

CHILDREN ALL GROWN UP: CHILD LABOR, GENDER ROLES AND
PEDAGOGICAL FUNCTION IN ENGELBERT HUMPERDINCK'S
HÄNSEL UND GRETEL.

Jeff VanDrimmelen

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Approved by
Advisor: Jonathan M. Hess
Reader: Siegfried Mews
Reader: Kathryn Starkey

ABSTRACT

JEFF VANDRIMMELEN: *Children All Grown Up: Child Labor, Gender Roles and Pedagogical Function in Engelbert Humperdinck's *Hänsel und Gretel**.
(Under the direction of Jonathan M. Hess)

This thesis explores the significance of the modifications Engelbert Humperdinck and his librettist Adelheid Wette made to the Grimm's version of "Hansel and Gretel" in the opera *Hänsel and Gretel*. I first examine how the role of the children transforms from a largely inactive one to a more labor-intensive one as a comment on child labor. Second, I investigate how the dramatic change in the leadership, along with the change in the profession of the father, comment on an emancipatory role for women and criticize traditional patriarchal power. Finally, I analyze how the addition of pedagogical and religious themes converts the opera into a didactic tool. All these themes – child labor, gender and pedagogical function – ultimately create a discourse about how children deserve a childhood free of abuse and adult anxiety, a childhood that equally educates both genders, and a childhood that instills confidence and religious faith in the child.

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DEDICATION

To my wonderful children Joseph, Rebekah and Kay, along with my wonderful and supportive wife Debbi, I dedicate this project. You are the reason I get up every day. I pray you will find the same joy in Humperdinck's opera that I have found while writing this thesis. I love you all!

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: AN OLD TALE MADE NEW AGAIN

The theater grows quiet as the lights dim and the curtains open, revealing two young children playfully singing nursery rhymes. Despite their outer joviality, the boy and girl are poorly dressed as they construct a broom and knit some clothes respectively. It is not clear how old they are, but it is obvious that they are still quite young. There is no trace of parents anywhere on the stage. They begin to bore of their chores, as is so typical with children, and soon abandon them. The girl awakens to a sense of duty and begins to fear the work will not be done in time. She urges her brother to return to his work.¹ He sarcastically answers "Arbeiten? Wo denkst du hin? / Dananch steht mir nicht der Sinn."² The boy then succeeds in convincing his sister to join him in "tanzen und fröhlich sein!"³ They put aside their assigned chores and sing and dance around the stage.

This is the opening scene for a musical work written over a century ago in which two young children are lost in the forest, accosted by a witch, and ultimately delivered from peril: Engelbert Humperdinck's fairy-tale opera *Hänsel und Gretel* (1893). This familiar fairy tale was made famous in the century preceding its composition by the brothers Grimms' *Kinder*

¹ "Und jetzt an die Arbeit zurück, geschwind, / Dass wir beizeiten fertig sind." Engelbert Humperdinck, Kurt Pahlen, and Rosemarie König, *Hänsel und Gretel: Textbuch, Originalausgabe*, (Zürich: Atlantis Musikbuch-Verlag, 2000), 23.

² Ibid. 23.

³ Ibid. 23.

und Hausmärchen (1812) and Ludwig Bechstein's *Märchen* (1857).⁴ Research points to both the Grimms' and Bechstein's "Hänsel und Gretel" as the source for the fairy-tale opera.⁵ Although characters' names and settings were well-known, Humperdinck and his librettist, Adelheid Wette, significantly modified their version from the earlier renderings of the tale.⁶

It will be my argument that by changing Grimms' and Bechstein's versions, Humperdinck and Wette commented on several important issues in the late nineteenth century regarding childhood. First and foremost, Hänsel and Gretel no longer play innocent bystander roles, but are required instead to work alongside their parents. This change in position is a criticism of child labor that was very prevalent at that time, and draws attention to the need for a childhood free of abuse and adult anxiety. Second, Hänsel and Gretel switch leadership roles in the opera. Where Hänsel used to take the protective function, he now takes on an inferior role. The father's profession is also altered. He was a wood-cutter in the older

