
“ Sleeping Beauty ” in Chelmno : Jane Yolen’s *Briar Rose* or Breaking the Spell of Silence

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“SLEEPING BEAUTY” IN CHELMNO:
JANE YOLEN’S *BRIAR ROSE* OR BREAKING
THE SPELL OF SILENCE*

This article analyses Jane Yolen’s *Briar Rose* from the perspective of trauma studies as a novelistic transposition of “Sleeping Beauty” in the context of the Holocaust. It argues that the fairy tale fulfils a key psychological and even existential role for the fictional survivor of the extermination camp, but also a pedagogical, moral and political one through the figure of the *cowitness* central to the economy of the novel. Through Becca’s recovery of the biographical elements underlying her grandmother’s retelling of the story, Yolen shows how the fairy tale can serve to communicate traumatic personal memories and transmit collective cultural knowledge to counter the disappearance of first-hand witnesses.

The Holocaust threatens a secular as well as a religious gospel, faith in reason and progress [...]. Our *sefer ashoah* [...] will have to accomplish the impossible: allow the limits of representation to be healing limits yet not allow them to conceal an event we are obligated to recall and interpret, both to ourselves and those growing up unconscious of its shadow.

Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Book of Destruction*¹

* This article is dedicated to Geraldine’s son, Liam.

1. This quotation is taken from the epigraph to D. LaCapra’s *Representing the Holocaust*. The authors are grateful to Irene Kacandes for her generous feedback on the article and Marie Emilie Walz for her helpful comments and careful editorial work.

In a recent article, Anna Richardson accounts for the significance of the narrative device of “Historian-As-Detective” characteristic of contemporary Holocaust fiction as a mirror of the reader’s “quest for knowledge in the face of a crisis that threatens the fabric of social order”². Although *Briar Rose* (1992) does not figure among the novels listed by Richardson, Jane Yolen’s powerful retelling of the story of “Sleeping Beauty” as a disguised Holocaust memoir hybridizes genres still further as it fuses historical fact, detective fiction and the fairy tale to inquire into the communication and transmission of traumatic experience, and confront the ever-pressing problem of historical understanding³. Becca, a young American woman, undertakes a journey to Poland to fulfill her promise to her beloved grandmother, Gemma, and solve the mystery of her enigmatic past, thereby reclaiming her family history and Jewish identity. As she travels towards modern-day Kulmhof (Chelmno), the young woman encounters various characters, including a Holocaust survivor known as the Prince who rescued her dying grandmother from a massgrave and organized her flight to the US. Their testimonies confirm the significance of “Sleeping Beauty” for Gemma, a tale that enables

2. A. Richardson, “In Search of the Final Solution”, p. 159. See also L. Kokkola, *Representing the Holocaust in Children’s Literature*.

3. The page references to Yolen’s novel will be given parenthetically in the main text instead of footnotes. We have kept Yolen’s original italics in the chapters recounting Gemma’s storytelling and Becca’s childhood memories. Throughout this article we refer to the tale as “Sleeping Beauty” for convenience’s sake. Although the title of Yolen’s novel is based on Grimm’s tale, Joseph Potocki, who plays the role of the Prince in Gemma’s story, refers to it as “La Belle au Bois Dormant” (p. 159), and, later, as “Sleeping Beauty in the Wood” (p. 211). Yolen self-consciously draws on both versions: Gemma admits to Joseph that she has “no memories in [her] head but one” – a fairy tale: “I do not know its name. But in it I am a princess in a castle and a great mist comes over us. Only I am kissed awake. I know now that there is a castle and it is called ‘the *schloss*’. But I do not know for sure if that is *my* castle. I only remember the fairy tale and it seems, somehow, that it is my story as well” (p. 211). The presence of two different versions of the story seems to draw attention to subtle cultural differences between the European and American contexts. It also reflects the protagonists’ different perception, understanding and treatment of the traumatic events as mediated through the tale: significantly, Gemma draws on Grimm as a metonym for German culture and history (including the Nazi period); it also allows her to emphasize the life-giving kiss which is absent from Perrault’s version (see M. Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère, “‘But marriage itself is no party’”). Potocki’s matter-of-fact testimony, on the other hand, puts the romance elements in perspective in a way that is reminiscent of Perrault’s more distanced and ironic version of the story.

her to “turn the unassimilated experience into a story”⁴. In spite of the clues confirming that she is a Holocaust survivor, however, Gemma’s identity remains elusive and can only be retrieved in fragments.

The key to Gemma’s past lies in her grand-daughter’s ability to decode the biographical implications of her obsessive retelling of “Sleeping Beauty” “[w]ith a Yiddish accent”⁵, which functions as a coded narrative of her miraculous survival of the extermination camp of Chelmno thanks to the intervention of a group of partisans. The fairy tale thus mediates between traumatic memory and consciousness, past and present, reality and fantasy, insofar as the old woman’s compulsive retelling of the tale both articulates and disguises an intimate truth that resists language, logic, order and coherence⁶. “Sleeping Beauty” is made to express the unspeakable truth because it offers the consolation of a fairy tale romance lying outside reality, set in a dream-like, magical universe that obeys its own laws and where fantasy reigns supreme. Even though the traditional versions by Perrault and Grimm are not without their trials, as we shall see, they hold the promise that everything will eventually turn out well for the heroine, and as such provide comfort, hope and reassurance to Gemma. The horrific reality and shattering consequences of the Holocaust are thus poignantly held at bay by the storyteller, while the possibility of meaning, justice, and “happy endings” are magically restored by the tale.

