

RETRIEVING RIGHTFULNESS – *THE WHITE MOOR* FAIRY TALE COMIC STRIP AND THE ACNOWLEDGMENT BY POSTMODERNIST READERS OF AN EMERGING GENRE

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Abstract: The paper presents the impact of the Romanian *The White Moor* fairy tale adaptation into comic strip format on its various readers. The results of a well-developed questionnaire, randomly sent to some of the graphic version readers, are interpreted and unforeseen results thereafter highlight the weightiness of comics, despite steady disesteem and recurrent association with low-culture.

Keywords: *The White Moor*, Ion Creangă, adaptation, fairy tale, comics, comic strip

1. Introduction

According to *Oxford Concise English Dictionary*, a fairy tale is “a children's tale about magical and imaginary beings and lands; an untrue account” (Pearsall 1999:510), which indicates something viewed as magical and idealized. Given that in the past people didn't have access to technology and modern means of communication, they could hardly be warned about the various dangers in the world. Entertainment lacked as well, so authors would address those risks in the shape of a fairy tale such as *Little Red Riding-Hood*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Snow White*, warning people about the dangers in this world by adding a moral ending. Except for bringing amusement to children, adults find it also pleasant to remind themselves of the reality of everyday life and more genuinely differentiate between good and bad. Whether fairy tales are that some greater-than-themselves-things that give hope to those with no faith or religion, or just a reason to disconnect from reality and plunge into another world for a short time, “toutes les grandes personnes ont d'abord été des enfants. Mais peu d'entre elles s'en souviennent”, as Antoine De Saint Exupery would say, meaning that all grownups once were little children but few remember this. That's why not only children, but grownups, too, read fairy tales, their format being nowadays only a matter of trend or favoured perspective: fairy tales books, comic strips, video and computer games etc.

2. Comics and Literature

The relationship between literature and comic books has been pointed out repeatedly by Versaci - “if literature is an art that brings about new understanding and insight – as I believe it to be – then comics certainly fit the bill” (Versaci 2007:210). In what concerns fairy tales and folktales, over the years people have used sequential art forms - graphic novels and comics - in various ways, although the material was treated differently most of the times. There were distinguished three different categories of retelling the original material: direct retellings, adaptations and pastiches. The simplest format is direct retelling, rendering the precise location and characters of the original source as, for example, Walt Kelly's *Gingerbread Man*, the graphic version. This type of retellings does not change the stories, but effort to authentically retell them into the new medium. Adaptations, though, are inspired by

fairy tales and folktales, adjusting somehow the setting or the characters. At this level the mixture of different medium conventions occurs, whether it involves the style or the form, such as expanding the content - more detailed scenes inserted, changing the focus etc., (Hasse 2008:419) for example *Scary Godmother* (1997-2006) by Jill Thompson - a modern adaptation of Cinderella or *Books of Faerie* (1998-1999) which employs characters from William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Another example of adaptation is *Grimm Fairy Tales*, an intriguing and provocative horror comic book series which comprises adaptation of fairy tales written by renowned authors such as Grimm Brothers, Charles Perrault, or Hans Christian Andersen. These stories explore a more obscure side of the tales we knew as a child and are re-imagined, this time with a scary turn. However, because the graphic art here often reveals pictures of very sexual female characters, together with a considerable amount of explicit violence, the series doesn't target children as main audience. The series is particularly interesting for young adults, especially because it creates a bridge between old days' stories and their morality and adolescents' nowadays concerns. For example, after a young girl hesitates about losing her virginity to her aggressive boyfriend, she reads a story about Little Red Riding Hood in a book found beside her bed (Figure 1); as she goes through the story, she feels that the life of the fairy tale character parallels her own and the ending of the story teaches her a lesson, which feels extremely real. Likewise, Cinderella pursues a dreadful revenge for the years of agony suffered, while Hansel and Gretel realize that running from the problems they left at home will eventually bring them more pain and terror on their reckless journey. Although the characters are portrayed in their original fairyland, they appear quite contemporary. This is reflected in both their actions and vocabulary, and even some instances of subtle humour are found throughout the stories.



