Is *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* a Modern Day Fairy Tale?

by Cody Reed

Abstract

Are fairy tales still receiving cultural significance in modern-day mediums – such as within the gaming industry? This essay aims to answer that question by analyzing the relationship The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild has with Masculinity and Queer Theory, and how this directly parallels the lesser-known fairy tale of Iron Hans, written by the Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. By analyzing other significant scholars of fairy tale literature, this paper shows that the conversation of modern-day fairy tales can be applied to new mediums and shed new light into areas unexplored.

A young person, asleep for one hundred years. A castle surrounded by dark energy, plagued by a vile pig beast that lurks its halls and elements of dark magic banished away by a mystical sword. Though that may sound like a fairy tale from European literature, it is actually the framework of the popular Nintendo video game *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild.* Link, who has been asleep for one hundred years after suffering a wound during a climactic battle, awakens, and must save the land of Hyrule, as well as the titular Princess Zelda -- who has been battling the evil monster Ganon for the past century in Hyrule Castle. The epic tale that Nintendo and the video game's director Hidemaro Fujibayashi have created is filled with fantastical elements: kingly ghosts, children made of wood who hide like the tricksters they are, and eccentric dungeons with seemingly impossible tasks. The land of Hyrule is presented to players through the eyes of Link, a silent protagonist, who accomplishes the tasks set before him, and the player is given total freedom to explore, fight, and live in this world through Link.

Since *Breath of the Wild* exudes traditional fairy tale-esque motifs and elements, this paper will explore how the game takes on a modern appeal of those magically infused stories. To explore this notion, I will define what makes a fairy tale. It is a story or narrative that is designed around the mundane and normalcy of everyday life which becomes influenced and disturbed by magic or magical qualities; they are classified as ATU 300-749. They are tales that are fantastic and fantasy but solidified in cultural realism, emulating current events and hardships that many cultures were experiencing at the time of their creation. The tales are filled with vile (step)mothers, talking beasts who want to gobble up young women, and tricksters surviving in the woods, but there is always more to the story. By itself, the *Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* is a video game about a young man who must free four divine beasts and defeat the evil monster to rescue the damsel in distress, but when these motifs are explored, the superficiality of the game is subverted and the fairy tale becomes clear.

To prove that Nintendo's *Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* is a modern-day fairy tale, it must be placed into conversation with a fairy tale that shares similar themes to show these parallels. Unlike fairy tales, video games today are not treated like their literary counterparts. The purpose of this paper is to explore the themes and motifs that go unnoticed when compared to the study of

fairy tales; such as in the areas of masculinity and queer identity. By comparing *Breath of the Wild* to the Grimm's masculine fairy tale "Iron Hans" and its underlying queer handlings of the Prince's character, the examined parallels to *Breath of the Wild* support the claim that it is a modern day fairy tale, furthering the conversations of other scholars, such as Jeana Jorgenson and Jennifer Orme.

The main character of the game, Link as well as many supporting characters -- are male, and they are presented to the audience in terms of initial appearance and masculine traits. However, in fairy tale narratives men, specifically supporting characters, are commonly presented to be more in tune with their bestial side, such as the Wild Man in "Iron Hans," the Wolf in the many renditions of *Little Red Riding Hood*, and the Giants of *Jack and the Beanstalk* and these notions are present in *Breath of the Wild*. Note that this bestial side expands beyond the form of actual beasts, but also includes the deformities of characters, making them appear monstrous. Link does not carry this representation, but the supporting characters of his story do, specifically the characters of Sidon, Yonobo, and Teba. Each of these characters represents a different race within the Legend of Zelda canon. Sidon is a Zora, a race within the world of *Breath of the Wild* that is aquatic based, who have fins, can breathe under water, and resemble a shark who can walk and talk on land. Yonobo is a Goron, which is a group that is found deep within the volcano near Hyrule. They present themselves as rock people who have large bodies of stone and strength, and even eat stone, "I offered him some Grade A rock roast to help refine his palette" (Breath of the Wild). Teba, comes from the Rito, a race of beaked and winged citizens who are feathered and feel more at home in the air. These heightened, over-exaggerated representations highlight their masculine qualities, and these qualities serve narrative functions, which is common in the Grimm versions of stories (Jorgenson 343). Jorgenson states that the inclusion of bestial fairy tale male characters is to "conform to an ideal and elude the gaze," and that they are "uphold[ing] a certain vision of masculinity," while performing "obvious narrative functions" (353) while men/bestial men in within Fairy tales "are also expected to be more aggressive" and more "prone to violence" (Jorgenson 343). While Sidon, Yonobo and Tiba do represent these qualities as each one helps Link fight and push through the game, *Breath of the Wild* subverts these expectations of their masculinity by displaying these characters as vulnerable. The monstrosity allows sympathy for the audience, transforming these characters into underdogs (Jorgenson 343). Sidon mourns and shows sadness towards the death of his sister. Yunobo is seen as a coward by many other Gorons but wants to be a hero like his ancestor Daruk and become brave. Teba is a proud warrior for the Rito people but was severely wounded, creating a physical limitation that pushes him to be less prideful and accept outside help (*Breath of the Wild*). These characters vulnerabilities, alongside their bestial characteristics, are done so in order to improve and enhance their relatability toward a more modern audience.