Like the Holocaust narratives adopting the conventions of detective fiction analysed by Richardson, *Briar Rose* resorts to the fairy tale as a formulaic genre whose association with the Holocaust may at first seem incongruous or even inappropriate. Upon closer scrutiny, however, the two genres raise mutually provocative questions, and it is through their combination that Yolen addresses the complex interplay of fiction and reality in Holocaust literature (and trauma narratives more generally), as well as the role of imagination for psychic survival (for the victim) and as a precondition for empathy (for the reader) so that it is endowed with ethical/moral, social and political values. It notably sheds light on

4. Pierre Janet as paraphrased in I. Kacandes, *Talk Fiction*, p. 92.

5. J. Yolen, *Briar Rose*, p. 13.

6. Yolen’s novel confirms C. Bacchilega’s observation that “Postmodern fairy tales exhibit an awareness of how the folktale, which modern humans relegate to the nursery, almost vindictively patterns our unconscious” (C. Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales*, p. 22).

the role of the fairy tale as a form that makes the Holocaust survivor's testimony communicable to herself and to her grandchildren, as it puts the horror of lived experience at a safe distance, gives it a recognizable shape and sense, a coherent moral vision, and promises a happy ending, when direct confrontation with the traumatic events and full knowledge cannot be achieved. As such, the adoption of the fairy tale becomes a poignant reminder of the role of escapist fantasies as a means to deal with traumatic memory and name the unnameable, bringing some sort of consolation or even hope for the future while hinting at the enigmatic quality of the genre and the staying power of its images. The function of the fairy tale as a pedagogical tool associated with children's literature also ties in with Yolen's ethical imperative as a novelist: she reminds us that inasmuch as "we are implicated in each other's traumas"⁷ the tale itself has agency on the listener/reader, where Yolen relocates the transformative function of magic. *Briar Rose* appeals to the reader's knowledge of the familiar tale to stimulate his/her interpretive skills and desire to know more about the circumstances of the Holocaust and ward off oblivion at a time when first-hand witnesses disappear and events gradually vanish from memory. The appeal of the fairy tale as a popular genre therefore plays a vital role as it can touch readers old and young in a way that blank facts often fail to do, and even keep some form of collective memory alive.

In what follows, we want to examine how Yolen's novel reworks her fairy tale intertexts (i.e. Perrault's "La Belle au Bois dormant" and Grimm's "Dornröschen", known in English as "Sleeping Beauty" and "Briar Rose" respectively), and treats the motif of the spell in particular. Materializing the performative power of speech associated with the fairies, the spell is not only the prime mover of the plot, but it is also linked to what Gemma's storytelling, and the novel itself, are trying to achieve: although it is at the origin of Gemma's trauma, it also has to do with the novel's imaginative recovery of untold stories and hidden truths that resist a factual approach. As such, the narrative both conjures up and contains/neutralizes the spell of Nazism through the telling of the tale⁸.

7. C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 24.

8. For a discussion of the etymology of the word "fairy" (*fari*, "to speak" in latin), see the introduction to the volume. D. Haase's claim that the tale centrally "addresses the agency of storytelling" is borne out by Yolen's novel.

Transforming a curse into a gift: the power of storytelling

My memory is the only tomb they have.

Samuel Pissar, lyric for Leonard Bernstein's *Kaddish*

Gemma's unusual retelling of "Sleeping Beauty" (or, rather, "Briar Rose"), which dominates her granddaughter's childhood memories, contains clues about the old woman's past and Becca's own inheritance: her legacy is not the fairy tale castle she at first imagined, however, but the nightmarish "*schloss*" (p. 145) where the inmates of the Chelmno extermination camp (most of them deported from the Lodz ghetto) awaited death by gassing, a place of terror and horror that lies at the core of Gemma's painful story. In this sense the fairy tale transforms a curse (the historical trauma of the Holocaust), into a gift – the gift of storytelling, which the grandmother passes on to her granddaughter, as Becca realises at the end. The connections between the fairy tale and Gemma's life are repeatedly underlined in the course of the novel. The storyteller identifies with the enchanted princess of the tale, the old woman's physical and emotional reactions in the course of the telling suggesting that the story is in some sense about herself, as materialized in the gesture of touching her own hair when she mentions the birth of the red-haired princess. Similarly, when Gemma tells her granddaughter about the evil fairy's curse, she "*sh[akes] herself all over and Becca put[s] her hand on her grandmother's arm*" (p. 19) to comfort her, in a reversal of traditional roles. Although Gemma tells the tale in the third person to her grandchildren, the old woman reveals its personal significance when she desperately asserts that "[she is] Briar Rose" (p. 17) on her death bed. This will start Becca on her quest, her investigation following the clues provided by the discrepancies between Gemma's version of the tale and its so-called classic versions, and the scant documentary evidence found in a wooden box that guide her towards an understanding of the autobiographical meaning behind Gemma's retelling of the tale.

The complex structure of the novel goes against commonplaces about fairy tales as simple, linear and naive stories set safely in an imaginary past. Like many authors writing about the Holocaust, Yolen resorts to formal and structural experimentation, such as a dislocated temporal frame, metaphorization, and multiple narrative points of view to enact the difficulties and dilemmas faced by survivors in communicating

traumatic experience, while protecting young readers against the brutal facts. *Briar Rose* is composed of thirty-three chapters divided into three main sections ("Home", "Castle", "Home again") and it alternates flashbacks (set during Becca's childhood) and the main story (taking place in the present), followed by Joseph's first-hand testimony of deportation, internment, escape and resistance in the third part of the novel. The embedded scenes of storytelling mirror the reader's experience of being (re)told the story of *Sleeping Beauty* in different forms, styles and voices, drawing attention to issues of interpretation and reception, and illustrating what Irene Kacandes calls "talk fiction", which privileges the interactive aspect of communication and writing⁹. Like the young girls listening to Gemma's tale and reacting to it, the readers are indeed compelled by the very form of the novel to actively respond to and engage with it. Becca's role as detective/interpreter involves us into gradually uncovering the significance and implications of the story, linking past and present, fact and fiction, storyteller/narrator and audience.