Figure 1 - Adaptation of *Little Red Riding Hood* fairy tale in *Grimm Fairy Tales* horror comic book series

The recent adaptation of the well-known Romanian fairy tale *The White Moor* into the comic strip *The White Moor Continues* has some noticeable differences from the original tale, too. The characters are all identified by names, not nicknames; there are also background stories for each of the White Moor's companions, explaining their actual state and the source of their special abilities; extra scenes are inserted (e.g. White Moor's short stay in the Purgatory), eliminated, or slightly twisted (e.g. the Red Emperor's daughter being credited for obtaining herself the Living Water). However, the major change operated is the actual continuation of adventures, as the title of the comic strip points out. While the adaptation is divided into four parts that preserve the basic narrative thread of the original fairy tale, each part being contained in one comic strip issue, the comic strip series has reached so far twelve numbers in total. The popularity of the comic strip is undeniable, the number of fans having grown rapidly, this fact being more visible on social networks - from 97.000 fans on Facebook in December 2013 to 142.000 in August 2014 (Figure 2 and Figure 3).



Figure 2 - FB statistics, Dec. 2013



Figure 3 - FB statistics, Aug. 2014

3. Survey and Results

In order to gain insight on the readers' motivation towards reading comics and particularly this fairy tale adaptation, a well-developed questionnaire was randomly sent to *The White Moor Continues* comic strip's readers and 80 respondents provided information on some of their personal details and on their opinion regarding the adaptation in relation with the original fairy tale. Responses concerning information on their gender, age, educational background, reading habits, impressions and comparative aspects with the original fairy tale were obtained and thus, several conclusions were drawn as follows. Nearly two thirds of the readers are males, while a third are women. This result is comparable with the US 2013 survey on the same gender matter. DC Comics, one of the most successful comics companies worldwide carried in 2011 a reader survey, which showed a low number of American females among comics readers, only 7%. However, the methodology of the DC study was questioned by many, while the online branch of the survey, on the other hand, pointed a greater number of female readers - 23%. Also, using social network statistics as the main research tool, a famous US comics blogger, revealed in 2013 that as much as 40% of US comics fans are women and that eighteen to thirty is the predominant age range for both males and females - male audience leading in each age group (Schenker, 2013), information in agreement with the result of the survey presented in this paper (Figure 4 and Figure 5).

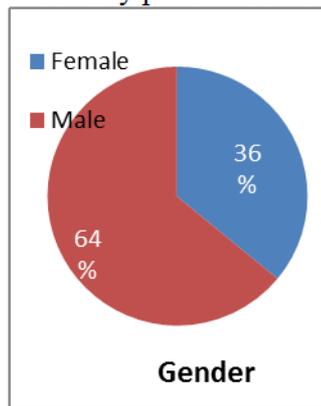


Figure 4

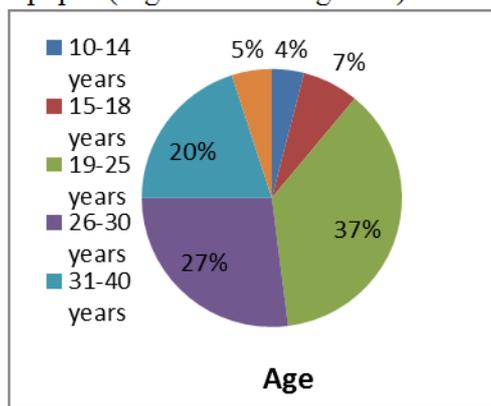


Figure 5

Another interesting aspect of the finding concerns determining the extent to which comic book reading varies with social class and educational background. The results of this paper's survey conclude that two thirds of the readers have university or postgraduate studies, while the other third are secondary students or below. (Fig. 6)

