

## Hansel and Gretel from Kneehigh Theatre written by Carl Grose

### Back Ground

1. The actual fairy tale Hansel and Gretel was written by Brothers Grimm in 1812, though they did not originate all the ideas. **Task 1: Read the plot summary below.**

### **Plot summary**

The story is set in medieval Germany. Hansel and Gretel are the children of a poor woodcutter. When a famine settles over the land, the woodcutter's wife (stepmother to Hansel and Gretel) decides to take the children into the woods and leave them there to fend for themselves so she and her husband will not starve to death. The woodcutter opposes the plan but finally reluctantly submits to his wife's scheme, unaware that Hansel and Gretel have overheard them. After the parents have gone to bed, Hansel sneaks out of the house and gathers as many white pebbles as he can, then returns to his room, reassuring Gretel that God will not forsake them.

The next day, the family walks deep into the woods and Hansel lays a trail of white pebbles. Their father lights a fire for them in the woods, and goes to gather more wood. After a while, the kids realize the father isn't coming back. Gretel cries, but Hansel tells her all will be fine. After nightfall, they follow his shiny pebbles back to the house, arriving by morning. Their father is overjoyed, and takes them back in as he was very upset about leaving them in the first place.

After a while, famine strikes again, and the stepmother insists that they take the kids back to the forest to leave them. This time, she locks the door to their room so Hansel is unable to gather pebbles. Clever Hansel crumbles up the small piece of bread he is given by his parents, and sprinkles crumbs along their path. Unfortunately, birds eat the crumbs, and they can't find their way home. After searching for a very long time, they come upon a house in the woods made of breads, cakes, and sugar.

They eat from the house, as they're very hungry. While they are eating, a witch comes out and invites them inside, offering them a meal, and pretending to be a kind and friendly old woman. After feeding them, she traps them in her house and makes them do chores each day, feeding them well in order to fatten them up for eating.

One day, the witch decides it is time to eat, and has Gretel light the oven and provide water for boiling her brother. After a while, the witch asks Gretel to hop in the oven to make sure it is hot enough to bake bread. Gretel, sensing the witch's intent, pretends she does not understand what the witch means. Infuriated, the witch hops into the oven herself to demonstrate what she wants, and Gretel pushes the door closed behind her, leaving "the ungodly creature to be burned to ashes". Gretel frees Hansel from the cage, and the pair discover a vase full of treasure and precious stones. Putting the jewels into their clothing, the children set off for home. They arrive home to hear that their stepmother has died from unknown causes and their father has not had a happy day since they left their home. They live happily ever after with the witch's wealth

### **Changes made over different editions**

In the Grimms' original version of the tale, the woodcutter's wife is the children's biological mother, but this was changed to the stepmother in the 5th edition.

The sequence where the swan helps them across the river is an addition in later editions.

Another revision was that some versions claimed the mother died from unknown causes, left the family, or remained with the husband at the end of the story.

### **Task 2:**

Write an answer to the following:

1. What difference does it make that the mother becomes the step mother?
2. What difference does it make that this character has died or left at the end of the story? How does it affect the 'happy ever after' idea?
3. What idea does it give that nature in the form of swan helps the children?

## Influences for the Brothers Grimm

**Task 3: Read the following earlier fairy tales and make a note of the similarities to the Hansel and Gretel stories.**

### **1. Hop-o'-My-Thumb by Charles Perrault in *Histoires ou Contes du temps passé* (1697)**

Hop-o'-My-Thumb (*le petit Poucet*) is the youngest of seven children in a poor woodcutter's family. His parents are no longer able to support their children and intend to abandon them. Hop-o'-My-Thumb, overhearing his parents, plans ahead and collects small white pebbles from a river. He uses the stones to mark a trail that enables him to successfully lead his brothers back home. However, the second time round, he uses breadcrumbs instead, which the birds eat up.

The brothers are lost in the wood. Hop-o'-My-Thumb climbs up a tree and spots a distant light. The boys walk towards it. They come at last to a house, and learn that it belongs to an ogre. Hop-o'-My-Thumb, fearing the wolves, decides to take the risk of staying in the monster's residence.

The ogre allows the boys to sleep for the night, and provides a bed for them in his daughters' room. But the ogre wakes up not too long after, and prepares to kill them in their slumber. Hop-o'-My-Thumb, who anticipated the possibility, already planned ahead and replaced the daughters' gold crowns with the bonnets worn by him and his brothers. As a result, the ogre kills his daughters instead, and goes back to bed. Once he is snoring, Hop-o'-My-Thumb directs his siblings out of the house.

The ogre wakes up in the morning to discover his grave mistake, puts on his seven-league boots, and races after the boys. They spot the ogre while walking. Hop-o'-My-Thumb once again thinks fast and hides in a small nearby cave. The ogre, who is tired, happens to rest close to their hiding spot. Hop-o'-My-Thumb instructs his brothers to make their way home, and meanwhile, removes the boots from the sleeping ogre. He puts them on, and the boots, being magical, resize to fit him.

