Hansel and Gretel

Hansel and Gretel is a German fairy tale that was recorded and published by the Grimm brothers in 1812 (Heiner). The original story follows Hansel and Gretel who are the children of very poor parents. In the original version, the parents cannot feed the children anymore so they leave them deep in the forest. The children find themselves hungry and lost in the forest. They come across a house built completely out of cookies and candy. The owner of the house presents herself as a friendly, lonely old woman who loves to cook. She lures the children into her house. She locks Hansel in a cage and feeds him relentlessly in order to fatten him up. She turns Gretel into her personal maid. The witch explains to Gretel that she plans to eat them both, Hansel first, once she has fattened them up. Gretel cleverly questions the size of the oven, saying there is no way a boy will fit in the oven. The old lady climbs into the oven to demonstrate its size, when she has climbed in Gretel slams the door shut and cooks the old witch (Grimm). This story has been adapted to many different short films, in many different countries and languages; turning it into a very universal fairy tale. It has been adapted to several horror films, but it is more commonly a children’s movie. In 1987 Len Talan directed a film of Hansel and Gretel starring some famous American actors such as Cloris Leachman who played the evil witch. The film had been changed and adapted to make it a little more generationally child appropriate and more of a family movie which cause for some major and some minor plot changes.

In the original story recorded by the Grimm brothers, the witch intends to roast and eat the children, so it can be assumed that she has successfully roasted and eaten other children in the past (Grimm). In the 1987 film version the witch turns living things into giant gingerbread cookies instead of roasting them as meat. The pathway to her edible house is lined with giant
gingerbread people who turn out to be trapped children that she has previously turned into 
cookies. In the movie Gretel turns the witch into a giant cookie before throwing her into the oven 
(Talan). Because the original story comes from a time when it was okay to terrify your children 
into to behaving, it was not a bad thing that the old witch eats children in a children’s story. 
However, it is now frowned upon to scare children at such a young age, so the film from 1987 
has been adapted more to fit the changing ideals of society.

Originally, Hansel and Gretel overhear their parents discussing their plans to abandon 
them in the woods, so Hansel fills his pockets with stones that glisten in the moonlight. He uses 
these stones to mark the path they took in the woods so they can find their way back home once 
they have been abandoned. The first time it works and they return home successfully, only to be 
brought to the woods a second time. The second time they are abandoned Hansel has only a 
small piece of bread to mark the trail with crumbs. After Hansel dropped the crumbs they were 
eaten by birds, leaving the children no path to follow (Grimm). In the film Hansel and Gretel’s 
parents never plan to abandon them; they are simply separated in the woods. Their father spends 
weeks searching for them in the forest (Talan). This difference is most likely also due to the fact 
that abandoning your children in the forest is considered child abuse and definitely not a good 
message to send to children.

One of the most interesting differences is seen not only in these two particular examples 
of the story, but it is seen progressively through history as the story evolves. This difference is 
the fact that in the original Grimm’s version the mother is the mother of the children. She is 
called “die Frau” which in German can mean “the wife” “the mother” or “the woman,” but in the 
context of the original story it means she is their mother (Ashliman). After the first 1812 edition, 
the story was updated again by the Grimm brothers in the second 1857 edition. The mother in the
second edition is now identified as the stepmother. She is crueler and less interested in the well-being of the children whereas the father is growing more and more submissive and controlled (Ashliman). It is the mother’s idea in both editions to abandon the children in the forest; the father is reluctant and says “how could I bring myself to abandon my own children in the woods…” (Grimm). However, in the movie the mother is definitely the mother of Hansel and Gretel and she loves them like the ideal mother should. She is not evil, cruel, or selfish in any way (Talan). The character of the evil step-mother is seen repeatedly in many fairy tales that have been passed down through generations. The evil step-mother is often the reason the hero or protagonist begins their journey. There could very well be a correlation between evil step-mothers and the archaic yet somehow still relevant issue of the sanctity of marriage and problems that arise with remarriage. Pressing the issue of divorce and remarriage as a sin has decreased significantly over the years due to the changing ideas of society. Divorce and remarriage is now more common than a couple staying married till death do them part. The evil step-mother could have possibly sent the wrong message to children throughout history; it seems to have scared children into fearing and despising divorce and remarriage, or just remarriage in itself.

Hansel and Gretel is meant to teach children a very adult lesson in as little a horrible way as possible. The lesson is that the world is filled with bad people who prey on the innocent simply because of their innocence. This story is one of the earlier examples of “don’t talk to strangers” and especially don’t take candy from them or go in their house. To children the world is a happy place full of happy people; their problems are little and they are unaware of the pain and ugliness of the world. This story in a way is a wake-up call to children who are almost ready to learn more about the world. It also teaches children that innocent, normal, everyday people
can be dragged into horrible situations with no fault to them, and they can use their knowledge and strength to learn and grow from such a horrible experience.
Works Cited