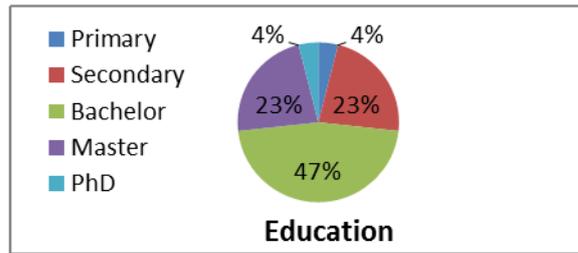


Figure 6

Unlike, for example, the view of the German-American psychiatrist Fredric Wertham (Wertham, 1954), extended research indicates that comic book readings does not replace other kinds of reading. According to numerous writers, comic book readers, in general, read as much as non-comic book readers (Witty, 1941; Heisler, 1947; Bailyn, 1959; Swain, 1978) and even the results of another study suggest they even read more (Blakely, 1958). The survey on *The White Moor Continues* comics' readers reflects indeed that half of the respondents are active readers and do intensive reading in general and another third is represented by passive readers. Less than 20% of the respondents seem to occasionally read or dislike reading in general (Figure 7). Even though comic books haven't even by far reached the level of popularity of traditional lecture, a third of the respondents are not at their first contact with this genre, a third of them having been reading comics for some years now (Figure 8). There are studies which suggest that some readers acknowledge comics as being a very useful starting point tool for approaching more difficult texts (Mathabane, 1986), as light reading may stand as a significant connexion from daily "conversational" language (Krashen, 1993) to "academic language" (Cummins, 1991).

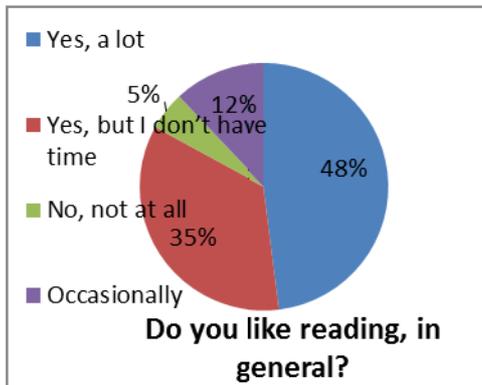


Figure 7

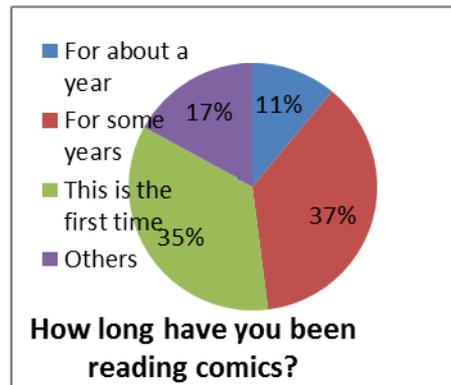


Figure 8

The study further examines the relationship between the classic fairy tale and its adaptation. Though 93% of the respondents have read the original fairy tale (Figure 9), the adaptation undeniably lacks Ion Creangă's original style: the humour, the proverbs, old sayings, regionalisms and archaisms, author's direct intervention and his irony, long dialogues and the descriptive passages. Even so, more than half of the respondents don't seem disturbed by these deficiencies (Figure 10) and more, regardless the huge linguistic drawbacks, 88% still appreciate the new graphic character given to the original fairy tale (Figure 11).