Becca's childhood recollections of Gemma's (re)telling of "Sleeping Beauty" focus on moments of interaction between the storyteller and her audience. The repetitive structure of these episodes itself suggests the traumatic nature of the memories that are somehow passed on from grandmother to granddaughter beneath the ritual bedtime story. The tale of "Sleeping Beauty" thus tends to "graft itself upon all other speech and associate itself with any other image"¹⁰. Gemma's idiosyncratic version of the tale contains textual clues that only gradually reveal their deeper significance. The embedded fairy tale thus functions as transitional material, bringing the various narrative threads together. Time passes and the girls grow up in-between the interpolated, italicized scenes of storytelling (structurally, temporally and visually distinct from the main narrative), but the fairy tale itself remains the same, endlessly reiterated, bringing the faraway past in the present and retaining its universal and timeless aura, while gradually revealing its personal

9. In *Talk Fiction*, I. Kacandes considers *cowitnessing* as a form of active listening to trauma narratives that can potentially transform the listeners (*ibid.*, p. 107). Usually, as in Yolen's novel, the narrative form "foregrounds the social issues of testimony: how and to what extent can we know the trauma of another person? How can we bear testimony to it?" (p. 108).

10. B. Brodzki, "Teaching Trauma and Transmission", p. 125.

significance through its juxtaposition with Becca's journey as she comes closer to Chelmno in the main narrative.

Becca, the main focalizer of the events and questing heroine, grows from empathetic listener to interpreter/detective, and finally to storyteller in the course of the novel. The readers are made to identify with her, and Yolen depicts her in mixed fairy tale and realistic fashion as a sympathetic young woman both ordinary and special (with her unruly red hair and Cinderella-like attributes). Like a true fairy tale heroine, she undergoes trials in the form of an initiation into the atrocities of the Holocaust during her journey to Poland through which she achieves psychological maturity, her quest leading to discovery and self-discovery. The readers understand that the point of Becca's journey is not so much "*finding*" as "*looking for*" (p. 109) the past. Leaving the comfort and safety of home, Becca, "sort of a Sleeping Beauty" (p. 115), awakens to knowledge about the past as she "break[s] the spell" (p. 109) of silence, oblivion and forgetting. In this sense, the idea of inescapable fate symbolized by the evil fairy in the classic tale(s) is replaced by a more positive (and modern) affirmation of free will and individual responsibility towards past and future generations.

The readers are indeed not simply meant to witness the heroine's emotional, psychological and intellectual maturation, but to learn from it. This harks back to the age-old function of the fairy tale in the socialization process and the transmission of norms and values¹¹. Unlike her older sisters, Becca is sensitive, loving, independent, idealistic and progressive, and as such she incarnates the values upheld by the author. By inviting readers to adopt Becca's point of view and identify with her, Yolen also raises the issue of mediation and transmission or "*cowitnessing*"¹². The main narrative is set in a contemporary, familiar context, suggesting that Gemma's traumatic history can only be known to us indirectly, obliquely, and in fragments, partly because of the nature of what she has to transmit which can only be formulated through the detour of the fairy tale, and partly because the old woman dies at

11. See, for example, J. Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, p. 70.

12. M. Hirsch, I. Kacandes, *Teaching the Representation of the Holocaust*. See also I. Kacandes, *Talk Fiction* as well as her personal "paramemoir", *Daddy's War*, where she confronts her family's wartime experience and investigates the communication of and response to traumatic memory through generations.

the beginning of the novel. Gemma's version of "Sleeping Beauty" is the means through which the storyteller (literally and metaphorically) comes to terms with her own story by putting it at a safe distance and giving it universal significance. Yet, by emphasising the strong bond of love between Becca and her grandmother, as well as their physical and emotional proximity, Yolen encourages the readers to share Becca's stupor, anguish and sorrow at discovering the truth about Gemma's past while drawing attention to the role and responsibility of the *cowitness* in preventing this tragic episode of human history from ever happening again. In this sense, the readers are interpellated by and through the reading experience. As Kacandes puts it:

Most important for our purposes here is the concept of "transhistorical-transcultural witnessing", in which readers at a historical or cultural remove co-witness the stories in the text by acknowledging and explicating those stories as uncompleted attempts at recounting individual or collective traumas¹³.

As both child listener and apprentice journalist investigating her grandmother's past, Becca fulfills this role, and spells out the conditions of possibility for *cowitnessing*: sympathy for the victims as well as recognition of the irreducibility of what they experienced, and of the inevitably transformative, fictionalizing effects of mediation and transmission. It also implies a moral responsibility to acknowledge and pass on this legacy. All of these aspects are thematized in the novel through Becca and Gemma's status as heroines and surrogates of the author herself.

Rewriting the Grimms and Perrault in the context of the Holocaust

[Readers] find themselves hardly prepared for the graphic descriptions of murder, mutilation, cannibalism, infanticide and incest that fill the pages of these bedtime stories for children.

M. Tatar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*, p. 3

13. M. Hirsch, I. Kacandes, *Teaching the Representation of the Holocaust*, p. 18. Kacandes spells *cowitness* in one word in her subsequent work.

