Peculiarities of the Blend *Catwoman* in English Fairytales

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Abstract

The history of any nation has always been connected with its tale heritage. Fairytales were initially created as an attempt to explain reality by means of imposing peculiarities of the natural world on the life of the society. The blending of ideas in tales carries a deep pragmatic sense. For example, the word *Catwoman* was firstly employed in fairytales due to various cultural reasons. The purpose of our research is to apply the theory and the structure of blending to the study of the fairytale image ‘*Catwoman*’, and to find the connection between cultural beliefs and the way the blend has been yielded.

1. Introduction

The origin of tales goes back to the archaic epoch. The basis of the fairytale was formed by a figurative comprehension of reality that surrounded our ancestors. There are three main processes that reflect the peculiarities of how ancient people interpreted the world: animism (animation of nature), anthropomorphism (imposition of human features onto nature, animals, and things), and totemism (belief in the idea that people originated from animals). These features have been preserved in tales and now serve as evidences of a highly metaphorical content of this genre.

As O. Freidenberg (1997) denotes not only the language of the tale is metaphorical but also its images. A rhythm and a word, an action, a thing, a character – everything we are used to in literature – are various forms of the conceptualization of reality; their structure is as metaphorical as any other figurative system.
In fairytale tradition there are even special linguistic pointers in the beginning that lead away from the reality, though do not break all the connections with it, like in tales Jack and His Golden Snuff-box or The Well of the World’s End from Joseph Jacobs’ book English Fairy Tales (2005): “Once upon a time, and a very good time it was, though it was neither in my time nor in your time nor in any one else’s time”. Very often such illogical beginnings are rhymed, for example The Story of the Three Little Pigs:

*Once upon a time when pigs spoke rhyme
And monkeys chewed tobacco,
And hens took snuff to make them tough,
And ducks went quack, quack, quack, O!*

The final traditional wording returns the reader back to reality, hinting that the context was not necessarily imagined: “And that’s just about the end of my tale, except to tell you this, my friend: if you believe even half of this fine old nonsense, you’re more of a fool than I am!” (from the tale The King of England’s Three Sons).

Of course, fairytales present a mixture of different ideas that at the first gaze seem to be quite ridiculous and unreal, though these ideas were not blended spontaneously without any visible reason. To understand how the process of blending works, it is necessary to refer to the conceptual integration process described by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner.

The theory of blending is based on two Input mental spaces that, with the help of the cross-space mapping, yield a third space, the blend. The blend partially inherits features of the input spaces and possesses an emergent structure of its own. One more essential component of this process is the so-called generic space. It reflects some common structure projected from the inputs. The emergent structure of the blend appears as a result of three interrelated processes. They are composition, completion and elaboration. The projections from the inputs in their correlation produce a new structure that is not shared by them separately. This composite structure on the basis of background frames, cognitive and cultural models turns into a larger, self-contained structure in the blend, and can later be elaborated and function on its own.

This idea originates from the theory of mental spaces by G. Fauconnier (1999), who in his book *Mappings in Thought and Language* wrote that cognitive operations, which take place in human mind and connect the processes of speaking and thinking, are capable of generating new meanings from the simplest to the most elaborated.

G. Fauconnier remarks,

*The most surprising aspect of the organization of language and thought is the fundamental unity of the cognitive operations that serve to construct the simple meanings of everyday life, the commonsense reasoning of our daily existence, the more elaborate discussions and arguments in which we engage, and the superficially far more complex theories and artistic and literary productions that entire cultures develop over the course of time (Fauconnier, 1999).*

He points out various kinds of mappings between cognitive domains but the most crucial of them, which, additionally, deals with cognitive metaphors, is blending.

Mark Turner in the book *The Origin of Ideas* explains this term in the following way:

*A blend is a mental space. It results from the mental act of blending other mental spaces in a mental web. The blend is not an abstraction, or analogy, or anything else already named and recognized in common sense. A blend is a new mental space that contains some elements from different mental spaces in a mental web but that develops new meaning of its own that is not drawn from those spaces. This new meaning emerges in the blend (Turner, 2014).*

Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner showed this process schematically as the interplay of circles, representing mental spaces, and dashed lines, reflecting the connection of mental space elements (See figure 1):
This figure reflects the process that can also be observed in fairytales. To know how the blend ‘Catwoman’ was formed, it is necessary to define the input spaces themselves and to implement the generic space.

2. Research preliminaries

Research preliminaries presuppose the study of the blend background. The two input spaces in the blend are Woman and Cat. They are two notions with their own structure and history behind. Analyzing them separately it is possible to find the key elements that connect these two, at first sight, unrelated things. To understand what stands behind these input spaces, let’s address etymology of these words and their definitions, as well as historical facts, cultural beliefs and stereotypical associations connected with them.

