

Class Struggle, Labour and the Restoration of Social Order in Selected Grimm Fairy Tales: A Marxist Reading

Kapitiarachchige L.W.

Center for Communication Skills Development, Sri Lanka Technology Campus, Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of class struggle, labour, exploitation and social mobility in six fairy tales collected and edited by the Brothers Grimm: “The Jew in the Thorn Bush,” “The Blue Light,” “Rumpelstiltskin,” “Hansel and Gretel,” “Mother Holle” and “The Goose Girl.” Using qualitative textual analysis and concepts drawn mainly from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’s *The Communist Manifesto*, the study considers how poverty, unpaid or undervalued labour, female commodification, family relationships and resistance are presented in the tales. The analysis does not claim that the Grimms deliberately wrote Marxist theory into stories published before *The Communist Manifesto*. Instead, Marxism is used as a later interpretive framework for examining social and economic relationships within the narratives. The findings show that the tales frequently expose unequal relations between servants and masters, rulers and subjects, adults and children, and wealthy and poverty-driven characters. Magic often provides temporary relief or makes otherwise impossible social movement possible. However, resistance does not necessarily produce collective or lasting change. In several tales, the oppressed characters gain wealth or status individually, while the social hierarchy remains in place. “Mother Holle” rewards industrious labour and punishes refusal to work, while “The Goose Girl” ends by violently restoring aristocratic order. The analysis of “The Jew in the Thorn Bush” further shows that class interpretation cannot be separated from the tale’s antisemitic representation. Overall, the selected tales reveal social conflict while also containing or redirecting it through magic, marriage, individual enrichment, and the restoration of established authority in the narratives.

Keywords: Brothers Grimm; Marxist criticism; class struggle; labour; fairy tales

INTRODUCTION

Fairy tales are often associated with magic, imaginary beings and happy endings. Modern adaptations have strengthened the idea that fairy tales are mainly stories for children. However, the early versions of many tales collected by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm contain poverty, starvation, violence, unequal marriages, unpaid labour and severe punishment. These darker elements make the tales suitable for social and political interpretation as well as for studies of folklore and children’s literature.

The Brothers Grimm published the first volume of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* in 1812 and a second volume in 1815. They continued to revise the collection in later editions. The tales were not simply invented by the brothers; they were collected from oral and written sources and shaped through selection and editing. Bottigheimer (1989) notes that folk and fairy-tale texts pass through editorial filters, while Zipes (2002) connects the Grimms’ work with their social, political and personal circumstances. Therefore, the tales may reflect several historical layers rather than a single authorial intention.

The financial hardship experienced by the Grimm family has sometimes been used to explain the presence of poverty and class conflict in the collection. After their father’s death, the family’s economic position changed considerably. Nevertheless, biographical experience alone does not prove that the brothers intentionally designed the tales as arguments against capitalism. The present study therefore avoids treating the tales as direct expressions of Marxist thought. It examines what becomes visible when selected tales are read through a Marxist critical framework.

Marxist criticism is concerned with the relationship between economic power, labour and social organisation. Marx and Engels (1969) describe history in terms of class struggle and focus on the unequal relationship between those who control the means of production and those who must sell their labour. Tyson (2015) explains that Marxist literary criticism examines how texts represent class relations, material conditions and ideology. These ideas offer a useful framework for studying the relationships between kings and servants, employers and workers, adults and children, and wealthy and poor characters in the Grimms' tales.

The six tales selected for this study are "The Jew in the Thorn Bush," "The Blue Light," "Rumpelstiltskin," "Hansel and Gretel," "Mother Holle" and "The Goose Girl." They contain different forms of economic and social conflict, including unpaid work, dismissal from service, hunger, the use of women and children as instruments of labour, and attempts to move from a lower position to a higher one. They also present different endings. Some characters are rewarded with wealth or marriage, while others are punished for challenging the established order.

