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Timeless Toys: *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*

Fantasy is a genre that is attractive to people of all ages from all backgrounds as it allows an escape from everyday life. *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* is a beloved classic that has transcended time and various forms. E.T.A. Hoffmann's novel transitioned from a story to a ballet, then to other texts and major motion pictures. *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* acknowledges strife in the world through the conflict with the Mouse King but allows an escape that conveys relatable and truthful elements of everyday life. The plot is one of the most well-known and beloved pieces of Christmas literature today. The story of *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* starts as a childhood fantasy and becomes a dream world that invokes joy that carries through the dreamlike world to the real world. Hoffmann's *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* is a staple of fantasy because of the whimsical adventure while still connecting to reality, with engaging themes for all ages, along with the adaptation into multiple forms including ballets, texts, and films.

Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann was born in 1776 to a Prussian family in what is now Germany (Hardy). Hoffmann grew up very close to his aunt and used her as inspiration for many of his works across a multitude of disciplines including painting, composing, writing, and a legal background (Hardy). Along with dabbling in various creative endeavors, Hoffmann had a brief career as a civil servant, but then began to pursue more creative ventures. Over time, Hoffmann began composing and working on his music. He even changed his name from Ernst Theodor

Wilhelm Hoffmann to Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann in honor of Mozart (*E.T.A. Hoffmann*). After Hoffmann's work and involvement with musical endeavors, he wrote *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* in 1816 (*E.T.A. Hoffmann*).

Of Hoffmann's literary ventures, his most popular and classic piece was *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*, largely because of its relevant themes. The story was published in the German *Kinder-Mächren* and its suitability for children was debated (Blamires 223). Originally, *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* was intended for the children of Hoffmann's friend, Julius Eduard Hitzig, who were intelligent and well-read, leading to the debate over whether the story was suitable for all children, due to the Hitzigs' advanced level of comprehension. The text inspired by the Hitzig children naturally attracts children due to the wonderful and fantastical elements, while the complex themes interests adults (Blamires 223). It can be assumed that it was written for children, but also attracts adults to that fantasy and wonder of Christmas through a child's viewpoint.

The themes of childhood and imagination are extremely prevalent throughout the book and can be difficult to understand. Hoffmann blurs the lines between reality and fantasy, making the text challenging for some to categorize quickly as a children's literature. The contrast between what occurs when Maria, the child in the story is dreaming and when she is not. *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* is a children's book that establishes a mirror to reality that children can relate to and understand. Children are introduced to the universal themes of Christmas, the giving of gifts, an attachment to toys, and a disagreement with parents. Children and readers of all ages are drawn towards stories and texts that model or mirror their experiences as they remember experiencing them. The attraction is due to the connection and relatability to the characters and situation, similar to Maria at Christmastime.

Because many of the themes are still understood and relevant, this text transcends time as a classic. Themes dealing with one's perception of fantasy and reality are always applicable, in the nineteenth century and today. *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King's* confusing differentiation within the story between fantasy and reality makes the story an extremely captivating piece of fantasy. The story continues to be one that readers can read again and find a new perspective based on current life experiences. As readers age, the mirror image seen may align more with Maria's parents than Maria. Or in reverse, readers may grow to appreciate the magic taken for granted as a child ages.

The genre of fantasy is so captivating because of the desire for magic, wonder, and unrealistic events that everyone maintains from childhood. This causes fantasy versus reality to be a common struggle throughout literature because individuals have their own imaginations which make their fantasies seem very real. Each individual's fantasy is based in some aspect of truth in their life thus creating confusion when it is that individual's imaginative reality, but other people see it as fantasy (Kiefer and Tyson 133).

In literature, particularly in the fantasy genre, readers can and will perceive text differently. Readers may see the text as a mirror image of their own lives, and something they can relate to, or they may see it as a window into a world, place, or situation that they have no experience with. Children or even adult readers with active imaginations could see Maria's experiences as a mirror to their Christmas experiences; however, readers who struggle with imagining events outside of the usual activities may see this text not only as a window into another world or experience but also a window into what they want their perception or imagination to be like. This view and understanding of literature is particularly pertinent to children because they learn quickly from reading. With fewer experiences in life, children strive

to make connections to literature as their personal experience grows. Fantasy as a genre is timeless because people are constantly looking for an adventure or whimsical dream. As people grow in their experiences, their conceptualization of reality as time passes, and many fantasy texts may seem to change as their life experiences grow and alter the way that they think.

The Nutcracker and the Mouse King maintains its popularity not solely because of its genre, but because of the common connections made to the characters and situations in the book. The story takes place around Christmas time. For generations, Christmas has been depicted as a day of joy, peace, and happiness, with the celebration of Santa Claus and baby Jesus. Christmas gives everyone their own unique, memorable, and happy experiences. Everyone can remember and relate to the first time a child learns about presents, food, and other things that mean Christmas time to so many. In literature, these events serve as a mirror for the experiences of many. However, these experiences can be a window if a child never experienced the joy or beautiful decorations of Christmas as Maria and Fritz do in the story. The relatability of Hoffmann's work continues to allow a peek through the window of a fantasy story from 1816 to still be enjoyed and read today in the twenty-first century.