This notion of a differing appearance coincides with the Wild Man character of "Iron Hans" as well as the subverting their notions of masculinity in the story. Iron Hans is described as having a body that was "brown like rusty iron, and his hair hung over his face down to his knees" (Grimm's 3). Iron Hans is painted in a masculine light, which is highlighted by the monstrous qualities that he has been assigned. The chosen adjectives indicate that his body is strong like *iron* and his old age is represented as monstrous *rust*. The notions that Jorgenson defends, such as men being more aggressive and then being rewarded for those actions, the Wild Man in Iron Hans is no different. Within a heteronormative society, masculinity becomes an invisible social construct, and when men act out these aggressive motives (Jorgenson 351), they are seen as normal: such as when the Wild Man kidnaps the Prince and brings him to his isolated forest (Iron Hans 3). In both *Breath of the Wild* and "Iron Hans," the secondary characters and their masculinities are never brought into question by their respective societies and are considered normal; therefore, the focus is "shifted away from

the monstrosity" and is instead keyed to "other aspects of the narrative" (Jorgenson 353). The secondary characters are all presented as these creatures/warriors of masculine nature, in order to push the narrative forward and showcase cultural ideals. At the same time, the main characters of these two stories rise out of the narrative as unique. Since both tales, although separated by temporality and creative mediums, share these motifs, the fairy tale image that *Breath of the Wild* is trying to emulate becomes clearer.

These masculine ideals are observed in the main characters of the two-fairy tales: Link and the Prince, and this is presented by how the characters fit within the hero frame. Jorgensen argues that the main characters in fairy tales are "judged not by their appearance but because of their ability to overcome obstacles" (341). At a surface level, Link, is presented as a strong, silent, masculine character. He can wield swords, fight and overcome giant monsters, and solve complex puzzles: qualities that are commonly found in the heroes of fairy tales. Representing Jorgensen's argument, from Link's introduction and through a journal found in the game, Link has always known his masculine roles as a warrior/protector with a cunning aspect: "one of those ancient machine things went nuts during some test and shot out deadly beams! With true Goron spirit, Link grabbed a pot lid from the ground and deflected the blast. He nailed the thing in its weak spot and saved the day" (*Breath of the Wild*). Link is shown to be courageous and strong, exuding heroic qualities, putting himself at risk in order to overcome obstacles and save the people in danger. When the Prince in "Iron Hans" is examined in that same fashion, then he too radiates these qualities: "Then the youth galloped up with his iron army and attacked the enemies like a storm, beating down all who opposed him" (Grimm 5). Within the story, the youth was clever enough to gather up his own army from the mythical Iron Hans and successfully lead them. The Prince is portrayed as resourceful, able to become a strong leader, and is cunning enough to always catch the golden apple when the princess throws it, showing his own mastery within the male sphere, conquering the obstacles in front of him. The parallels between the two heroes become more apparent and both are firmly planted within their respective culture's ideals for masculinities. Both characters take the initiative in the examples above and answer their calls to action aggressively, in order to defeat their perceived enemies in displays of masculinity.

Continuing the conversation of masculinity of main characters in fairy tales, Jorgenson introduces the idea of wounds that characters suffer in reference to Robert Bly's book *Iron John:* "the young man investigates or experiences his wound -- father wound, mother wound, or shaming wound" (340). These notions of 'wounds' that Jorgensen -- in relation to Bly -- are proposing are contained within *"Iron Hans."* The Prince disobeys his father and speaks to the Wild Man in the cage (the father wound), he steals his mother's key to let the wild man out (the mother wound), and he fails three times from polluting the pool (the shaming wound). In *Breath of the Wild,* Link too suffers from all three wounds. Daruk, who exemplifies male qualities -- giant muscles, tough exterior shell, and physical displays of power -- is a father figure to Link, and Links failure leads to Daruk's death (father wound). Baribosa -- a Gerudo woman who is the queen of her people -- helps Link find a purpose and presented herself as a motherly figure, also died due to the same failure (mother wound). Link was placed into stasis after receiving a literal wound and must sleep for a century due to his own inaction, resulting in the wound of shame. Both characters, Link and the Prince, are not able to fulfill their roles respective to their masculine identities until they overcome their wounds; however, once they do, their stories are able to achieve a sense of completion. The Prince returns back to the Kingdom, claiming a throne and marrying his Princess, while Link finally defeats the evil Ganon, saves his princess, and brings peace back to Hyrule. The wound parallel structure adds to

the framework of the underlying fairy tale that *Breath of the Wild* is emulating, and it is only exemplified through the main characters uniqueness.