⁴ All citations for this project refer to the 1857 version of Grimms' fairy tales. Jacob Grimm, Wilhelm Grimm, ed. Heinz Rölleke, *Kinder- und Hausmärchen: Ausgabe Letzter Hand mit den Originalanmerkungen der Brüder Grimm* (Stuttgart: P. Reclam, 1980). Although first published in 1812, "Hänsel und Gretel" went through some revision before it reached the form in which Adelheid Wette, the librettist, knew them. Maria Tatar catalogues some of these changes in her book, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*, Expand 2nd ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003), 36. She lists the change in the character of the mother to a more evil stepmother and the exoneration of the father as a guilty party in the abandonment of the children as some of the most important changes. There has also been some speculation regarding the source for the adaptation of the Hänsel and Gretel tale. For quite a long time it has been assumed that the Grimm brothers' version was the source, but Julia Liebscher argues that it may have been, in fact, Ludwig Bechstein's version. She argues that Humperdinck "did not concern himself so much with retaining a simple folk language, [but] it was the graphic, rather drastic narrative that ranked foremost; ... Therefore [Bechstein's] version seemed to lend itself better to a stage of adaptation than the quiet narrative style of the Grimm brothers, with their subdued and cozy charm." Engelbert Humperdinck and others, *Hänsel und Gretel* (Germany: Philips, 1993), 8. Whether or not the Grimms' version was used as a source or Bechstein is not relevant for this discussion. What is important is the way that Hänsel and Gretel are portrayed, and it is on this depiction that I will focus the discussion.

⁵ It is important to recognize that some of the differences in the text are inherent in a comparison between different genres, i.e. literature and opera. Although it would be interesting to explore how the genre changes the interpretation of a fairy tale, it is outside the scope of this essay. I will thus focus on the literary, and to a smaller extent, musical aspects of Wette's libretto and its implications.

⁶ It should be noted that some sources, but not all, also cite Humperdinck's then fiancée, and later wife, Hedwig Taxer, as helping Wette in the writing of the libretto. See Mehnert epilogue, Engelbert Humperdinck and Adelheid Wette, *Hänsel und Gretel; Märchenspiel in drei Bildern von Adelheid Wette* (Stuttgart: P. Reclam Jr, 1970), 48.

versions of the tale, but now is a broom-maker. Both the changes in the father's and Hänsel's roles are a comment on gender and ultimately point out the need to educate both men and women equally. Wette also adds a blatant pedagogical element to the opera by creating teaching moments within the text and adding a repeated motif about the protection of God. This transforms the account from a medieval folk tale into a modern didactic and religious narrative capable of instilling personal confidence and religious faith in a child.⁷

Much of the scholarly research about Humperdinck's *Hänsel und Gretel* to date has focused on his biography leading up to the writing of the opera.⁸ Although his father did not want him to be a musician, when Humperdinck heard Lortzing's *Undine* at the age of fourteen he immediately went to work composing.⁹ At eighteen he entered the Cologne Conservatory and over the next decade won several awards for his musical compositions.¹⁰ The most decisive change occurred in 1878 when, at the age of 24, he heard Wagner's *Ring*. He joined the Munich Wagnerian society "Orden vom Gral," and was invited to Bayreuth by Wagner himself to help copy scores for the first production of *Parsifal* in 1881.

⁷ In the introduction to their 1857 version of *Kinder und Hausmärchen*, the Grimms' explain that the stories they had gathered were "Samen" of tales that "in früherer Zeit geblüht hat" but from which "nichts mehr übriggeblieben, selbst die Erinnerung daran fast ganz verloren war..." Grimm, Grimm, *Kinder- und Hausmärchen: Ausgabe Letzter Hand mit den Originalanmerkungen der Brüder Grimm*, v. 1, 15. One of these profound "seeds" is the story of "Hänsel and Gretel." It was not original to the Brothers Grimm, nor was their narration the last to grace the pages of literature, as we see with Bechstein and Humperdinck.