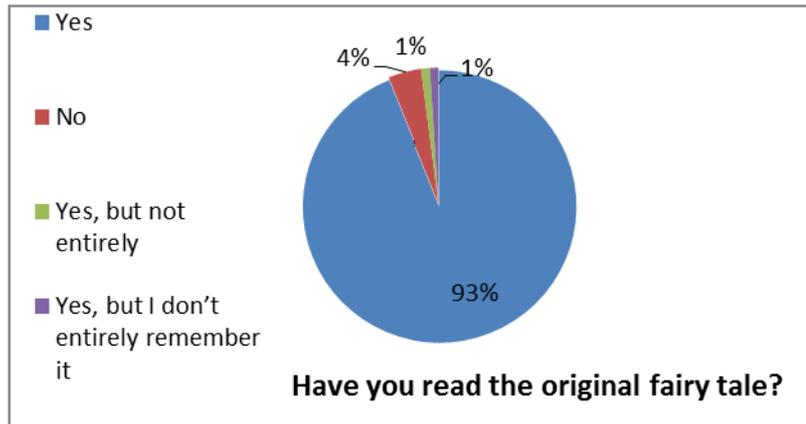


Figure 9

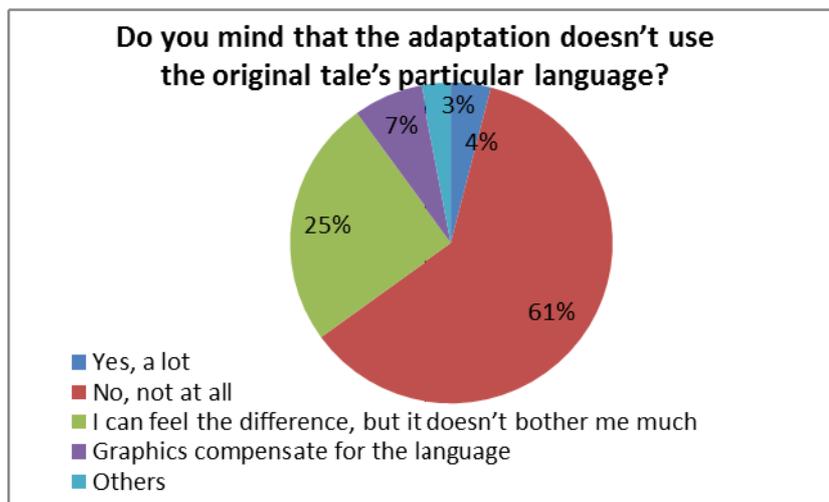


Figure 10

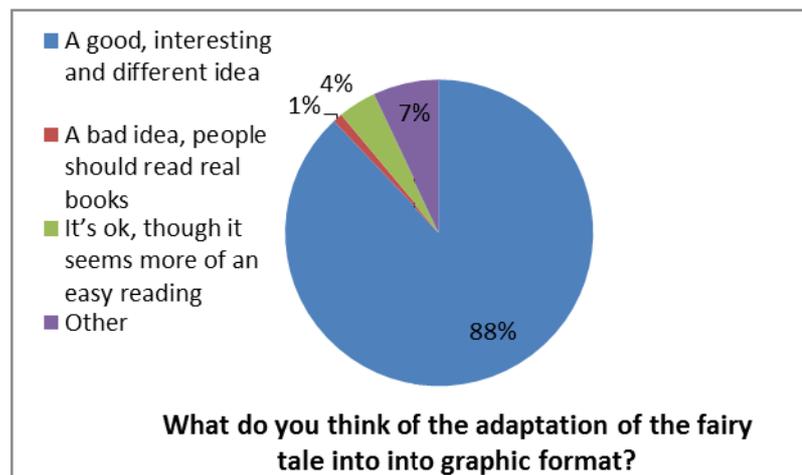


Figure 11

The acoustics, though, is the most important device used instead, by employing numerous onomatopoeic words to add the intended emotional effect (Figure 12). (Catalina 2013: 268) (Eisner 1985:18)



Figure 12. The use of onomatopoeia (*Harap Alb Continuă* – Album)

Also, Rosen suggests that

there is a tendency for readers who come from literary backgrounds to read over design, as though the artwork existed only to render the plot visible and move protagonists from place to place, while readers with design backgrounds often see the art as existing in a narrative void, an end in itself. Yet in the best instances, the design of a comic is inseparable from the narrative (Rosen 2009:58).

