

Posthumanism And Anthropomorphism In Fairy Tales

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Abstract:

Folklore has long been a repository of anthropomorphism, a literary term denoting a narrative or interpretation where human characteristics are ascribed to non-human entities such as animals, gods and natural phenomena. This tradition reflects humanity's efforts to make sense of the world through projection of human traits into the non-human. However, in Posthumanism, the anthropocentric worldview inherent in anthropomorphism is challenged, advocating for a decentering of the human in favour of recognizing the agency and interconnectedness of all beings. This paper explores how folk narratives and literary texts embody anthropomorphism through engagement of Posthumanist ideas, revealing the shifting perceptions of the human and the non-human through observation that Posthumanism critiques anthropomorphism as a human-centered imposition on the non-human, questioning the ethical implications of reducing other beings to mere reflections of humanity.

Keywords : posthumanism, anthropomorphism, fairy tales, folklore, decentering.

Introduction:

Posthumanism challenges the view of the world which is predominantly centered around the human, questioning the centrality of the human existence and relevance. It is a response and a subversion of humanism, which traditionally places humans at the apex of natural hierarchy as it seeks to deconstruct this hierarchy by acknowledging the agency, interconnectedness and intrinsic value of all beings. In literature, generally humans are by default, dominant at the center of the narrative owing to the fact that the writer as a form of self-location or identification, seek to portray familiar grounds in the narrative by identifying and portraying humanism generally as he or she sees, or seeks to portray. Rooted in the interplay between philosophy, science and cultural studies, posthumanism challenges anthropocentric perspectives through exploration of entangled relationships between humans, animals, technology and the environment. In folk and fairy tales, various principles of posthumanism are embodied in their narratives because of their repository nature of collecting imagination, cultural values and archetypal storytelling. Emerging from oral traditions, and constantly evolving, these tales frequently transcend human-centric narratives.

A prominent feature of folk and fairy stories of any culture is therefore in the portrayal of magical creatures, anthropomorphic animals, sentient objects, and supernatural forces as these factors blur the distinctions between human and non-human. The transformative qualities of these tales are resplendent with situations where humans became animals, objects gain agency or nature exerts power over characters which reflect a departure from strict anthropocentrism, but align with posthumanist concerns.

Posthumanism : Key Theoretical Contributions:

In the words of Rosi Braidotti, Posthumanism is a navigation tool to rethink humanity's place in a relational universe and to reimagine ethical relations with non-human others (190). This perspective is an overthrow and a critique to the general established belief that human beings are the most significant entities in the universe, whilst instead emphasising the fluidity of boundaries between humans, animals, technology and the environment. Instead, the ideals of human exceptionalism and autonomy are questioned with emphasis on inter-dependence and co-evolution of all forms of life and matter. It also calls to rethink traditional binaries such as human/animal, nature/culture, and self/other. Braidotti offers a comprehensive critique by suggesting that the posthuman condition is marked by the integration of humans with technological and ecological systems by asserting that Posthumanism is an affirmation of life beyond anthropocentric confines, thereby acknowledging a continuum(2). This continuum is vividly illustrated in folklore where natural phenomena, animals and inanimate objects are imbued with life and agency.

Donna Haraway's seminal work, "A Cyborg Manifesto" introduces the concept of the cyborg as a posthuman figure that transcends human-animal-machine boundaries with critique of the essentialism of human identity. While her work primarily addresses technological hybridity, its implications also extend to folklore where hybrid beings like animals or anthropomorphised deities often blur the boundaries between categories.

In *What is Posthumanism?*, Cary Wolfe argues upon how posthumanism is less about rejecting humanism but more about recognizing the entanglement of all forms of life by stating that Posthumanism is not totally traditional post-human but post-anthropocentrism, while decentering the human without lapsing into anti-humanism, thereby devaluing the human (xv).

Folklore and Posthumanism:

In folklore, anthropomorphism often anticipates posthumanist ethics by presenting non-human entities as active participants in the narrative. This is not merely a projection of human traits but a recognition of the agency and personhood of non-human beings which can also be interpreted as an acknowledgement of shared vulnerabilities and independence. As Haraway suggests, Anthropomorphism can be a way of respecting non-human others, not through domination, but through empathy and connection (75). De-centering the human in folklore often de-centers human protagonists and instead focus upon the perspectives of animals or supernatural beings, which is a common trait of folklore as well, owing to the fact that these narratives often challenge human exceptionalism. In the words of Marina Warner, folktales use the anthropomorphic animals as mirror to human behaviour, while also emphasising on relatability and tendency to educate and to instruct.

Themes of Posthumanism and Anthropomorphism in Folk and Fairy Tales:

Many folk and fairy tales feature anthropomorphic characters or hybrid beings, such as Puss in Boots, the Beast in *Beauty and The Beast*, the North Wind, mermaids and even anthropomorphic abstractions. These characters challenge the rigid boundaries of humanity, opening discussions on hybridity, species identity and the ethics of transformation. Secondly, sentient objects like Aladdin's lamp and the dancing shoes in *The Red Shoes* ascribe agency to the non-human as it reflects a posthumanist worldview of living objects which challenge human domination and assertion. Thirdly, magic, often viewed as a precursor to technology in fairy tales facilitates transformations and reconfigures human and non human relationships. For example, the spinning wheel in *Sleeping Beauty* or the enchanted mirror in *Snow White* becomes the tools mediating human experience as they mirror the posthumanist fascination with technological augmentation.