The study asks: How do the selected Grimm tales represent labour, exploitation, social mobility and resistance, and to what extent do their endings challenge or restore class hierarchy? Its purpose is not only to identify rich and poor characters. It also considers the contradictions within the tales. A story may expose exploitation while still rewarding obedience, converting collective hardship into individual success or restoring the very hierarchy that has been challenged.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Fairy tales have been studied from feminist, psychoanalytic, structuralist, historical and Marxist perspectives. Tatar (2003) draws attention to the violence, family conflict and difficult material conditions that are often hidden by the popular image of the fairy tale. Zipes (2002) also challenges the romantic image of the Brothers Grimm and places their collection within a wider social and political history. These studies support the view that the tales are not merely bedtime stories, but neither study requires the assumption that every social meaning was intentionally placed in the stories by the Grimms.

Bottigheimer (1989) emphasises that a fairy-tale text is shaped by transmission and editing. This is important because the same tale may appear in different forms across editions and adaptations. The present study uses the English translation of the complete first edition edited and translated by Jack Zipes (J. Grimm & W. Grimm, 2014). This edition includes tales from the 1812 and 1815 volumes and allows the analysis to remain consistent across the six selected texts.

Previous research has demonstrated the usefulness of class-based readings. Panttaja (1993), in her analysis of "Cinderella," argues that the difference among the female characters is also a class difference and that marriage is connected with social advancement. Her discussion is particularly relevant to "The Goose Girl," where a servant attempts to take the position of a princess but is finally removed from it. Golden and Canan (2004) use Marxist criticism as one of several theoretical approaches to "Snow White," connecting the dwarfs with labour and lower socio-economic classes. Their work shows how characters and their activities may represent positions within a social order.

Cicalese (2015) applies Marxist concepts to three less frequently discussed Grimm tales and argues that class, labour and commodity relations are present within them. As an undergraduate capstone study, it is useful as an example of a similar critical direction, although its claims about deliberate Marxist intention require caution. The present article develops a more limited claim: themes later described by Marxist theory can be used to interpret the economic relationships in the tales, but this does not mean that the Grimms consciously anticipated Marx and Engels.

Ollman (1968) explains that Marx uses class in relation to several connected social and economic relationships. Therefore, identifying a king as bourgeois and a servant as proletarian is not enough by itself. The analysis must consider control of labour, property, exchange, dependence and the possibility of changing one's position. This distinction is important because kings, princesses, witches, peasants and servants belong to a pre-industrial narrative world that cannot be transferred mechanically into the categories of industrial capitalism.

The present study focuses on four connected categories: labour and its reward; the treatment of people as instruments or commodities; poverty and material deprivation; and resistance or social movement. A fifth concern emerged from the endings of the tales: whether resistance changes the social order or is redirected into individual wealth, marriage, punishment or restored authority. This focus provides a more precise contribution than the simple argument that class conflict is present in fairy tales.

One selected tale requires an additional critical consideration. “The Jew in the Thorn Bush” uses an antisemitic stereotype and presents violence against a Jewish character as deserved punishment. Grey and Paige (2016) identify the tale as antisemitic in their discussion of its later cultural use. Accordingly, the character cannot be treated merely as a neutral representative of an upper economic class. Any class-based interpretation must examine how the narrative transfers guilt from a Christian employer who withholds wages to a Jewish figure who is humiliated and executed.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses qualitative textual analysis. The primary text is *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition*, translated and edited by Jack Zipes (J. Grimm & W. Grimm, 2014). The six tales were selected because each contains a visible relationship between material need and social power. The characters work for masters, depend on rulers, experience hunger, exchange labour for payment, or attempt to change their social position.

The analysis was completed in three stages. First, each tale was read closely to identify references to work, wages, property, hunger, wealth, marriage and service. Second, the relationships among characters were examined through the concepts of class conflict, labour exploitation and commodification found in *The Communist Manifesto* (Marx & Engels, 1969). Third, the endings were compared to determine whether resistance changed the wider social structure or produced only individual reward, punishment or restoration.