However, in the case of *The White Moor* adaptation, only 10% are attracted by the graphics and the accessibility of the text, while more than a half seems to appreciate the idea of adaptation into comic strip in its entirety. (Figure 13)

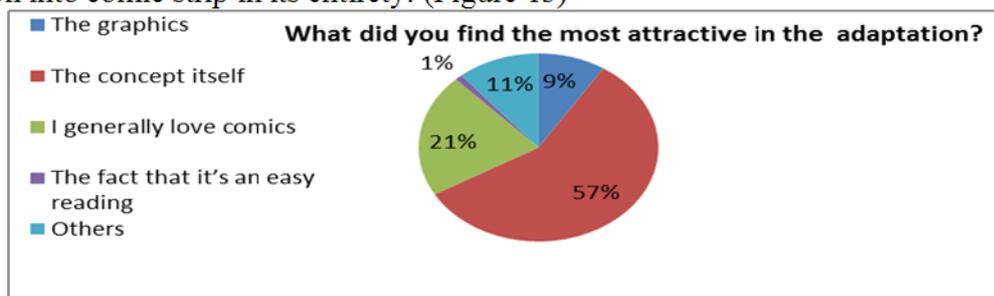


Figure 13

As Kukkonen states, when talking about differentiating between words and images in comics,

these different modes work together in their storytelling, and this suggests that they are perceived in a dynamic process of narrative cognition, rather than in a piecemeal combination of non-commensurable semiotic resources (Kukkonen 2011:39).

Sequential art has gradually changed the topics tackled, from war to sexism, violence, crime, drugs and family and consequently the comics fans have also changed. Therefore, the new graphic adaptations bring out not only attractive colours and imaginative techniques displayed by the artists in the story, but also the very current trend in the readers' motivation to choose particularly this kind of reading: a plot with modern twist, good confronting evil, mystery, action, blood, the presence of *femme fatale*, and the omnipresent supernatural element. More, these features are all backed by the reputation already gained by the title of the story itself, over-publicized through various media over the years, particularly for commercial purposes. In *The White Moor Continues* the females and their outfit denote passion and eroticism; history is present in shaping weapons and clothing, Romanian mythological influences are felt in presenting the story behind the characters, and in the choice of character names. (Catalina 2013:265). That is why it is not surprising that more than 70% of the

questionnaire's respondents are dedicated to reading even the continuation of the comic strip series, which goes far beyond the original fairy tale with new unforeseen adventures and surprising characters. (Figure 14)

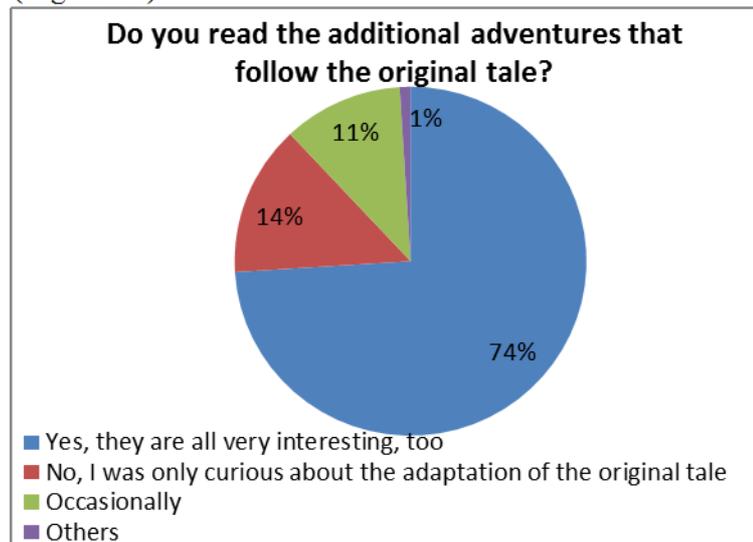


Figure 14

Also, the new media gives anyone the possibility to access various kinds of information, offering new kinds of connections and creativity, while also demanding more attention to visuals, prints and acoustics working together. In addition, the interest in comics could also be exploited within literature classes in schools, given that in America and Western Europe, comics are nowadays already regarded as an alternative method of learning. The respondents of this study also show great interest in comics and graphic novels being introduced in school as an alternative educational resource, as well as other classics being translated into graphic format. (Figure 15 and Figure 16)