The Nutcracker and the Mouse King not only expresses a fantasy story from 1816 but also a window into what life was like in the seventeenth century, or what Christmas was like before the commercialized celebration began. In addition, the desires of a child to play with toys that come to life and for one's parents to believe them are other mirroring aspects that occur in the story. The desires of the children to want to play with toys as close to realistic and life size as possible also greatly impacts the timelessness and fantastic elements of this text. A child grows into adulthood, but the childhood hopes, dreams, and fantasies continue to follow the child into

adulthood. Adult readers relive the fantasy and wonder through this story or allow them to see the magic through the eyes of their own children.

The influence of *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* extended beyond literature and led to the development of the Nutcracker ballet. Hoffmann's story went on to inspire a ballet in 1892. The Nutcracker ballet was composed by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky and was choreographed by Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov. The first show was not a success; however, a successful suite from the ballet was later used. The ballet has only continued to grow in popularity. Tchaikovsky's score was and is still viewed as magnificent and is one of the many reasons *The Nutcracker* is still known and loved today.

The art of ballet has great origins in Russia and came successfully to the United States in 1944 with the San Francisco Ballet, then spreading to New York (Fisher 3). The spread and popularity of the Nutcracker is extremely impressive. In some cases, the ballet and the story travelled with the immigrants from Russia to the United States, then all across the world. The ballet maintains some consistent elements it is known for, including certain numbers, costumes, and story lines, but is constantly performed in different variations. Contrary to the usual lack of uniformity in the plot of the ballets, the performance of the ballet differs in many different aspects it continues to make the ballet and the story of the Nutcracker more accessible and the timeless piece of literature that it is today. However, the ballet still maintains a graceful portrayal of the classic.

The Nutcracker in the glory of its original presentation in St. Petersburg highlights the joy and the happiness the Nutcracker elicited. The Nutcracker came during the golden age of ballet in St. Petersburg at the end of the nineteenth century. The prevalence of ballet at this time was likely responsible for *The Nutcracker's* success (Fisher 7). The fantastic elements of the

ballet the mimicked the Czar's royalty and riches and held the attention and interest of many audiences (Fisher 7). Not only did *The Nutcracker* ballet attract the attention of Russians but spread as immigration continued throughout Europe and the United States. *The Nutcracker* was uniquely given an opportunity as a known children's story to be developed into a ballet stage production that conveys the same themes and emotions.

The Nutcracker continues to be developed into other forms. Not only are there other variations of *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* as a piece of children's literature, but it was also developed into various other mediums. Balanchine's 1954 *Nutcracker* ballet became more popular and well received than the original (Fisher 3). There are several adaptations of the story in text form designed to be simpler for children read independently. Some of the children's texts of *The Nutcracker* are geared towards a younger audience with simplified texts, such as *The Nutcracker* adaptation by Campbell Books, containing cartoon illustrations and interactive tabs. There are also other children's versions that portray the more mature story adapted in text but are more similar to Hoffmann's than others and are based on the Balanchine's ballet, such as *The Nutcracker* illustrated by Valeria Docampo. These are just a few examples of the books that are based on Hoffmann's text and story. The numerous adaptations that can cater to a specific age level and style continue to make this story a staple in children's literature and in fantasy for all ages.

The longevity of Hoffmann's work has also been aided by other productions and major motion pictures. There has been a myriad of movie versions of *The Nutcracker* that have become Christmas movie favorites. From versions made in the 1970s to more recent versions, such as *The Nutcracker and the Four Realms* in 2018, the story continues to be retold with different variations. The adaptations have allowed the story, originally considered children's literature, to

continue to be enjoyed by readers of all ages and levels because they are able to tell the story with an emphasis on the themes that are more applicable to a modern audience. For example, a children's version of the book or movie, such as the movie *Barbie in the Nutcracker*, focuses more on the adventure and the magic of toys, whereas *The Nutcracker and the Four Realms* focuses more on the themes of imagination versus reality, innocence, and good versus evil. The various adaptations' theme and style allow Hoffmann's story to be a favorite.

Hoffmann's *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* has become a staple in literature for all ages through its applicable themes for various levels of maturity, the attraction of fantasy with connections to reality, and the various adaptations in text, ballet, and film. Fantasy will always be appealing to all ages provides a window into a different world and a mirror of present experiences. Hoffmann's work transcends time as it connects to Christmas, becoming a classic traditional story to many people as they celebrate each year. My love of the Nutcracker began when I had the pleasure of performing in the ballet at age 4. I remember loving the costumes and movements I performed as well as watching others and being transfixed on the magic the story portrays. The story continues to be passed on through text and other print adaptations, along with ballet productions performed each year based on the story. In the twentieth century, the creation of films based upon the movie continued to guarantee the timelessness of *The Nutcracker* as the story could be revisited frequently making a connection to the story visual even for those who have never picked up the story in a literary form. *The Nutcracker* will continue to be a staple in literature as long as fantasy provides an escape to whimsy that is relatable for all ages.

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