⁸ See Humperdinck, Pahlen, and König, *Hänsel und Gretel: Textbuch*, 190, John W. Freeman and Metropolitan Opera, *The Metropolitan Opera Stories of the Great Operas*, 1st ed. (New York: Metropolitan Opera Guild, 1984); Engelbert Humperdinck, *Briefe und Tagebücher* (Köln: Volk, 1975); Eva Humperdinck and Engelbert Humperdinck, *Engelbert Humperdinck Werkverzeichnis: zum 140. Geburtstag*. (Koblenz: Görres Verlag, 1994); Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed. (New York: Grove's Dictionaries, 2000).

⁹ Amanda Glauert, 'Humperdinck, Engelbert', *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 15 October 2005), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>.

¹⁰ Mozart Prize of Frankfurt (1876), Mendelssohn Prize of Berlin (1879), and Meyerbeer Prize of Berlin (1881). *Ibid.*

Humperdinck spent ten years with Wagner and many critics focus, rightfully so, on the impact Wagner had on the young composer.¹¹

Other scholars focus on the historical process by which the composition became an opera. Wette wrote to her elder brother Engelbert Humperdinck toward the end of 1890 and asked him to set some scenes to music from a newer version of “Hänsel and Gretel” she had already written. These scenes were originally created for an entirely different audience, the children in a school she ran and in which she and her sister taught.¹² At that point, however, she was asking so she could use the songs as a gift to her husband for his birthday. Humperdinck accepted the challenge and these lullaby-like scenes eventually grew into the full-fledged opera that would become *Hänsel und Gretel*.¹³ The opera was a great success. In its first year, it had at least seventy-two performances and still continues to be popular, even into the twenty-first-century.¹⁴ This thesis will not delve into this already exhaustive area of study, but will build on these solid biographical and historical foundations to explicate the literary significance of the work.

¹¹ John W. Freeman explains that “Humperdinck’s music, to be sure, often sounds Wagnerian.” *The Metropolitan Opera Stories of the Great Operas*, 1st ed. (New York: Metropolitan Opera Guild, 1984), 178. Kurt Pahlen gives credit to Wagner for the style of Humperdinck’s music. He says, “Ein Blitz von Genie wies Humperdinck auf einen seltsamen, kaum geahnten, noch nie begangenen Weg: Wagners leitmotivische Musik, die Fülle seiner sinnlich betörenden Klänge mit der Kinderwelt zu verschmelzen! Unsinn, ja Wahnsinn? Wahrscheinlich, aber möglich und in der Umgebung dieses ‘Kleinmeisters’ wundersam schön und überwältigend erfolgreich.“ Engelbert Humperdinck, Kurt Pahlen and Rosemarie König, *Hänsel und Gretel: Textbuch*, Originalausg. 1. Aufl ed. (Zürich: Atlantis Musikbuch-Verlag, 2000), 134. Pahlen goes as far as referring to Humperdinck as the “Kleinmeister:” the heir to the legacy of the great musical master of the nineteenth century, Wagner.

¹² For more information see Julia Liebscher’s CD introduction, Humperdinck et al., *Hänsel und Gretel*, 9.

¹³ See Humperdinck, Pahlen, and König, *Hänsel und Gretel: Textbuch*, 133-78.

¹⁴ This opera was first performed on the 23rd of December 1893 in the Großherzogliches Hoftheater in Weimar. Engelbert Humperdinck and Adelheid Wette, *Hänsel und Gretel; Märchenspiel in drei Bildern von Adelheid Wette* (Stuttgart: P. Reclam Jr, 1970), 3. On account of its prodigious success and first performance date, it became a standard Christmas-time performance in many great opera-houses. See also Glauert, ‘Humperdinck, Engelbert’ *Grove Music Online*, 4.