This approach is interpretive rather than empirical in the statistical sense. It does not attempt to demonstrate that the Grimms intended to communicate Marxist theory. The Manifesto was published in 1848, after the first volumes of the tales appeared. Marxist concepts are therefore used retrospectively as analytical tools. The study is also limited to one English translation and six tales, so its conclusions should not be generalised to the entire Grimm collection.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Labour, Scapegoating and “The Jew in the Thorn Bush”

At the beginning of “The Jew in the Thorn Bush,” the exploitation of labour is clear. A faithful servant works for three years without receiving wages. When he finally asks for payment, his master gives him only three pennies (J. Grimm & W. Grimm, 2014, pp. 360–361). The servant believes that the amount is generous because he does not understand the value of money. This incident reflects an unequal relationship in which the employer controls both payment and knowledge, while the worker remains dependent.

Marx and Engels (1969) describe wage labour as a relationship in which workers must sell their labour in order to live. The servant’s experience can be read in this light because his work is retained for several years while his payment is withheld. The beginning of the tale therefore contains one of the clearest examples of exploitation in the selected group. It also shows that exploitation is maintained not only by force but by the worker’s lack of awareness about the value of his service.

After leaving his master, the servant meets a poor little man and gives away his three pennies. Because of this generosity, he receives three magical wishes. Magic provides what ordinary social relations have denied him: power, protection and the ability to make others obey him. The poor servant is unable to obtain justice through employment, but the magical fiddle and the other gifts allow him to reverse his powerlessness.

The later part of the story, however, cannot be read simply as a worker's revolution against a wealthy oppressor. The servant forces a Jewish man to dance in the thorns, takes his money, and finally causes him to be executed. The tale describes the Jewish character through stereotypes of greed and deception. The dissertation's original interpretation categorised him as a member of the upper class, but the text does not establish that he owns labour or controls production. His narrative function is also racial and religious, not merely economic.

This changes the meaning of the apparent revolt. The servant does not return to the master who withheld his wages, nor does he change the conditions under which workers are exploited. Instead, the violence is redirected towards a stereotyped outsider. The Christian employer disappears from the story, while the Jewish character becomes the final criminal. The tale may begin with a legitimate complaint about unpaid labour, but it resolves the complaint through scapegoating rather than structural justice.

This section therefore supports a more cautious conclusion. "The Jew in the Thorn Bush" reveals the vulnerability of an unpaid servant, but its ending should not be celebrated as the victory of the proletariat. It combines class resentment with antisemitic representation. Retaining the historical title is necessary for accurate identification of the tale, but its prejudicial language and punishment must be examined rather than repeated as fact.

Dismissal and Revenge in "The Blue Light"

"The Blue Light" begins with a soldier who has served a king for many years. When the soldier becomes old and can no longer provide the same service, the king dismisses him without payment: "When the soldier became very old, the king sent him away without giving him anything for his service" (J. Grimm & W. Grimm, 2014, p. 383). His value is measured by his ability to continue working. Once his labour is no longer useful, his years of service are ignored.

The situation resembles Marx and Engels's (1969) description of workers who can live only while they find work and whose labour contributes to capital. The soldier's age makes him economically useless to the ruler. His dismissal therefore shows how a person may be treated as an instrument of labour rather than as someone to whom the employer has an obligation.

The soldier later gains power through the magical blue light and the little man who appears when he smokes his pipe. He orders the king's daughter to serve him and eventually defeats those who attempt to execute him. This reversal can be understood as revenge against royal power. The servant who was dismissed now gives orders, while the king and his household become vulnerable.

Nevertheless, the ending does not create equality or collective freedom. The soldier uses coercion and violence, and his victory places him in a powerful position similar to the one previously held by the king. His treatment of the princess also demonstrates that the reversal of class power can reproduce gendered domination. The tale expresses anger against an unjust ruler, but it imagines justice as the transfer of power to one individual rather than a transformation of the system.

"The Blue Light" therefore presents a direct conflict between service and authority. It shows the insecurity of workers whose survival depends upon the favour of a ruler. At the same time, the magical resolution prevents the conflict from becoming a realistic collective struggle. Magic gives the soldier the power that economic and legal institutions have denied him.

