a Time* is the site where the future has broken into the here-and-now, reminding us that so much is possible. The fairy story provides the elementary framework for developing a narrative of the imagined future, because from its opening phrase we are interpolated into an account that can only be imagined outside of time.

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Source Material

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