The fame bestowed upon the opera was certainly due in some measure to its Wagnerian form, but also in part to the issues it addressed. Yet despite the exceptional libretto, very little has been written about the literary significance of the opera. Kurt Pahlen, for example, recently wrote an excellent critical analysis of the opera to accompany the libretto.¹⁵ He skillfully points out innuendos within the music, and while exploring the early historical background of the work briefly mentions the libretto. He reports that Humperdinck asked some friends to read the altered fairy tale in the summer of 1891. He then quotes a letter Humperdinck wrote to his sister, the librettist, about the experience:

Adelheid, Du wirst berühmt. Über die Musik lässt sich noch nichts sagen, da ich sie bis jetzt niemandem gezeigt habe. ... Ich möchte nur, dass sie auch so gut befunden werde [wie das Libretto].¹⁶

Both Pahlen and Humperdinck imply that Wette's new version of "Hänsel and Gretel" had made quite an impact on the readers, but Pahlen does not go into any more detail about why the text was so well received. No one else has since addressed the topic, and it is the purpose of this project to fill in this academic gap. In this introductory chapter, I will examine how the topics mentioned before—child labor, gender, and pedagogical function—are addressed in scholarship regarding the Grimms' "Hänsel und Gretel." Each of the following chapters will then focus on these topics in greater detail by examining Humperdinck's opera, and, more importantly, the libretto itself.

Child Labor

In his book, *The Brothers Grimm: From Enchanted Forest to the Modern World* (1988), Jack Zipes cites the abandonment of Hänsel and Gretel in the Grimms' fairy tale as an

¹⁵ Humperdinck, Pahlen, and König, *Hänsel und Gretel: Textbuch*, 190.

¹⁶ Quoted by Pahlen in *Ibid.* 159.

example that "there was widespread child abuse in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries."¹⁷

He further explains that

[t]he history of the family in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is filled with reports about long periods of swaddling, child killing, abandonment of children, corporal punishment, sexual abuse, rape, intense sibling rivalry, [and] maltreatment of children by stepmothers and stepfathers.¹⁸

Zipes points out this obvious cruelty and then concludes that "[w]hile these subjects are amply portrayed in the Grimms' tales, they have not been sufficiently explored by literary critics, folklorists, and therapists," thus leaving an opening for further analysis.¹⁹ In recent years, scholars have addressed the gap Zipes mentioned in his book with articles and books that have focused on the abandonment of the child.²⁰ None of these commentaries have, however, mentioned Humperdinck's rendition and as a result, none mentions child labor.

¹⁷ Jack David Zipes, *The Brothers Grimm: From Enchanted Forests to the Modern World* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 121. In her book *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the idea of Human Interiority 1780-1930* (1995) Carolyn Steedman also explores child labor in nineteenth century Europe. She looks at the character of Mignon from Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* and her reception, particularly in England. She begins her eighth chapter, "Children of the Stage," by explaining how the theaters in the mid 1840's began to see "increased employment opportunities ... for women and children of the working and lower-middle classes." See Carolyn Steedman, *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority, 1780-1930* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 130-148. There is also a discussion of child labor going on in English literature. Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies* (1863) was very popular in England through the 1920s. The first three chapters tell the story of a young boy, Tom, who is forced to work as a chimney sweep. It portrays in detail the abuse and neglect common to the chimney sweeps in England at that time. See Charles Kingsley and Brian Alderson, *The Water-Babies* (Oxford England: Oxford University Press, 1995).

¹⁸ Ibid. 121.

¹⁹ Ibid. 121. Maria Tatar confirms that "child abandonment - along with infanticide - was not so uncommon a practice among the poor as to make its fictional portrayal appear more sensationalistic than realistic" in her book *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales* (2003), 49.