The notion of woman exists in every language and is characterized by strongly marked national and cultural characteristics. Its interpretation is based upon stereotypes which have appeared due to biological and social functions carried by women. It is an input space that serves for yielding various blends both in everyday speech and in tales.

The study of etymological and encyclopedic material has revealed some features commonly associated with women. Thus, in the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2001) woman is defined as “1) an adult female person; 2) a man’s wife or partner”.

According to the etymology, the English word woman, from Old English wifmann, meant a female person.

Further comparative analysis of historical and cultural facts shows that, as a rule, the woman is associated with beauty, wisdom, domesticity, hospitality, maternity, caring, magic, or witchcraft, and trickiness. All these characteristics taken together form the general input space Woman which serves as a basis for creating other mental spaces, or blends.
The enumeration of main characteristics in figure 2 is not built according to lexical or grammatical rules. These elements represent the so-called associative line. The reason of such irrationality is human mind. In our consciousness thoughts are not produced as an uninterrupted logical chain, they are rather sudden and subdued. They are usually imposed on each other. Conceptual integration process represents a flow of thoughts, which for many years of evolution has become automatic and indispensable.

The second input space forming the blend Catwoman refers to zoomorphic images. In the infancy of manhood animals were an entire part of human life. They were worshiped; they were sacrificed; and they were idolized. The most mysterious animal, which different magical features are still attributed to, is the cat. Beauty, grace, elegance, independence, trickiness, capability to move from one place to another just per seconds have always dazzled and attracted people. On one hand, cats are predators which do not obey anybody. On the other, they are very sociable and loving. For more than 10,000 years cats have been relished by people for their hunting on rodents.

But there is hardly any country where cats are cherished more than in England. They were brought to Britain by the Romans and cost a lot of money. The cats’ sale was even regulated by law. For stealing or murdering the animal a serious punishment followed.

As it is mentioned in the book Lexikon der Symbole written by Wolfgang Bauer, Irmtraud Dümotz and Sergius Golowin (2003), “cats always accompanied Freya, the Anglo-Saxon goddess of love and marriage, who later was equated to the Queen of the witch Sabbath. In English folk beliefs witches, as well as doulas, always possessed a black cat”.

At the time of the witch-hunt, these animals were also exposed to demonization. They were considered to be devil’s helpers and were put to death together with women accused of witchcraft. The situation changed in the XVIII century and since then cats have always been in favour.

This description compiles the input space Cat that has been constructed for many centuries. Together with the biological characteristic (this animal refers to the cat family), main features and habits (it is a predator and hunter that eats rodents) the mental space includes associative elements (independence, mystery, beauty, grace, fastness, trickiness) and cultural beliefs (cats have always been connected with witches and magic). Therefore, the second input space can be presented in the same way as the first one:

If to compare two schematical images of the input spaces, it gets obvious that some of the characteristics coincide. These features are based on the associative characteristics and cultural beliefs. They are beauty, trickiness and magic/witchcraft. These three similar characteristics can be projected from the input spaces into the generic space:
Due to its role in the English history, the image of the cat is widely-spread in fairytales. Very rarely in tales the cat is presented as a male creature (as in the tale *The King of the Cats*) or is addressed to with the help of the pronoun *it* (as in the tale *The Cottager and his Cat*). In most fairytales the cat is female and is referred to as *she*. This phenomenon actually stipulated the formation of the image ‘Catwoman’ in English folktales.

3. The yielding of the blend ‘Catwoman’ in English Fairytales

Having examined the structure of the input spaces and the generic space, it’s time to see how their elements interact in the English tales and what main characteristics are added up to build the image of the catwoman. The schemes of the mental spaces above will serve as the basis for illustrating the process of the conceptual integration.

Before the analysis itself it is necessary to mention that all the tales were taken from the Internet site [http://messybeast.com/moggycat/brit-fairy.htm](http://messybeast.com/moggycat/brit-fairy.htm) and from Joseph Jacobs’ book *English Fairy Tales*, among them are the most known ones: *The White Cat* and *How Cats got their Purr*.

In two of the tales mentioned above the main hero is a white cat. As it is mentioned in Sinkevich’s encyclopedia *Мир Животных* (2000), the British people have always respected white cats. In earlier times it was believed that the animal of this colour could treat many diseases, so white cats were even sold at chemists'.

The fairy tale *White Cat* starts with the scene where the king wants to get rid of his sons sending them to perform various tasks. The youngest son finds a splendid castle that, as he knows it later, is inhabited by cats. The owner of the castle is a very beautiful white cat whose behaviour and manners are more portrayed as that of a human, especially woman:

> Instantly the door opened, and in came a tiny figure covered by a long black veil. It was conducted by two cats wearing black mantles and carrying swords, and a large party of cats followed, who brought in cages full of rats and mice. At first, the astonished prince thought he was dreaming, but the little figure came up to him and threw back its veil to reveal the loveliest little white cat imaginable. She looked very young and very sad, and in a sweet little voice that went straight to his heart she spoke to him.