Female Labour and Exchange in "Rumpelstiltskin"

"Rumpelstiltskin" begins with a poor miller and his daughter. The miller tells the king that his daughter can spin straw into gold. By making this claim, he turns her into a means of improving his own position. Her beauty and supposed productive ability become the only valuable possessions he can offer to the ruler. The daughter is then confined and threatened with death if she cannot complete an impossible task (J. Grimm & W. Grimm, 2014, p. 181).

Marx and Engels (1969) discuss the transformation of family members into instruments of production and articles of commerce. The relationship among the miller, his daughter and the king can be read through this idea. The father uses his daughter to approach the king, and the king values her because she appears capable of producing gold. Her opinion is not requested at any stage. She is placed within an exchange controlled by men with different levels of power.

The king's greed becomes clearer after the first room of straw is changed into gold. Instead of releasing the girl, he moves her to a larger room and demands even more. The impossible labour is repeated because successful production increases the ruler's desire for wealth. The worker's success does not provide security; it increases the demand placed upon her.

Rumpelstiltskin's assistance also depends on exchange. He first receives the girl's possessions and later demands her first child. Magic does not remove the commodity relationship. It makes the required production possible, but every act of assistance has a price. The girl moves from dependence on her father and the king to dependence on the magical figure who controls the means of producing gold.

Marriage appears to offer upward social mobility. The king promises to marry the girl if she completes the final task, and she moves from the position of a poor miller's daughter to that of a queen. However, this is not a free decision or collective change. Her new status depends on her value to the king and on the production of gold. Marriage removes her from poverty without changing the conditions that allowed the king to threaten and exploit her.

The tale therefore presents both class and gender inequality. The king represents concentrated wealth and authority, the miller attempts to improve his position by using his daughter, and the daughter's labour is controlled by others. Her eventual rise demonstrates individual mobility, but it does not challenge the power of the monarchy. The social ladder remains in place; one character is simply permitted to move upwards through marriage and magical production.

Poverty and Individual Enrichment in "Hansel and Gretel"

"Hansel and Gretel" begins with severe poverty. A woodcutter cannot provide enough food for his wife and two children, and the adults decide to abandon the children in the forest (J. Grimm & W. Grimm, 2014, p. 45). Hunger damages the family relationship and turns the children into an economic burden. Material deprivation, rather than the absence of affection alone, produces the crisis.

The children are too young to provide useful labour and consume food that the household cannot supply. From a Marxist perspective, their abandonment can be connected with a social order that measures people according to their economic usefulness. The story shows the indirect violence of poverty: no ruler directly orders the parents to abandon their children, yet economic hardship makes the decision appear necessary for survival.

The contrast between the children's home and the witch's house is important. Hansel and Gretel experience hunger, while the house in the forest is made of bread, cake and sugar (J. Grimm & W. Grimm, 2014, p. 47). The abundance attracts them because it appears to answer their immediate material need. However, the food is also a trap. The witch feeds Hansel in order to consume him and forces Gretel to work. Their bodies and labour become resources under her control.

Gretel's decision to push the witch into the oven reverses this relationship. The children resist the person who intends to use and destroy them. In the original dissertation, this act was described as a proletarian revolution. It is more accurate to call it an individual act of survival. Hansel and Gretel cooperate against their oppressor, but they do not organise a wider class or change the conditions that produced their poverty.

After the witch's death, the children take jewels and pearls from the house and return to their father. The family becomes rich (J. Grimm & W. Grimm, 2014, p. 49). Poverty is therefore solved through the acquisition of private wealth. The social system remains unchanged, and the children escape the lower economic position by possessing the witch's treasure. The ending offers personal release rather than a collective solution.

“Hansel and Gretel” clearly reveals the destructive effect of hunger and the struggle of vulnerable children. It also shows how fairy-tale magic and treasure can fulfil the desires of people who have no realistic path out of poverty. The tale criticises material deprivation, but its happy ending depends upon individual enrichment.