²⁰ One such critic was Virginia Walter in her 1991 journal article "Hansel and Gretel as Abandoned Children: Timeless Images for a Postmodern World," *The Image of a Child*, ed. Sylvia Patterson Iskander (Battle Creek, MI: Children's Lit. Assn, 1991). In this article she relates this ageless fairy tale to modern times. She says: "One could make a convincing argument that child abandonment continues today as a practice in the United States, citing, for example, the evidence of crack babies who are left behind in hospital nurseries by their addicted mothers or the increasing number of children waiting for foster homes, thus providing a continuing historical relevance to this folktale." (324). Walter then looks at several twentieth-century versions of "Hansel and Gretel" and examines how these reinterpretations take the child out of the ageless setting and instead portray an abandoned child.

As we have already seen in the opening scene of the opera, the children in Humperdinck's version are depicted not only as abandoned children, but working children. By altering the figure of the child in the opera to include physical labor, Wette takes Hänsel and Gretel out of their traditional innocent roles and places them within a sphere of economic responsibility. They are no longer innocent followers, subject to the will and actions of their parents as they were in the Grimms' version of the tale. Now Hänsel and Gretel are fellow laborers alongside their caregivers. Wette further supports their loss of innocence by elaborating on the traditionally abusive character of the mother from the Grimm version of the tale. She expands the children's complaints of hunger, as well as the mother's abusive words. Consequently, the children often express a longing for childhood in words and actions.

Gender

In her book *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales* (2003), Maria Tatar interprets "Hänsel und Gretel" by following Propp's Russian fairy tale paradigm laid out in *Morphology of the Folktales*.²¹ She reduces the tale to its most simple components: a struggle between a weaker power and greater power. In the case of "Hänsel und Gretel," she classifies it as a struggle between children and adults, but there is also a struggle between genders. In the Grimms' version of the tale, the father is the provider, even though the evil stepmother has the power in the relationship. Additionally, Hänsel takes on a leadership role among the children for the majority of the fairy tale. Only when Gretel musters up enough courage to push the witch into the oven does she show any initiative. The males in the earlier versions of the story follow traditional patriarchal gender roles by always leading and providing for the family, while the females, or at least Gretel, plays an inferior role.

Hänsel changes dramatically in Humperdinck's opera. He is no longer the responsible

²¹ See Tatar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*, 51.

older brother watching out for his younger sister, but as we saw in the opening scene, he often takes on more childlike attributes. Gretel is then the one that takes on the traditional patriarchal leadership role in their relationship. It was Gretel that tried to get Hänsel to go back to work after they had stopped. She takes the lead among the children and is often depicted teaching Hänsel. This pattern is repeated several other times in the opera and will be discussed in greater detail in the second chapter.

Humperdinck's version changes the role of the father as well. He goes from being a woodcutter to a broom-maker. Although both have to do with wood, they have significantly different implications. Brooms play a noteworthy role throughout Wette's version of "Hänsel and Gretel," yet are not mentioned even once in the Grimms' tale. In the opera, Hänsel makes brooms and the father sells them. At one point, Gretel uses one as a prop to teach Hänsel how to sweep his worries away, and the witch rides on a broom.

Broomsticks have long played an important and symbolic role in literature. One symbol dictionary says that when used, they are "a sign and symbol of sacred power" as well as a sign of sweeping out evil.²² That is the positive side, but when a broom reverses its role, "it becomes an instrument of sorcery," or evil.²³ A broom can also be considered a phallic symbol, and in turn a symbol for patriarchal authority. Additionally, when not controlled, they become "symbols of the powers which the broom has failed to drive out but which gain control of it and use it as they please."²⁴ In this context, the broom has some interesting implications in the opera.

²² Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, (Oxford; Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1994), 126.

²³ Ibid. 126.

²⁴ Ibid. 126.

The broom is not only present physically, but also represented as a musical leitmotif. It is first introduced by the father as he describes the selling of the brooms. Later Humperdinck takes that theme and applies it to the witch and by so doing, successfully associates the father with the witch – exactly opposite of the Grimm brothers’ versions that compared the mother to the witch.²⁵ It is my argument that in juxtaposing the witch and the father, Humperdinck was criticizing the patriarchal authority the male figures represented. This change and the change in the role of the children contribute to the discussion of the role of women in society during such a crucial time in the emancipation of women. This ultimately illustrates the need for an egalitarian education of both boys and girls.