As Maria Tatar observes in her study of Grimm's tales, although the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* collection was rejected in the aftermath of the Second World War on the grounds that it encouraged cruelty, violence, hatred for the outsider and even anti-Semitism, it has simultaneously "also become a book whose stories have been used, both in German-speaking countries and in the Anglo-American world, to work through the horrors of the Holocaust"¹⁴. Tatar makes a passing reference to Jane Yolen's *Briar Rose*¹⁵, and she mentions Anne Sexton's version of "Hansel and Gretel" in *Transformations* (1971), which also refers to the "final solution"¹⁶. She speculates that while being immediately associated with German culture, Grimm's *Märchen* also "capture human drama and emotion in its extreme forms and conditions and thus provide the appropriate narrative vehicle for capturing the melodrama of historical events that defy intellectual comprehension"¹⁷.

Yolen's *Briar Rose* is mainly based on Grimm's "Dornröschen" (although it also alludes to Perrault's "La Belle au bois dormant"), which provides the basic plot, characters, motifs, images and language through which Gemma's traumatic memories can be articulated. Gemma's retelling of the fairy tale follows Grimm's version but also deviates from it in significant ways, the Holocaust subtext drawing attention to the disturbing and macabre aspects of the classic tales that are usually softened in modern adaptations for children. Through its careful interweaving of historical fact and self-consciously fictional material, the novel thus sheds new light on the classic texts.

14. M. Tatar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*, p. 3.

15. L. Kukkola devotes a few pages to Yolen's novel in *Representing the Holocaust in Children's Literature* (p. 30-33); see also E. R. Weil, "The Door to Lilith's Cave" and M. J. Landwehr, "The Fairy Tale as Allegory for the Holocaust". However, none deals with Yolen's treatment of the fairy tale intertexts in any detail.

16. Yolen pays homage to Sexton when she uses a quotation from "Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty)" as an epigraph for the "Castle" section of her novel: "The thirteenth fairy, / her fingers as long and thin as straws, / her eyes burnt by cigarettes, / her uterus an empty teacup, / arrived with an evil gift. / She made this prophecy: / The princess shall prick herself / on a spinning wheel in her fifteenth year / and then fall down dead. / Kaputt!" (l. 31-40). The word "Kaputt" echoes Sexton's retelling of "Hansel and Gretel" in the same volume, which refers to the Holocaust even more directly.

17. M. Tatar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*, p. xxii.

Spatial and temporal references are indeed only superficially abolished in the fairy tale. Likewise, even though Gemma first transports the children listening to her version of "Sleeping Beauty" into "another" world, the storyteller's comments on the traditional formula already calls into question the safe location of the tale in an imaginary past:

Once upon a time, [...] which is all times and no times but not the very best of times, there was a castle (p. 4).

The glossing of "once upon a time" as being at once timeless (and hence valid for all times) and euphemistically set "not [in] the very best of times" hints at the historical anchoring of the story and the presence of the past characteristic of postmodern fiction¹⁸. Gemma's tale starts in the usual fashion, locating the story in a pre-modern world featuring kings and queens, princes and princesses, soldiers and peasants. The storyteller, however, soon deviates from her sources, as she subtly interweaves social and religious references which connect the old woman's fairy tale to the Jewish community to which she belongs. The idiom "[f]rom your lips to God's ears" (p. 4), for example, identifies the royal couple and their child as a Jewish family, like the storyteller herself. Similarly, the description of the party organised by the king to celebrate the princess's birth inscribes the story in a specific socio-historical and cultural context. While in Perrault's "La Belle au Bois dormant" the little girl is baptized, the reference to the religious ritual is suppressed in Grimm's tale. Since baptism is not part of Jewish culture, Gemma follows Grimm's description of the celebration as a great feast, which she further modernizes and adapts for her young audience, as it becomes "[a] *terrifically big party. With cake and ice cream and golden plates*" (p. 19). More importantly, the description of the evil fairy and the circumstances, nature and consequences of the curse significantly differ from the classic versions. Unlike the fictional audience of Gemma's tale, the older and more knowledgeable reader grasps the transformative effect of fiction as well as the horror of the reality lurking behind it. A juxtaposition of Grimm's tale and Yolen's rewriting of the same passage is illuminating:

Es waren ihrer dreizehn in seinem Reiche; weil er aber nur zwölf goldene Teller hatte, von welchen sie essen sollten, so mußte eine von

18. See L. Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*.

ihnen daheim bleiben. [...] Als die elfe ihre Sprüche eben getan hatten, trat plötzlich die dreizehnte herein. Sie wollte sich dafür rächen, daß sie nicht eingeladen war [...] ¹⁹.

And not to mention invitations sent to all the good fairies in the kingdom. But not the bad fairy. [...] Not the bad fairy. Not the one in black with big black boots and silver eagles on her hat. But she came. She came, that angel of death (p. 19).

In Yolen's novel, the "bad fairy" is introduced in a passage marked by negations and a repetitive, monosyllabic and alliterative style reminiscent of children's literature. It also evokes the broken, breathless outbursts of Sylvia Plath's mock nursery rhyme poem "Daddy", where the I-speaker's father is memorably compared to a Nazi. Whereas the Grimms explicitly state that the thirteenth fairy (to whom the adjectives "bad" or "evil" have not yet been attributed) wants revenge for not being invited and give a very practical reason for it (the king possesses only twelve golden plates), the motive for the fairy's revenge is elided in Yolen's retelling (the antiphrasis "not to mention"), as if to suggest that trying to find reasons for the genocide is itself absurd. The focus is on the evil fairy's appearance (wearing a Gestapo uniform) and it culminates with the expression "that angel of death", the nickname given to the sinister Nazi "doctor" Joseph Mengele. The supernatural character thus comes to embody the dreaded historical figure, and through him Nazi ideology and the horrors of the death camps, to capture the intrinsic *Unheimlichkeit* (the uncanny horror) of the Final Solution ²⁰.