Work, Reward and Discipline in “Mother Holle”

“Mother Holle” contrasts an industrious girl with a lazy girl. The hard-working daughter is required to spin until her fingers bleed, while her mother favours the other daughter (J. Grimm & W. Grimm, 2014, p. 81). The first girl’s value in the household is closely connected with the amount of work she performs. When she loses the spindle, she is ordered to recover it even though the task places her in danger.

After entering Mother Holle’s world, the girl agrees to perform household work. Unlike several masters in the other tales, Mother Holle rewards her service. When the girl returns home, she is covered with gold. Her mother welcomes her warmly because of the wealth she brings back. This response again shows how material value shapes family relationships.

The second daughter attempts to obtain the same reward but refuses to work consistently. She is covered with pitch, which remains on her for life (J. Grimm & W. Grimm, 2014, p. 83). At first sight, the tale appears to support fairness because good work is rewarded and laziness is punished. However, a Marxist reading can ask what kind of social behaviour the story encourages. The preferred character accepts service, completes every task and receives wealth from the person who controls the reward.

Unlike the servants in “The Jew in the Thorn Bush” and “The Blue Light,” the industrious girl does not rebel against work. Her success depends on obedience and productivity. The tale therefore contains a work ethic that disciplines the lower-status character. It does not condemn all relationships between masters and servants; it distinguishes between an unfair household and a supposedly fair employer.

The original dissertation correctly identified the importance of labour and reward in this tale. The stronger conclusion is not that “Mother Holle” presents a revolution against capitalism. Instead, it presents a moral economy in which hard work should receive payment. This still exposes the unfairness of the girl’s first home, but the resolution accepts labour hierarchy when the master rewards the worker.

Class Transgression and Punishment in “The Goose Girl”

“The Goose Girl” begins with a royal marriage arranged between a princess and a prince from another kingdom. The princess travels with a valuable dowry, royal clothing, a speaking horse and a chambermaid. These details establish the difference between the princess and the servant before the conflict begins. The marriage also protects the position and relationships of royal families.

During the journey, the chambermaid refuses to fetch water for the princess: “I don’t like being your servant” (J. Grimm & W. Grimm, 2014, p. 284). She later forces the princess to exchange clothing and positions. This is the most direct act of class rebellion among the six tales. The servant rejects obedience, takes the visible signs of royal status and attempts to marry the prince.

The exchange of clothing shows that social identity is partly maintained by appearance and recognition. Once the princess loses her royal dress and magical protection, others accept the chambermaid as the bride. The true princess is assigned the low-status work of tending geese. The servant’s success demonstrates that hierarchy is not entirely natural; it depends on symbols, testimony and institutional recognition.

However, the chambermaid’s action does not create equality. She does not reject the hierarchy itself; she wants to occupy the princess’s place within it. She also makes the former princess serve under her and arranges the death of the speaking horse that could reveal the truth. Her rebellion becomes an individual attempt at upward mobility rather than an effort to end unequal service.

The king eventually discovers the exchange. The chambermaid is asked to select a punishment for a woman who has deceived her master, and she unknowingly describes her own violent death. She is then executed in the manner she proposed (J. Grimm & W. Grimm, 2014, p. 289). The true princess regains her clothing, position and marriage. Aristocratic order is completely restored.

Panttaja's (1993) discussion of class in "Cinderella" is useful here because both tales link virtue with an apparently rightful social position. In "The Goose Girl," the princess's beauty and good behaviour are treated as signs of her true identity, while the lower-class woman is associated with deception and cruelty. The possibility that a servant might enter royalty is presented as disorder and punished severely.

The tale therefore contains a clear class conflict but offers a conservative resolution. It reveals resentment within service and shows that rank can be performed through clothing. Nevertheless, it finally protects hereditary status and warns against crossing class boundaries. The servant's revolt fails, and the existing order becomes stronger through her punishment.

Patterns Across the Six Tales

Across the selected tales, poverty and labour create several forms of conflict. Servants are unpaid or dismissed, children are abandoned because of hunger, and women are valued according to their ability to work, produce wealth or secure marriage. These themes support the original dissertation's argument that fairy tales contain a deeper social reality. The stories are not separated from material life merely because they contain magic.