Pedagogical Function

As mentioned earlier in the introduction, children were the intended audience of the original writing of this opera. With children as the intended audience, one can then analyze the work from the viewpoint of children. It can no longer simply be seen as pure entertainment. The opera gains a new position as a teacher of values, but, as we shall see, in an entirely different way than the Grimm brothers’ version.²⁶

In Bettelheim’s *Uses of Enchantment*, he argues that fairy tales give children a "moral education."²⁷ While examining the text, he shows how Hänsel and Gretel need to overcome their feelings of dependence and inadequacy in the Grimms’ version of the tale.²⁸ They are

²⁵ See footnote 28.

²⁶ It is also possible that Wette might have also been changing the text to make it more conducive to the Wagnerian notions of opera to which Humperdinck was aspiring, but it seems that Wette had the final say over the content of the opera. Humperdinck always regretted “the loss of popular components such as the strewing of pebbles and the return of the children under the protection of the swan that rescued them.” Julia Liebscher introduction, Engelbert Humperdinck and others, *Hänsel und Gretel* (Germany: Philips, 1993).

²⁷ Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, 17.

²⁸ Focusing on the Grimms’ tale itself Bettelheim also focuses on how the role of food, the fear of starvation,

led to the witch's house by the birds, and once they overcome her, they are finally able to enjoy individual freedom. In the earlier versions of the tale, the forest is a place of learning. As soon as the children enter the forest, they enter a supernatural reality which "in [its] very nature, invite[s] interpretation."²⁹ The ride from the swan out of the forest symbolizes a completion of their inner journey to find self-awareness and overcome their dependency on their mother. He concludes that the tale is "a warning against a regression, and an encouragement of growth toward a higher plane of psychological and intellectual existence."³⁰

Wette's libretto is not concerned with subliminal teaching, but rather with the open didactic function of the opera. In a much more direct way, Gretel teaches Hänsel on several occasions how to control his feelings. The children take on a redemptive role and thereby provide an example of the power children have within themselves. Finally, Gretel introduces a leitmotif in the first scene that runs throughout the opera both in word and music: "Wenn die Not aufs Höchste steigt, / Gott der Herr die Hand euch reicht!"³¹ The motif transforms the opera from its symbolic medieval formation into a more modern and explicitly didactic

and the resulting oral fixation are created by Hänsel and Gretel's fear of abandonment. He says, "The fairy tale expresses in words and actions the things which go on in children's minds. In terms of the child's dominant anxiety, Hansel and Gretel believe that their parents are talking about a plot to desert them. A small child, awakening hungry in the darkness of night, feels threatened by complete rejection and desertion, which he experiences in the form of fear of starvation." *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf : distributed by Random House, 1976). It is the fear of starvation that drives a child's fear. Bettelheim goes on to explain how the mother is the infantile source of food in young children. When the children are not allowed to nurse anymore, it creates an oedipal complex, or a sexual desire for the mother, within them. This familial conflict is confronted in the story in the form of the witch. The witch symbolically represents the mother and when Hänsel and Gretel challenge and destroy the witch they are confronting this complex within themselves. By destroying the witch they symbolically break the bond between them and their mother. When the children return home to find the evil stepmother dead the connection between the witch and the mother is confirmed.

²⁹ Tatar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*, 51.

³⁰ Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, 165.

³¹ Humperdinck and Wette, *Hänsel und Gretel; Märchenspiel in drei Bildern von Adelheid Wette*, 6.

religious opera that is capable of educating its audience, children.

In this introduction, I have sought to explore how some of the significant scholarship surrounding the Grimms' version of "Hänsel und Gretel" specifically relates to select important topics at the end of the nineteenth century and Humperdinck's opera. First, I have looked at how the Grimm version portrayed child abuse and abandonment and how it related to Wette's as a criticism of child labor. Second, I have explored how some of the significant changes in the role of men and women enter into the opera as a comment on gender. And lastly, I have delved into the pedagogical significance of fairy tales in the past and how that might relate to Humperdinck's opera. I will now explore each of these topics in greater depth by looking at Wette's libretto itself, ultimately showing that Humperdinck's opera comments on the position and function of children at the end of the nineteenth century in Germany.