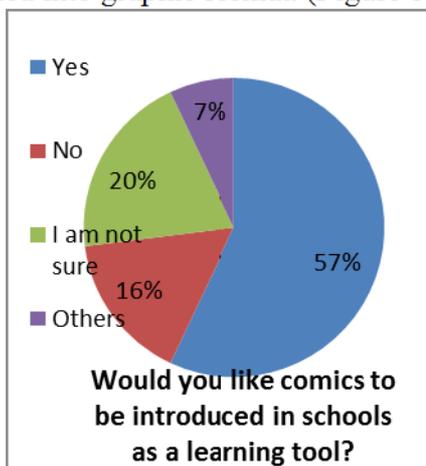


Figure 15

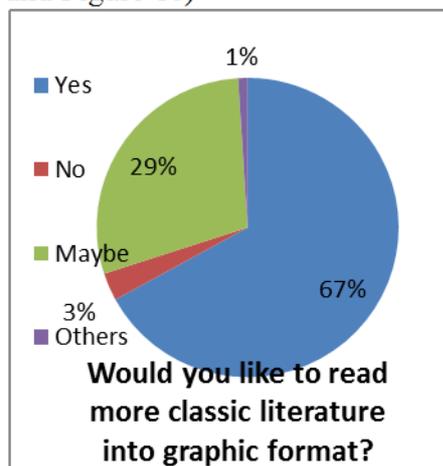


Figure 16

4. Conclusions

Comics have become a new art form, found almost worldwide, comprising innovative work and modelling the thoughts and images of the contemporary culture, having reached even the most remote and conservative audiences in a country still reluctant to exit the shadow of cultural commitment as Romania is. However, another response to the survey confirms that culture indeed has undergone “the broad move from the now centuries-long dominance of writing to the new dominance of the image” (Kress 2003:1). The slow but sure transition

towards a literature dominated by the image is eventually acknowledged by *The White Moore Continues* comic strip's readers. (Figure 17)

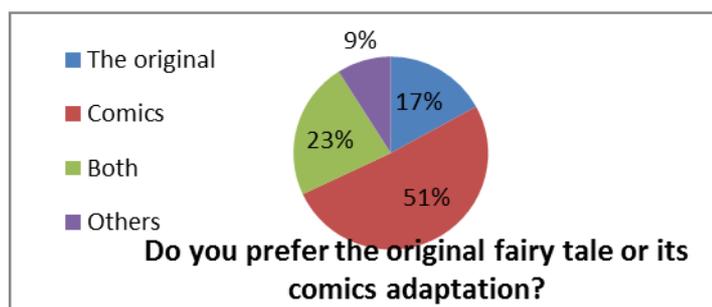


Figure 17

There is no doubt that we can conclude, even about the Romanian public, adding *comics* to the following enumeration, too, that

we are in the midst of a cognitive shift and reading today has become a hybrid textual-visual experience, as witnessed by the inescapable presence of the Internet, PowerPoint, cell phone screens, and the numerous full-colour illustrations and photographs now found in newspapers (Tabachnick 2009:1-4).

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Note on the author

Andreea-Nicoleta CATALINA is a PhD student at University of Bucharest and has been an English language trainer for the past 4 years, which has given her the opportunity to see the educational potential of comics and graphic novels. She believes that using sequential art in classrooms can reach curriculum criteria, motivate students to learn - even enhance their learning, and offer further openings for those who struggle with literacy tasks.