Likewise, the curse plays a central part in Gemma's retelling, and its effects are hardly mitigated by the presence, reassuring words and positive influence of a "good fairy". Apart from the visual details that make her immediately identifiable, Yolen's evil fairy is much more powerful than in the classic texts:

Le rang de la vieille Fée étant venu, elle dit, en branlant la tête encore plus de dépit que de vieillesse, que la Princesse se perçerait la main

19. J. and W. Grimm, *Märchen*, p. 130-132.

20. Saul Friedländer quoted by H. Bosmajian in *Sparing the Child*, p. xxii.

d'un fuseau, et qu'elle en mourrait. [...] Dans ce moment la jeune Fée sortit de derrière la tapisserie, et dit tout haut ces paroles: « Rassurez-vous, Roi et Reine, votre fille n'en mourra pas [...] au lieu d'en mourir, elle tombera seulement dans un profond sommeil qui durera cent ans, au bout desquels le fils d'un Roi viendra la réveiller. »²¹

Sie wollte sich dafür rächen, daß sie nicht eingeladen war, und ohne jemand zu grüßen oder nur anzusehen, rief sie mit lauter Stimme: „Die Königstochter soll sich in ihrem fünfzehnten Jahr an einer Spindel stechen und tot hinfallen.“ Und ohne ein Wort weiter zu sprechen, kehrte sie sich um und verließ den Saal. Alle waren erschrocken, da trat die zwölfte hervor, die ihren Wunsch noch übrig hatte, und weil sie den bösen Spruch nicht aufheben, sondern nur ihn mildern konnte, so sagte sie: „Es soll aber kein Tod sein, sondern ein hundertjähriger tiefer Schlaf, in welchen die Königstochter fällt.“²²

She came to the party and she said: "I curse you, Briar Rose. I curse you and your father the king and your mother the queen and all your uncles and cousins and aunts. [...] And all the people who bear your name." Gemma shook herself all over and Becca put her hand on her grandmother's arm. "It will be all right, Gemma. You'll see. The curse doesn't work." (p. 19) "When you are seventeen, [...] my curse will come true. You will lie down and a great mist will cover the castle and everyone will die. You too, princess." [...] But one of the good fairies [...] had saved a wish: "Not everyone will die. A few will just sleep. You princess, will be one." (p. 33-34)

In Perrault's "La Belle au Bois dormant", the old fairy's words are mediated by the narrator and conveyed through indirect speech, unlike those of the "good fairy" which are reproduced directly. The narrative thus neutralizes the performative power of the curse, stressing its positive outcome instead. Likewise, the princess is the agent of her own fate and the spindle the means through which it is accomplished. The conditional tense also reduces somewhat the impact of the death sentence, which sounds more like a prophecy than a curse. Acting out of spite and resentment, the old fairy is malevolent but also grotesque (at least for an adult reader): she has lost her position in the world, and taken

21. Ch. Perrault, *Histoires ou contes du temps passé*, p. 32.

22. J. and W. Grimm, *Märchen*, p. 132.

revenge on those who have ignored and humiliated her. In Grimm's "Dornröschen", the thirteenth fairy's words are delivered in a loud exclamatory sentence ("mit lauter Stimme"), and the emphasis is placed on the closing words, but sleep is immediately substituted for death by the young fairy. Beyond their differences, Perrault's and Grimm's fairies put a curse upon the little princess for a reason: revenge. This motive is absent from Yolen's narrative, and the fact that the curse extends to the baby's family and even to the entire community heightens its irrational and obscure aspect. In both Perrault's and Grimm's version, the baby girl is designated as the only victim of the fairy's anger. The hundred years' sleep spreads to the rest of the kingdom for the convenience of the princess either explicitly ("[la bonne fée] pensa que quand la Princesse viendrait à se réveiller, elle serait bien embarrassée toute seule dans ce vieux Château" ²³), or implicitly ("Und dieser Schlaf verbreitete sich über das ganze Schloß" ²⁴). In Yolen's novel, however, the curse has far-reaching effects and implications, let alone historical and political resonances. The evil fairy addresses the young princess directly ("I curse you Briar Rose"), stressing its performative aspect, and she presents herself as the sole agent of the fate that awaits the new-born baby. The suppression of the spindle actually infuriates Becca's school friend, Shirley, who points out that Gemma has "*got it wrong*" (p. 34) ²⁵. Moreover, the description of the "*great mist*" (p. 33) that surrounds the castle suggests the gassing of millions of victims of the Nazis during the war, as well as a more diffuse and abstract form of annihilation associated with forgetting. Through the visual analogy between fog and gas, the author suggests that real-life traumatic experience lies behind the tale's metaphorical language. No longer a story about sexual awakening or a sentimental romance, "Sleeping Beauty" comes to represent the individual

23. Ch. Perrault, *Histoires ou contes du temps passé*, p. 34.

24. J. and W. Grimm, *Märchen*, p. 134.

25. Removing the spindle also shifts attention away from the object that plays a crucial role in psychoanalytical readings of "Sleeping Beauty", notably in Bettelheim's influential interpretation of the tale as a story about the awakening of sexuality. According to Bettelheim, "The story of Sleeping Beauty impresses every child that a traumatic event – such as the girl's bleeding at the beginning of puberty, and later, in the first intercourse – does have the happiest consequences. The story implants the idea that such events must be taken very seriously, but that one need not be afraid of them. The 'curse' is a blessing in disguise" (B. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, p. 235).

and collective trauma of the Holocaust, so that behind the curse against Becca's family and "*all the people who bear [her] name*" (p. 19) lies the shadow of extremism, antisemitism and genocide.