CHAPTER II

THE TRUE SWEATSHOPS OF NINETEENTH CENTURY EUROPE

The title of Humperdinck's opera, *Hänsel und Gretel*, suggests that nineteenth century listeners will be hearing a tale that was very well known in his day. The listener is shown from the beginning, however, that this tale is in fact different from the Grimm brothers' well version. Wette imitates contemporary realistic and naturalistic writers by portraying the children in physical pain, working for the family, devoid of the innocence that typifies children, and in danger of abuse from the mother.³² In this chapter I will examine how Wette modernizes the fairy tale into a naturalistic picture of poverty-stricken, abused children encumbered with responsibility and longing for a lost childhood, and how ultimately this change then functions as a critique of child labor. I will first look at how Wette adds the children's hunger pains to the opera and turns the children into the responsible adults. I will then focus on the children's depiction as laborers, in contrast with their childlike discontent with that role. Next, I will explore how Wette's version takes the innocence of the children away. I will finish by investigating how Wette portrays partial retention of the mother's abusive character from the earlier versions of the tale as a comment on the connection between child abuse and child labor.

³² A good example of one such writer is Gerhart Hauptmann in his *Die Weber* (1893) published earlier in the same year as the opening of Humperdinck's opera. In this canonical naturalistic work Hauptmann convincingly portrays the plight of the common weavers by displaying their hunger and meager conditions.

Wie beißt mich der Hunger!

Food plays an important role in the Grimm brothers' version of "Hänsel und Gretel." At the beginning of the tale, the father and mother find themselves without enough food to support themselves and the children. The father voices his concern: "Wie können wir unsere armen Kinder ernähren, da wir für uns selbst nichts mehr haben?"³³ The focus on the lack of food is written from the parent's perspective, not Hänsel and Gretel's. There is only one passing reference to the hunger of the children in the Grimms' version. After the parents have decided to abandon the children to the forest the narrator explain how the "zwei Kinder hatten vor Hunger auch nicht einschlafen können und hatten gehört, was die Stiefmutter zum Vater gesagt hatte."³⁴ Hunger kept the children awake, but after Gretel learns of the parent's cruel plan to abandon them, she "weinte bittere Tränen."³⁵ Notice that it was the fear of abandonment that caused her to cry, not the lack of food. Of course Hänsel and Gretel suffer from hunger in the Grimms' version, but the hunger of the children is never explicitly mentioned or used as a writer's tool.

Wette's account takes the parents' expression of hunger in the Grimms' version and places it in the mouths of the children. By allowing the children to articulate this pain in her version, she turns them into adults. The vocal portion of the opera opens with Gretel playfully singing a nursery rhyme:

Suse, liebe Suse,
Was raschelt im Stroh?
Die Gänse gehen barfuß
und haben kein' Schuh'!

³³ Jacob Grimm, Wilhelm Grimm, ed. Heinz Rölleke, *Kinder- und Hausmärchen: Ausgabe Letzter Hand mit den Originalanmerkungen der Brüder Grimm*, (Stuttgart: P. Reclam, 1980), v. 1, 100.

³⁴ Ibid. 100.

³⁵ Ibid. 100.

Der Schuster hat's Leder,
kein Leisten dazu,
drum kann er den Gänschen
auch machen kein' Schuh'!³⁶

Hänsel, however, modifies the song to create his own version.