At the same time, the analysis shows that rich and poor characters cannot always be placed neatly into the categories of bourgeoisie and proletariat. Kings and employers possess authority, but witches, magical helpers, parents, children and servants occupy more complicated positions. A character may be oppressed in one relationship and exercise power in another. The soldier in "The Blue Light," for example, is exploited by the king but later dominates the princess. The chambermaid in "The Goose Girl" resists service but reproduces the same hierarchy after taking the princess's place.

Magic is one of the most important patterns. It helps characters accomplish what cannot be achieved through ordinary economic relations. The servant gains power through a magical fiddle, the soldier through the blue light, the miller's daughter through Rumpelstiltskin, and Hansel and Gretel through the extraordinary house and treasure. Magic can therefore be understood as a form of wish fulfilment for characters whose realistic opportunities are limited.

However, magical success usually remains individual. It does not reorganise society. The miller's daughter becomes queen, Hansel and Gretel become rich, and the soldier gains power. These endings allow selected characters to escape poverty while leaving the hierarchy intact. Social mobility replaces social transformation.

The tales also differ in their treatment of work. "The Jew in the Thorn Bush" and "The Blue Light" condemn masters who fail to reward long service. "Mother Holle," in contrast, presents a master who rewards the obedient worker and punishes the person who refuses labour. Together, these tales do not reject work relationships themselves. They appear to demand proper reward while maintaining the moral importance of industriousness.

Resistance is similarly uncertain. Hansel and Gretel survive by killing the witch, but their final success is measured through wealth. The chambermaid challenges aristocratic power, but she is brutally punished and the princess is restored. The servant in "The Jew in the Thorn Bush" escapes execution, but the tale redirects his grievance towards an antisemitic target rather than the employer who withheld his wages. The endings contain conflict rather than resolving its wider social causes.

For this reason, the selected tales should not be described simply as revolutionary. They expose exploitation, hunger, unequal exchange and the desire to move beyond a restricted social position. Yet they also reward obedience, individual enrichment, marriage and restored authority. Their class meaning lies in this contradiction between revealing hardship and containing the challenge it creates.

CONCLUSION

This study examined six Grimm fairy tales through a Marxist framework in order to identify representations of labour, exploitation, social mobility and resistance. The analysis confirms the main insight of the original dissertation: fairy tales contain social and economic conflict beneath their magical narratives. Unpaid service, dismissal, starvation, female commodification, family pressure and unequal access to wealth appear repeatedly in the selected texts.

The revised analysis also qualifies the original argument. The presence of class conflict does not prove that the Brothers Grimm consciously wrote Marxist ideas into the tales. Because the stories were collected and edited from earlier traditions and the first volumes preceded *The Communist Manifesto*, Marxism is better used as a later critical lens. This approach allows the economic relationships in the tales to be studied without making an unsupported claim about authorial intention.

The findings show that magic often helps poor or powerless characters overcome immediate difficulties. Nevertheless, the endings rarely change the wider social system. Characters escape poverty through treasure, marriage or personal power. “Mother Holle” rewards industrious service, and “The Goose Girl” violently restores aristocratic hierarchy. Even apparent rebellion may reproduce domination rather than remove it.

The analysis of “The Jew in the Thorn Bush” demonstrates a further limitation of a simple class interpretation. The tale’s antisemitic representation cannot be reduced to a conflict between a worker and a wealthy person. The servant’s legitimate grievance against an employer is redirected towards a stereotyped Jewish outsider. A responsible reading must recognise this prejudice rather than treating the punishment as straightforward class justice.

Overall, the tales both expose and contain social conflict. They show the difficult material conditions experienced by servants, women, children and poor families, but they often resolve these difficulties through individual movement within the hierarchy. This tension between criticism and restoration is the central contribution of the study. Future research could compare different editions and translations or examine how modern adaptations remove, soften or reinterpret these class relationships.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was not required because this study is based entirely on published literary texts and does not involve human participants or animals.

Data Availability

No new dataset was generated for this study. The analysis is based on published literary texts identified in the reference list.

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