This extract is very important for defining elements of the blend. Here we can notice the element typical of both input spaces – beauty. The element is projected from the generic space and is also illustrated by epithets occurring in the tale: “the loveliest little cat imaginable”, “a lovely princess”, “beautiful Cat”. This element can be observed in almost all fairytales about cats.

Another common element is magic. Three times the heroin helps the prince with her spells and finally makes him cut off her head to become a woman:

> At last he drew his sword, and desperately, with a trembling hand, cut off the little white head. But imagine his astonishment and delight when suddenly a lovely princess stood before him, and, while he was still speechless with amazement, the door opened and a goodly company of knights and ladies entered, each carrying a cat's skin!

This element is associated with both counterparts and is probably connected with the time of witch-hunt.

The last element from the generic space is trickiness. The white cat is very clever and she tries to do her best to please the king and the courtyard:
‘Your Majesty,’ replied the Prince, ‘will find in that crystal chair a little white cat, which has such soft paws, and mews so prettily, that I am sure you will be charmed with it.’ The King smiled, and went to draw back the curtains himself, but at a touch from the Princess the crystal shivered into a thousand splinters, and there she stood in all her beauty.

All three common features can be traced in the tale. As for the elements of the counterparts, let’s consider them separately and start with the input space ‘Woman’.

“Lady Cat” or “beautiful Cat”, as she is referred to by the Prince, turns out to be a very hospitable mistress, what reveals her woman’s nature (see the input space Woman). The metaphor “and in a sweet little voice that went straight to his heart” gives the opportunity to evidence one more element of this space – speech. More than that, she is very caring both towards the guest and her servants, what serves as a specific woman’s feature.

The elements of the input space ‘Cat’ has also penetrated into the image. Cat’s habits and instincts are interwoven with humans’. The white cat is a predator and hunter: “When he looked out all the cats were assembled in the courtyard, some leading greyhounds, some blowing horns, for the White Cat was going out hunting”. She hunts on rodents and eats mice: “First they put on the table two dishes, one containing stewed pigeons and the other a fricassee of fat mice”.

Together with elements of the generic space and the input spaces, the fairytale blend contains contextual elements or features emerging only in the narration. For instance, cat’s role in the tale makes her not only the main hero, but also the fairy helper. The white cat is presented as a very wise creature, what can be confirmed by the following examples: “When the Prince asked her how it was that she was so wise, she only said, ‘King’s son, do not ask me, but guess what you please’, “she was cleverer than a cat has any right to be”.

Such a detailed description of this tale was done intentionally to illustrate how the cross-space mapping takes place. The tale White Cat contains the fullest and most vivid examples. Other tales with cats as main heroes express similar characteristics that are displayed in the tale above.

The tale How Cats got their Purr also deals with white cats. Three cats help the princess to cope with the gypsy’s prophecy. Their image doesn’t contain all the blend elements represented in the first tale. For example, such characteristics as beauty, trickiness and hospitality are not reflected in this tale, but all the rest work quite perfectly:

"We know what is needed and we know how to help you," she said. "Cats have no hands, only paws, so we can do the spinning for you and it will not break the terms of the prophecy. Now we must get to work for there is little time left".

These few sentences illustrate such features as trickiness, magic (elements of the generic space), speech, caring (elements of the input space Woman).

Cats here play the role of the fairy helper. They do different things to ease the life of their owner and get her out of the trouble. Their behavior and function is similar to the ones performed by the White Cat.

Figure 5 represents the projection of the elements of the counterparts and reveals the cross-space mapping:
Figure 5. Four-space blend ‘Catwoman’
The figure shows that three common elements from the generic space (beauty, trickiness and magic/witchcraft) are mixed in the blend with some biological features (cat family, predator, hunter) and habits (eating rodents) from the input space ‘Cat’. The blend also comprises typical human features (female person, contrary to a man, speech) and associative elements (caring, hospitality) from the input space ‘Woman’. The further elaboration of the blend is stipulated by contextual characteristics of the heroes (main fairytale hero, fairy helper, wisdom).

4. Conclusion

This research suggests the analysis of the fairytale blend ‘Catwoman’. The formation of the blend is connected with the cross-space mapping of some elements from the inputs (elements that are typical of the counterparts and are reflected in tales) and from the generic space (all the resembling features of the counterparts that are presented in tales). These elements are accomplished with the context characteristics which can’t be found in other mental spaces but are displayed in the narration.

The described conceptual integration process serves as a proof that fairytales appeared due to the interaction of imagination and everyday experience by means of exaggeration and rethinking. What we usually perceive as a simple fairytale for children, in fact, is an attempt to explain reality by means of reflecting peculiarities of the natural and animal world on human’s life. Cultural heritage can still be traced in fairytale images.

References