Folk and fairy tales frequently explore transformation, challenging the notion of fixed human identities. From a posthumanist perspective, such metamorphoses are disruptions to the anthropocentric ideal of the stable, sovereign human. The Grimm Brothers' "The Frog Prince" for example, defies rigid binaries between human and non-human. The frog possesses intelligence and moral qualities typically reserved for humans, questioning the supremacy of human form over essence. Villeneuve/Beaumont's "Beauty and the Beast" also embodies the breakdown of human/non-human binaries, as the Beast's animalistic exterior masks human virtues such as kindness and love, and his hybrid identity destabilizes the hierarchy between human and animal, a key posthumanist theme. The tale suggests that humanity can exist beyond physical form, promoting a more inclusive view of personhood.

Another important feature of Posthumanism and Anthropomorphism in fairy tales is the agency of non-human beings. Fairy tales often grant significant roles to animals, plants, and objects, imbuing them with agency and sentience, and accordingly, Posthumanism interprets this as a challenge to human-centric narratives of control and dominance. The Grimm Brothers' collected tale of *The Brave Little Tailor* depicts inanimate objects like a needle and thread which are integral to the success of the plot, and the story reflects posthumanist themes of technological augmentation, where human success depends on non-human collaborators. Similarly, the animals like mice and birds and fairy godmother in *Cinderella* play critical roles in Cinderella's transformation and rise, at the same time de-centering the human protagonist by emphasizing the collaborative nature of success.

Fairy tales often depict hybrids, beings that embody human and non-human traits. These figures question the clear distinctions between species and challenge anthropocentric hierarchies. For example, in *Little red Riding Hood* by Perrault / Grimm Brothers, the wolf represents a liminal figure, straddling the line between predator and human-like cunning. His ability to speak and strategize mirrors human qualities. This hybrid nature questions the boundary between human rationality and animal instinct, emphasizing the interconnectedness of species. Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* is also a hybrid, combining human and aquatic traits. Her transformation into a human highlights the physical and existential costs of crossing species boundaries and in this way, posthumanism interprets the mermaid's identity as a critique of anthropocentrism, questioning the desirability and supremacy of human form.

Many fairy tales highlight the interconnectedness of humans and the natural world, emphasizing coexistence rather than domination. In Hansel and Gretel by the Brothers Grimm, the gingerbread house and the forest serve as both nurturers and threats, embodying the ambivalent relationship between humans and nature. Posthumanism views these settings as actors in the narrative, underscoring the reciprocal relationship between humans and their environment.

The intersection of magic and technology in fairy tales serve often as an early precursor to posthumanist themes, where artificial beings or enchanted objects hold significant power. In "Aladdin and the magic lamp" from *A thousand and one Nights*, the genie, an artificial or supernatural entity, performs tasks beyond human capacity, and the magic lamp functions as a tool that augment human power, interplaying between humans and non-human powers.

Finally, fairy tales often present moral questions through non-human characters, encouraging readers to empathize with other species and entities. In Perrault's *Puss in Boots*, the cat displays intelligence, manipulation and loyalty; traits that challenge human superiority as the tale promotes ethical considerations of animal agency, aligning with posthumanist calls to decenter the human, and similarly in *The Juniper Tree*, the spirit of the murdered child, reincarnated as a bird, seeks justice. This non-human perspective highlights the moral agency of non-human entities accordingly, questioning the exclusivity of human moral reasoning and advocates for a broader posthumanist ethics.

Conclusion:

Fairy tales, with their rich narrative traditions and universal appeal, serve as a profound medium for exploring posthumanist themes. These stories often transcend the limitations of human-centric narratives, presenting a world where the boundaries between human and non-human are fluid, contested, and interdependent. By examining transformation, hybridity, non-human agency, and the interplay between humans and their environments, fairy tales invite us to reimagine the constructs of identity, power, and morality. Through transformative characters like the Beast or the Little Mermaid, fairy tales interrogate the notion of a stable human identity, suggesting that existence is dynamic and relational rather than fixed. Hybridity, exemplified by creatures like mermaids and speaking wolves, undermines rigid binaries between human and non-human, prompting readers to embrace a continuum of being that transcends species or form. These narratives celebrate diversity and coexistence, fostering empathy for otherness, whether it resides in animals, magical entities, or even inanimate objects.

Furthermore, fairy tales illuminate the interconnectedness of humans and the non-human world. The enchanted forests, magical tools, and sentient creatures that populate these stories emphasize the interdependence between humans and their environments. This reflects a posthumanist ethic of coexistence, urging humans to recognize the value and agency of all beings and entities, whether biological, mechanical, or supernatural.

Ultimately, fairy tales challenge the anthropocentric worldview by decentralizing the human figure and promoting a more inclusive perspective on agency and existence. They remind us that humanity does not exist in isolation but as part of a vast, interconnected web of life, matter, and energy. Posthumanist readings of these tales encourage us to embrace a world where boundaries dissolve, where beings coexist in harmony, and where ethical considerations extend beyond the human sphere. In this way, fairy tales continue to be not just stories for entertainment but also vehicles for profound philosophical inquiry, inspiring us to reconsider what it means to be human in a world teeming with other forms of life and intelligence.

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