Within the framework of masculine characters, as well as within their stories, Link and the Prince's handling subverts their own analysis by being unique within their apparent heteronormative fairy tales, specifically the notions of their own masculinity must be examined within the intersectionality of queerness that is prevalent in fairy tales: especially those focused on male characters. Lewis Seifert, in his article "Introduction: Queer(ing) Fairy Tales" states that "queering necessarily involves reading against the grain so as to pick up signs and meanings neglected or obscured by heteronormative interpretations" (16). The concept of queer identity in fairy tales is as complex as the reality of identifying sexual identity because fairy tales involve the fluid orientation of the character's role in and rebellion against heteronormative society. The queerness that is presented in fairy tales allows for a deviation from normative behavior (Attebery 333), allowing the character in question to displace themselves from the perceived society and re-assert themselves into a different aspect that suits their current needs.

In both stories, the Prince and Link display their fluidity and become accepted within different cultures because they are not bound by the apparent social binaries. Throughout "Iron Hans" the Prince is able to leave the current castle, where he is not only employed, but a part of their culture. He returns to the forest with the Wild Man, and he gains a new horse and a magical army (6). This notion of him leaving his own community and assimilate to an entirely different one, and vice versa, equates him with moving between different orientations. In turn, this allows the prince to take a step back from the heteronormative society that he finds himself in, as he strays outside of those limiting binaries. With this in mind, the character development that the Prince experiences is not the linear growth that many fairy tale protagonists seem to possess, but rather a sideways growth through his multiple societies (Seifert 18). This notion of shifting through a group of societies is prevalent in *Breath of the Wild.* During a sequence of events*,* Link must gain access to an all-female city, in order to complete his task. As he is clearly identified by the guards to be a man -- a 'voe' as they call him in the game -- he is not allowed access inside the city, barring him from completing his task. However, as an answer to this, Link reveals his own fluidity and actively seeks out a transgendered woman to borrow her clothes. Crossdressing allows Link to gain access into the city and complete his own personal goals. Link takes a step back from the heteronormative society of Hyrule to immerse himself in the matriarchal society of the Gerudo women. This inclusivity is a defining feature of Link and his capability to grow sideways as a character instead of on a linear masculine plane. This non defining growth of movement between the two characters only grounds the two tales and intertwines their narrativity.

Queerness in fairy tales is in and of itself a counterculture of ideas toward the hegemonic straight societies that fairy tales are placed around. In her piece "A Wolfs Queer Invitation: David Kaplan's Little Red Riding Hood and Queer Possibility," Orme argues that queerness withing fairy tales can be "difficult and problematic, [for] queer theory resists stable definition or easily repeatable reading practice" (87). Although Orme analyzing Little Red Riding Hood's variation, her arguments can still be applied to "Iron Hans" and *Breath of the Wild.* While breaking down the gender roles of the Wolf and Red-Riding Hood, Orme highlights that certain identifiers for those gender roles represent "nonnormative gender and sexual position and thus also [makes them] potentially queer" (91). This notion is also shown in both "Iron Hans" and *Breath of the Wild,* as both main characters do specific actions and wear specific accessories that depict them as moving against the standard heteronormativity of their cultures. In "Iron Hans," the Prince wears a cap "[b]ecause he did not want them to see his golden hair" (4). In relation to Jorgenson, the Prince may consider this a

monstrosity against his natural self, and by hiding what he considers a disfigurement, the Prince demonstrates his queerness (343). For example, the King scolds the Prince by stating: "when you approach the royal table, you must take your hat off," but the Prince replies, "I have an ugly scab on my head" ("Iron Hans" 4). Orme suggests that this act could be surmised as moving against the ideas of his adopted castle culture. The nonnormative difficulty this presents could support the concept of queer theory toward the Prince. In relation, Link's own queerness is not so hard to define. Even after he no longer needs women's clothing, he still wears jewelry, and these certain accessories usually provide him with an advantage in his skills and abilities. For instance, a circlet around his head gives him an increased defense against lightning based attacks, or even an increase in strength (*Breath of the Wild*). Link only moves outside of the heteronormative Hyrule after queering himself and gaining access to a matriarchal society. Because his jewelry provides advantages and makes him more powerful as a character, he potentially de-genders constructs created by Hyrule.