Unlike the classic versions, in which a young fairy softens the spell from irrevocable death to a hundred years' sleep, Yolen's good fairy only manages to spare a few people's lives. And unlike Perrault's "*La Belle au Bois dormant*", sleep is not a pleasurable experience ("*la bonne Fée, pendant un si long sommeil, lui avait procuré le plaisir des songes agréables*"²⁶). It becomes a nightmare of violence, suffering and death from which the young woman will never fully awaken – her identity replaced by the consolatory fiction of the fairy tale. What Becca learns as a child about the meaning of "a hundred years" already hints at the true nature of the spell:

"So fast asleep they were, they were not able to wake up for a hundred years. Are you a hundred years, Gemma?"

"Not yet."

"I'm six."

"Not yet."

"Is a hundred a lot?"

"A hundred years is forever." (p. 44)

The gloss on "forever" is ambiguous, ironically echoing the *happily ever after* formula of traditional fairy tales. But it also rhymes with "never", and thus becomes a euphemism for death (just like sleep in Gemma's tale). It may also hint at the condition of Holocaust survivors unable to awaken from the traumatic experience of the camps. Gemma emphasizes that nobody escapes the curse except the fairy tale character she identifies with:

When princess Briar Rose was seventeen, one day and without further warning [...] a mist covered the entire kingdom. [...] And everyone in it – the good people and the not-so-good, the young people and the not-so-young, and even Briar Rose's mother and father fell asleep. Everyone slept: lords and ladies, teachers and tumblers, dogs and doves, rabbits and rabbits and all kinds of citizens (p. 43).

26. Ch. Perrault, *Histoires ou contes du temps passé*, p. 37.

This passage forms a dark counterpart to Grimm's humorous description of the quiet spreading of sleep in the entire castle. The enumeration of the victims of the "mist" of Nazi ideology leading to the deportation and extermination of the Jews, suggests once again the moral arbitrariness of the evil spell, which befalls "the good people" as well as "the not-so-good", and "all kinds of citizens". In Grimm's "Dornröschen", the princess's parents, the people of the court, the horses, the dogs, the pigeons, the flies, the fire flickering, the roast and the cook and even the wind go to sleep²⁷. Yolen combines historical references, fairytale imagery and sing-song rhythm as she associates lords and ladies, teachers and tumblers (from Yiddish, *tumlen* to stir, bustle; i.e. agitators who opposed resistance to the Nazi regime and were persecuted), rabbits and *rabbitzen* (female rabbis). From an adult perspective, Becca is able to identify the references that escaped her when she listened to her favourite bedtime story as a child, and grasp the sinister reality behind the playful language.

Gemma's retelling of "Sleeping Beauty" also inflects the story to capture her experience as a Holocaust survivor by inverting the significance of fairytale motifs, such as the briar edge that grows around the castle, whose role was to protect the sleeping princess in Perrault's and Grimm's classic versions²⁸. In Grimm's version, the hedge nevertheless takes on sinister overtones when the narrator makes a passing reference to the many young men who got stuck and died miserable deaths as they were trying to reach the castle²⁹, a morbid detail that reappears in Gemma's retelling:

"All around the castle [...] a briary hedge began to grow, with thorns as sharp as barbs. [...] Higher and higher the thorny bush grew until it covered the windows and it covered the doors. It covered the high castle towers and no one could see in [...] and no one could see out. [...] And no one

27. J. and W. Grimm, *Märchen*, p. 172.

28. The sleeping princess is raped during her sleep in Giambattista Basile's "Sole, Luna e Talia" (included in *The Pentamerone*). For a discussion of the sinister aspects of the classic tales, see D. Haase, M. Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère, S. Ravussin *et al.* in the volume.

29. "[...] denn die Dornen, als hätten sie Hände, hielten fest zusammen, und die Jünglinge blieben darin hängen, konnten sich nicht wieder losmachen und starben eines jämmerlichen Todes" (J. and W. Grimm, *Märchen*, p. 136).

cared to know about the sleeping folk inside," Gemma said pointedly. "So no one told about them and neither will I." (p. 58-59)

Gemma's simile comparing the thorns of the growing hedge to barbed wire poignantly plays on the confusion between literal and figurative language, where the painful physical reality of the concentration camps is neutralized/naturalized in the image, and protection redefined as internment. The claustrophobic atmosphere of the castle, from which it is impossible to escape, is emphasized, and made to signify beyond the isolation of the inmates of the camp itself. The passage significantly shifts the perspective from the external, distant point of view adopted by Perrault and the Grimms to an oscillation between those trapped inside the "castle" and those outside it ("and no one could see in and no one could see out"). Yolen thus creates a "poetics of sense memory [that] involve[s] not so much *speaking of* but *speaking out of* a particular memory or experience"³⁰. While in Perrault's and Grimm's versions the mysterious inhabitants of the castle give rise to many rumours and legends, Gemma's insistence on the invisibility of the people trapped inside, followed by her discouraged comment at the end, capture her anxiety at failing to carry her message across to her audience. Through the old woman's repetition of the words "no one" and "no one cared" in the next sentence, which abruptly ends in silence, the twin dangers of indifference and oblivion so central to Holocaust literature are evoked. "*Pointedly*" linking people's lack of concern for the fate of the victims to the girls' disinterest in the story ("*so no one told about them and neither will I*"), the old woman formulates what is at stake in her retelling of the tale. Despite Shana's begging, she cannot "*be persuaded to finish the story that night*" (p. 59).