Hop-o'-My-Thumb uses the boots to make a fortune, and returns to his family's home, where they live happily ever after.

### **2. Madame d'Aulnoy's "Finette Cendron" (1721)**

A king and queen lost their kingdom and sold all they had brought with them, until they were poor. The queen resolved that she could make nets, with which the king could catch birds and fish to support them. As for their three daughters, they were useless; the king should take them somewhere and leave them there.

Their youngest, Finette, heard this and went to her fairy godmother. She became tired on the way and sat down to cry. A jennet appeared before her, and she begged it to carry her to her godmother. Her godmother gave her a ball of thread that, if she tied to the house door, would lead her back, and a bag with gold and silver dresses.

The next day, their mother led them off and urged them to go to sleep in a meadow. Then she left. Though her sisters were cruel to her, Finette woke them. The sisters promised her many things if she would lead them, and they made their way back. Their mother pretended she had left to get something else. Her sisters blamed Finette, gave her nothing they had promised, and beat her. The queen resolved to lead them away further, so Finette visited her godmother again. Her godmother told her this time to bring a sack of ashes and use it to make footprints, but she should not bring her sisters back, and she would never see her godmother again if she did. The queen led them off, her sisters bewailed their fate, and Finette had pity on them. The king and queen plotted for a third time, and the middle sister said they could leave peas for their path, but Finette brought her jewelry and the bag of clothing instead. When the queen abandoned them, pigeons had eaten their peas, and they could not return.

Finette found an acorn and refused to let them eat it; instead, they planted it. They ate cabbages and lettuce. The acorn grew into a tree and Finette climbed it. One day, her sisters looked into her bag and found her jewelry; they stole it and put stones in its place. After this, one day Finette saw from the tree a dazzling castle. Her sisters stole her clothing and jewelry and left her in rags when they went to it. A hideous and enormous old woman told them that it was an ogre's castle. She told them she would let them live a few days; they tried to flee but she caught them. The ogre returned, and she hid them so she could eat them herself. He smelled them, and she persuaded him to keep them to look after the castle, so she could eat them while he was gone. While they were at work, Finette tricked the ogre into the oven and burned him to cinders. Then she persuaded the ogress that if she let them dress her and do her hair, she would soon find a noble husband. While she was doing the hair, she cut off the ogress's head.

Her sisters dressed themselves in the treasures of the castle and, so they might find husbands, went off to show themselves in the nearest town, threatening to beat her if the castle was not perfectly kept. They came back with tales of dancing with the king's son and kept going and leaving her behind. One day, Finette found an old key, and it proved to be gold and to open a chest full of beautiful clothing. When her sisters left, she dressed herself and followed to the ball, where she called herself Cendron and everyone paid court to her.

For many days, this went on; the chest always produced new clothing. But one day, Finette left in a hurry because she had to get back before her sisters, and she left behind a red velvet slipper, embroidered with pearls. The king's oldest son found it and fell ill. No doctor could cure him. He said he had fallen in love with the woman whose shoe it was, so they ordered all the women to appear and try it on. Her sisters went, but Finette did not know the way. She dressed herself and found the jennet at her door again. She rode past her sisters, splashing them with mud. When she put on the slipper, the prince wanted to marry her, but Finette insisted that the king, who was the one who had conquered her parents' kingdom, restore it to them, first. They agreed. She married off her sisters and sent back to the jennet with gifts for her fairy godmother.

Additional influences: Hansel and Gretel is set in the medieval times when there was a Great Famine (1315–1317), which caused desperate people to abandon young children to fend for themselves or even resort to cannibalism

**Key themes in the story**

**Task 4: Read the list of key themes in the Brothers’ Grimm original story. Then create a chart of your own or print off this page, and add to the chart on the right where this can be seen in the story.**

Theme	Can be seen in Hansel and Gretel...
1. survival	The family have to survive during the famine and have to make difficult choices. In the witch’s house the two children struggle to stay alive and keep hoping. The play ends with a ‘Happy Ever After’ at the end of the ‘good’ characters who all survive.
2. abandonment	
3. betrayal	
4. trickery	
5. cleverness	
6. trust	
7. coming of age	

## Telling the Story

**Task 5: Make a list of the challenges of performing and designing Hansel and Gretel on stage. It is important to consider the different design elements of them such as set, costume, music, sound, lighting and puppetry.**

For example:

- How to make Gretel's mouse trap contraction?
- Which of the animals should be puppets?

## **Kneehigh Theatre**

The play version we will be studying for the written examination is written by Carl Grose for Kneehigh Theatre.

### **Task 6: Read the following information**

#### **Who are Kneehigh Theatre?**

This version is told through contemporary storytelling theatre, which provides different twists on well known tales. This production involved the collaboration of many people, including musicians, puppeteers and actors.