An important aspect that needs to be taken into account when defining masculinity as well as queer theory is the notion of masculine spaces that fairy tales present. In both "Iron Hans" and *Breath of the Wild,* the heroes find themselves in spaces isolated from the rest of the world. Link awakens to find himself on the Great Plateau and is not allowed to leave until he has completed the trials. In "Iron Hans" the Prince is taken to the dark woods and the Wild Man states, "you will never again see your father and mother, but I will keep you with me" (2). The Prince must complete three tasks before he can leave the woods. This may seem like a banishment, but the Wild Man makes it clear: "I mean well by you, I will grant you one thing: If you are ever in need, go into the woods and cry out, 'Iron Hans,' and then I will come help you" (4). The notions behind the dark woods and the Great Plateau are that the two heroes of the story learn what masculinity means, away from civilization, and this isolation is what allows the two heroes to break through these stereotypical gendered norms of their beginning cultures.

In isolation, the characters gain "new ways of seeing their world and their relation to it" (Seifert 19), thus escaping from, and reintegrating into, the societies around them. Both heroes are allowed to move beyond their perceived social structures of heteronormativity and gain their structural fluidity or queerness. When moving about freely, the characters become far more accepted throughout their stories' cultures. Anytime Link enters a new town, despite being of a different race, class or sex, he is always accepted, welcomed and celebrated as a hero. The Prince does much of the same, he comes and goes into the forest as he pleases, as well as join different communities without questioning, "but they took a liking to him, and told him to stay" (Grimm's 4). He is rewarded as a hero for his actions. Despite that, the Prince does follow the heteronormative trope of marrying a princess, this can be equated to him finding his role in society and his parents' return only solidifies his reintegration. Link and Princess Zelda do not marry, but the game ends with them continuing their journey. The beauty of fairy tales, and specifically *Breath of the Wild* and "Iron Hans," is that their stories are always continuous.

The fairy tale influences *Breath of the Wild* draw upon are vast in order to tell its narrative, thus solidifying it as a modern-day fairy tale. When reading these narratives against the grain of literary and sociological research, the ATU 300-747 connections that the game exhibits movements beyond the overt imagery: saving a person in distress, the castle sieged under a powerful curse, and a character asleep for one hundred years. By only examining two aspects of the fairy tales and comparing it to the similar tale of "Iron Hans," as well as examining modern narratives in relation to old fairy tales, an appreciation for the vast array of media allows for the study of new interpretations, such as with the modern concepts of masculinity and queer theory. The stories and the video game medium provide future generations with new adaptations of fairy tales that can reach a wider

audience. *Breath of the Wild* still possesses many areas of exploration, such as its relations to the Freudian perspective in regard to its characters' wounds, historical context in the emulation of a medieval European fantasy, or feminist theory of how the female characters are handled in the game. By examining *Breath of the Wild* as a fairy tale, the new medium reveals that fairy tales are still as timeless as ever and can bend interpretations, to breathe life into old narratives.

Works Cited

Bly, Robert. *Iron John.* New York: Vintage Books, 1992. Print.

Brian Attebery. "Reinventing Masculinity in Fairy Tales by Men." *Marvels & Tales*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2018, pp. 314-337. *CrossRef*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13110/marvelstales .32.2.0314, doi:10.13110/marvelstales.32.2.0314.

Jorgensen, Jeana . "Masculinity and Men's Bodies in Fairy Tales: Youth, Violence, and Transformation." *Marvels & Tales*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2018, pp. 338-361. *CrossRef*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13110/marvelstales.32.2.0338, doi:10.13110/marvelstales.32.2.0338.

Nintendo. *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild.* 2017. Switch.

Grimm, Jacob., Wilhelm. "Der Eisenhans,*" Kinder- und Hausmärchen.* 1857. Vol 2. Translated by D. L. Ashliman, 2001. University of Pittsburgh. https://www.pitt.edu/~dash/grimm136.html.

Orme, Jennifer . "A Wolf's Queer Invitation: David Kaplan's Little Red Riding Hood and Queer Possibility." *Marvels & Tales*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2015, pp. 87-109. *CrossRef*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13110/marvelstales.29.1.0087, doi:10.13110/marvelstales.29.1.0087.

Seifert, Lewis C. . "Introduction: Queer(Ing) Fairy Tales." *Marvels & Tales*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2015, pp. 15-20. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13110/marvelstales.29.1.0015, doi:10.13110/marvelstales.29.1.0015.