There is no way to reach the castle, and no escape but death for those who are locked in it. Yet only a song may connect those who are outside and those inside, the living and the dead, once again reinforcing the need to endlessly (re)tell their story. It is "[a]n old song for an old story" (p. 98), sung in Yiddish, which has the power to open the magical hedge of barbed wire and give access to the sleeping kingdom. In Perrault's "La Belle au Bois dormant", it is because the hundred years have elapsed

30. Jill Bennet, quoted in M. Hirsch and I. Kacandes, *Teaching the Representation of the Holocaust*, p. 21.

that the thorns part before the prince³¹. Likewise, the prince finds nothing but beautiful flowers that open of their own accord to let him pass in Grimm's text³². In Gemma's retelling, when the prince extends his hands towards the thorns, "*all the bones of the many princes who had been there before him rose up from the thorn bush singing*" (p. 97). Further on, "*The prince sang, too, and as he added his voice to theirs, it was as if he witnessed all their deaths in the thorns. It was as if he had knowledge of all their lives, past and present and future*" (p. 111). And finally, "*And the thorns parted before him*" (p. 121). Even though this passage is originally divided into three parts, each belonging to a different memory (chapters 15, 17 and 19), the sentences are closely related semantically and syntactically (by the connective "and"). By singing along the dirge lamenting the fate of the victims persecuted and killed by the Nazis, the prince pays tribute to their sufferings and is therefore granted entrance in their sombre palace. Above all, it is his acknowledgement of their suffering that symbolically re-integrates them into the world from which they have been expelled, and gives them back their identity as human beings³³. The prince's song therefore becomes analogous to Gemma's retelling as an invitation to honor the memory of Holocaust victims. Through singing, telling and transmitting their story, the anonymous dead regain their rightful place in collective memory, and live on for future generations. As Gemma explains to Sylvia:

The future is when people talk about the past. So if the prince knows all their past lives and tells all the people who are still to come, then the princes live again and into the future (p. 111).

31. Ch. Perrault, *Histoires ou contes du temps passé*, p. 36.

32. "Als der Königsohn sich der Dornenhecke näherte, waren es lauter große, schöne Blumen, die taten sich von selbst auseinander und ließen ihn unbeschädigt hindurch, und hinter ihm taten sie sich wieder als eine Hecke zusammen." (J. and W. Grimm, *Märchen*, p. 136).

33. In *The Brothers Grimm*, J. Zipes argues that "*Sleeping Beauty* is not only about female and male stereotypes and male hegemony, it is also about death, our fear of death, and our wish for immortality" (p. 215). Zipes's understanding of the fairy tale as "grounded in history" and reflecting "specific struggles to humanize bestial and barbaric forces [...] through metaphors", used as an epigraph in Yolen's book, informs the novel as a whole. See also D. Haase's discussion of Ernst Bloch's and Bruno Bettelheim's theorizations of the utopian nature of the genre in response to WWII in "Overcoming the Present". Bloch wrote in exile and Bettelheim was a survivor of Buchenwald and Dachau.

Becca is the only one who understands the meaning of Gemma's explanations. It singles her out as the one who is designated to discover and transmit the story of her grandmother and, through her, of the Holocaust victims. As storytellers, both assure the continuity of collective memory, a role which is also taken on by the author herself, who thereby stresses the vital aspect of testimony and transmission.

Probably drawing upon the prince's first impression of death and horror in Perrault, the gloomy atmosphere in Yolen's novel distills with more and more intensity the horror of the Holocaust through repetitions, poetic language and ominous imagery:

The prince walked along the path of the overgrown forest, the thorns opening before him. On either side of the path white birch trees gleamed like the souls of the new dead (p. 135).

"Then at last he came to the palace itself. A mist still lay all about the walls and floors, hovering like a last breath on the lips of all the sleepers." She stopped to take a breath (p. 136).

In spite of the children's interruptions and invitations to skip a part which frightens them, Gemma carries on with the tale, using macabre similes that hint at the true nature of the curse. First comparing "the white birch trees" to "the souls of the new dead", the image prepares the reader for the scene of horror that follows and invites him/her to see beyond the euphemistic language used to address a children's audience as a (self-)protective device, although Gemma's physical reaction signals the harrowing effects of the telling on herself. The comparison between the birch trees and the souls of the new dead symbolically links the dark fairy tale to the tragic history of the Holocaust, suggesting more and more to the readers that the road which Becca and her Polish guide Magda follow corresponds to the path along which the prince walked. Indeed, on their way to the extermination camp of Chelmno, the young women, like the courageous young man in Gemma's retelling, pass "stands of white birch, gleaming in the afternoon light" (p. 132). Magda's remark that "there are birch trees everywhere in Poland" (p. 132) prepares the readers for the prince's discovery of the motionless sleepers, identifying Poland as the land of horror, trauma and mourning onto which Gemma's fairy tale is mapped out. It also strengthens

the link between the figure of the prince and Becca as ready to confront horror and bear witness to it.

While the first mention of the mist already hinted that it resulted from the curse, the discovery of the sleeping inhabitants of the castle (which parallels the partisans' discovery of the mass grave in Joseph's account of the events) confirms it. The fog that "*still lay[s] all about the walls and floors*" (p. 136) is the cause of the inhabitants' unconsciousness, and its comparison to "*a last breath on the lips of all the sleepers*" (p. 136) suggests its lethal effect, reinforcing its connection with the gas used by the Nazis to kill massively during World War II. The fog also echoes traditional motifs of Holocaust literature, including the crematoriums' suffocating smell, thick smoke and falling ashes evoking a world in which death and destruction have become the measure of all things. In this context, the readers cannot but understand the true significance of "sleep":

As he walked through the castle, he marveled at how many lay asleep: the good people, the not-so-good, the young people and the not-so-young, and not one of them stirring. Not one (p. 150).