This theatre company is based in Cornwall, with its origins in community based theatre. This is theatre performed in various small venues in the county. Kneehigh is also known for their lively interactive shows. The performance style is physical comedy. Some common features of the shows are:

- \*strong visuals
- \* live music
- \* actors being the musicians
- \*puppets and gadgets
- \*physical theatre
- \*storytelling/narrating directly by speaking directly to the audience
- \*comedy
- \*dance
- \*ensemble work
- \*talking animals

#### **Key Terms**

**Contemporary:** present day, now.

**Ensemble:** an approach to acting involving everyone working together, rather than any 'star' performers. It can also refer to a group of actors who play many roles in a play or chorus.

**Physical Theatre:** acting more with the body than voice. It can include mime, or stylised movement similar to contemporary dance , where physical movements can be exaggerated.

**Puppeteers:** The performer controlling the puppet

## What are Kneehigh's aims in making theatre?

**Task 7: Read the following information from the previous artistic director, Emma Rice that was published in Kneehigh Theatre's Cookbook. Then, if you can print this page, highlight the key aims of the company. If you are unable to print the page, then make a note of some of the key aims. For example: 'Starting with the story'**

### Emma Rice, Director, on 'Making a Show':



"There is no formula to the way we make theatre. However, it always starts with the story. No, it starts before then. It starts with an itch, a need, an instinct.

"Each one is raw, relevant and personal. Stories have an ability to present themselves, to emerge as if from nowhere. But they never are from nowhere. This is the seminal moment of instinct. This is when your subconscious stakes its claim and intervenes in your carefully ordered life. I sit up when a story taps me on the shoulder. I respect co-incidence. I listen to impulse. One of my most hated questions when making theatre is 'Why?'. 'Because', I want to answer, 'Because...'.  


"For me, making theatre is an excavation of feelings long since buried, a journey of understanding. Bruno Bettelheim in 'The Uses of Enchantment' his book about children's relationship to fiction, states that "our greatest need and most difficult achievement is to find

meaning in our lives". He argues that by revealing the true content of folktales, children can use them to cope with their baffling and confusing emotions. My fascination with certain stories is fuelled by my own subconscious. *The Red Shoes* charts the pain of loss, obsession and addiction, *The Wooden Frock*, follows the slow and faltering healing process, *Tristan & Yseult* is

a poem to love and its madness and *The Bacchae* a terrifying glimpse at the beast in us all. These are not children's themes but I often approach them in a childlike way. In my experience, our basic needs and desires are the same - to be communicated with, to be delighted, to be surprised, to be scared. We want to be part of something and we want to feel. We want to find meaning in our lives.

"The event of live theatre is a rare chance to deliver all these needs. We can have a collective experience, unique to the group of people assembled in the theatre. I don't want the fourth wall constantly and fearfully placed between the actors and their audience, I want the actors to speak to their accomplices, look at them, to respond to them. I want a celebration, a collective gasp of amazement. I want the world to transform in front of the audiences eyes and demand that they join in with the game. Theatre is nothing without the engagement of the audience's creativity. Theatre takes us right back to Bruno Bettelheim and his belief in the therapeutic and cathartic nature of stories. We tell them because we need them.

"Months before rehearsals begin, I start work with the creative team. We gaze at books and films, sketch and begin to form a concept; an environment in which the story can live, in which the actors can play. This physical world holds meaning and narrative, it is as much a story telling tool as the written word. Stu Barker (musical director and composer) and I exchange music we have heard, that inspires us or just feels right. We talk of themes and feelings. From these conversations he creates a musical palette of melodies and sound-scapes. With the writer or writers, we talk and dream. We map out the structure and the overall shape of the piece. They go away and write collections of poems or lyrics or ideas. Each writer works in a different way but what none of them do is to write a script or a scene in isolation.

"It is this fertile palette of words, music and design that we bring to the rehearsal room. As I said, Kneehigh is a team.

The shared imagination is greater than any individuals so we begin the rehearsal process by returning to the story. We tell it to each other, scribble thoughts on huge pieces of paper, relate it to our own experience. We create characters, always looking to serve and subvert the story. Actors like Mike Shepherd and Craig Johnson delight with their deft improvisation, breathing life and naughtiness into the bones of the story, performers like Bec Applebee and Eva Magyar use their painfully eloquent bodies to create physical poetry and story, Giles King and Tristan Sturrock tickle and disarm with their tragic clowns. Stu's music is used to help create the world, to guide and inform improvisation and release feeling. Lighting is used from day one, the design is developed with ideas coming from the devising team. The writers are in rehearsal. They watch and inspire, feeding in their poetry, their lyrics. They respond to improvisation and craft scenes and characters alongside the actors. Layer upon layer the world is created, the story released.

"We lay the foundations, then we forget them. If you stay true to the fundamental relationship between yourself, your team and the subject matter, the piece will take on a life of its own.