While this passage echoes the description of the sleeping inhabitants of the palace in Grimm's tale, it also dramatically contrasts with the depiction of the enchanted kingdom, as people's sleep is no longer temporary but final. Unlike their intertextual sources, they are not individualized and their complete immobility is emphasised. Through repetitions and a paratactic, elliptical style, the author pictures sleep as an irrevocable state. The dialogue which frames the passage shows that the revelation of the underlying meaning of words and images cannot come unprompted. Gemma's answer to the little girl's question ("*What is stirring, Gemma?*" [...]) "*Stirring means moving about, waking up*", p. 150) confirms that for the sleepers, "[a] *hundred years is forever*" (p. 44).

The historical and personal subtext that underpins Gemma's version of "Sleeping Beauty" is confirmed by Joseph's testimony in the third part of the novel. It is Joseph, the homosexual aristocrat who becomes a partisan after escaping from a labour camp, who kisses Gemma back to life. While in Perrault's "La Belle au Bois Dormant", the eloquent Princess playfully taunts the Prince ("*Est-ce vous, mon Prince? lui dit-*

elle, vous vous êtes bien fait attendre”³⁴), in Grimm’s “Dornröschen”, the heroine remains silent. In Gemma’s retelling, the emphasis is not on the romance element (the Prince figure is gay) or even on heroism – “You must understand (he said), that this is a story of survivors, not heroes” (p. 163) –, but on the life-giving aspect of the kiss: “*I am alive, my dear prince. You have given me back the world*” (p. 238). The ending of Gemma’s story is consistent with the conventional fairy tale ending:

Und da wurde die Hochzeit des Königssohns mit dem Dornröschen in aller Pracht gefeiert, und sie lebten vergnügt bis an ihr Ende³⁵.

After she was married, she had a baby girl, even more beautiful than she. And they lived happily ever after (p. 238).

Gemma’s retelling seems to conform to the classic versions insofar as it ends in marriage and a conventional happy ending. A closer look nevertheless reveals how it subtly deviates from the standard story to suggest a social reality which does not correspond to the fairy tale definition of happiness, but to the context of war in which Gemma’s story is set. While the Grimms evoke the prince and the wedding feast, underlining its magnificence, Yolen inverts the sequence of the events so that the mention of the union is relegated to the first part of the sentence, placing the emphasis on the little girl who was born from the union. The pronoun “they” may only refer to the mother and the baby, and no longer to the happy prince and his bride (referred to by the pronoun “sie” in Grimm’s text). The absence of the father of the child in the last lines of the tale foreshadows that he is not part of the final picture of family happiness, an unconventional detail which Becca, always an attentive listener, picks up on in the scene which concludes her grandmother’s story. As an adult, Becca is able to see beyond the reassuring *happily ever after* ending and find the true answers to the questions that the story has always raised for her, even as a child. Unwilling or unable to reveal the tragic aspects of her real-life story, Gemma hides pain, horror and death behind the familiar conventions of the fairy tale genre, except for

34. Ch. Perrault, *Histoires ou contes du temps passé*, p. 37.

35. J. and W. Grimm, *Märchen*, p. 138.

those who are able or willing to read between the lines³⁶. Gemma's last words evade or perhaps even seek to exorcize the painful memories that Becca's question unwittingly recalls, sending her granddaughter and the readers back to the abstract notion of happiness which the fairy tale formula conjures up, as if the fairy tale represented a form of "white magic" able to exorcize the past (as opposed to the "dark spell" of Nazism). This deceptively optimistic ending is put into perspective by the "Author's Note" which reminds the reader that "This is a book of fiction. All the characters are made up. Happy-ever-after is a fairy tale notion, not history" and that "no woman [...] escaped from Chelmno alive" (p. 241). In other words, the happy ending is only valid within the fiction, in keeping with Zipes's ideas about the utopian function of the fairy tale, but it is nevertheless contradicted by the historical facts that frame it, thereby drawing attention to the limits and limitations of the genre. This unresolved tension informs the novel and shapes its very structure, raising the central issue of the problematic representation of the Holocaust, in which fiction has a central role to play but whose irreducibility to historical fact must be simultaneously (re)asserted. The last section of the novel ("Home Again") is itself introduced by a quote from Angela Carter's *The Old Wives' Fairy Tale Book* which questions the simplistic opposition between fairy tales and "truth":

We say to fibbing children: "Don't tell fairy tales!" Yet children's fibs, like old wives' tales, tend to be overgenerous with the truth rather than economical with it (p. 223).

Although the fairy tale seemingly carries the readers or the audience away from reality, into a world in which frightening stories end well for the hero or the heroine, its metaphoric language and vivid imagery allow us to confront a reality which cannot be expressed directly. As Carter underlines, "lies" and strategies of indirection are often more telling or effective than mere statements of fact, as they point to the emotional and moral implications of real-life experience and historical fact. Framing the last part of the novel, these apparently paradoxical but

36. Just like Perrault's readers, who are invited to decypher the meaning of his tales which "renferment tous une Morale très sensée, et qui se découvre plus ou moins, selon le degré de pénétration de ceux qui les lisent" ("A Mademoiselle", in Ch. Perrault, *Histoires ou contes du temps passé*, p. 127).

complementary visions mirror and respond to each other, reflecting the richness and the subtlety of Yolen's approach to the question of how to name the unnameable, and reflect on the possibility (and limitations) of its communicability. It suggests that "literature becomes a witness, and perhaps the only witness, to the crisis within history which precisely cannot be articulated, witnessed in the given categories of history itself"³⁷, and as such invites readers to respond to the ethical imperative of becoming *cowitnesses* to individual trauma and human tragedy, and somehow be changed as a result.

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37. Felman and Laub, quoted in I. Kacandes, *Talk Fiction*, p. 98.

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