Wer schenkt mir einen Dreier
für Zucker und Brot?
Verkauf ich mein Bettlein
Und leg mich aufs Stroh,
sticht mich keine Feder
und beißt mich kein –³⁷

Hänsel is not thinking about childish folk tales. His modifications focus on the need for some of the essential needs in life: money, as well as a place to live and sleep. His concerns are not childlike, but concerns of an adult. When Gretel interrupts Hänsel before he can add the last word to his little song, “Floh,” she then verbalizes for the first time the hunger expressed by the parents in the Grimms’ version. She anticipates her own ending; “Ei, wie beißt mich der Hunger!”³⁸

Wette further illustrates the lack of food by allowing the children to express their feelings first hand. After the songs have ended, Gretel continues her lament, “ich halt's kaum noch vor Hunger aus.”³⁹ Hänsel then joins in: “Seit Wochen nichts als trocken Brot: / Ist das ein Elend, potz schwere Not!”⁴⁰ The children have had nothing to eat for weeks except dry bread. The description of their state as “Elend” and “schwere Not” creates a woeful picture

³⁶ Humperdinck and Wette, *Hänsel und Gretel; Märchenspiel in drei Bildern von Adelheid Wette*, 5. In his commentary to the opera Kurt Pahlen describes the song as a “Volkslied.” Engelbert Humperdinck, Kurt Pahlen, and Rosemarie König, *Hänsel und Gretel: Textbuch*, Originalausg., 1. Aufled. (Zürich: Atlantis Musikbuch-Verlag, 2000), 14.

³⁷ Humperdinck and Wette, *Hänsel und Gretel; Märchenspiel in drei Bildern von Adelheid Wette*, 5-6.

³⁸ Ibid. 6.

³⁹ Ibid. 6.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 6.

of children living on the brink of starvation.

Gretel then awakens to her duty and introduces the religious leitmotif that runs throughout the opera. “Wenn die Not aufs Höchste steigt, / Gott der Herr die Hand euch reicht!”⁴¹ I will return to this theme in the fourth chapter on the pedagogical function of the opera. Hänsel’s reaction to Gretel’s suggestion of faith is the more important aspect at present. Despite Gretel’s efforts, Hänsel remains concerned with eating and boldly retorts: “Jawohl, das klingt recht schön und glatt, / aber leider wird man davon nicht satt.”⁴² The only thing that matters is finding food. Wette competently juxtaposes faith and hunger, but hunger becomes the driving force and most important object to Hänsel.

The powerful influence of hunger is then further illustrated as the focus solely rests on Hänsel. He continues:

Ach, Gretel, wie lang ist’s doch schon her,
Dass wir nichts Gut’s geschmauset mehr!
Eierfladen und Butterwecken –
Kaum weiß ich noch, wie die tun schmecken.⁴³

He begins to grow nostalgic for food he once tasted, but that food now seems lost to the bitter conditions in which they find themselves. At the climax of the scene, Wette includes a stage direction for Hänsel. She describes Hänsel as “[d]em Weinen nahe.”⁴⁴ Wette’s portrayal of Hänsel close to crying creates a picture of the stark role the children have taken on as adults, and their utter inability to cope with this responsibility as children.

⁴¹ Ibid. 6.

⁴² Ibid. 6.

⁴³ Ibid. 6.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 6.

Arbeiten? Lass uns tanzen und fröhlich sein!

When the parents take Hänsel and Gretel into the woods in the Grimms' version of the tale, it is interesting to note what the children do. The parents leave supposedly to chop wood and the children "saßen am Feuer" and "schliefen fest ein."⁴⁵ At no point during the entire story do they do anything to contribute to the economic welfare of the family. The story focuses on their abandonment and survival. As we have already seen in the introduction of this thesis, Wette begins her version in a totally different way. She begins with a scene of the children working together making a broom and knitting clothing. The audience later learns that the brooms are sold to make money for the family. Throughout the opera, attention is called to the plight of the children by contrasting their role as adult workers and children. Wette's takes the responsibility to provide that the parents bore in the Grimm version and places it on the children. By making the children take on this accountability, Wette creates an example of the prevalent use of children as laborers at the end of the nineteenth century.

The opera opens with Hänsel and Gretel performing typical adult actions, almost as if they were the perfect married couple, but then their place as children is reaffirmed as Gretel playfully begins to sing the nursery rhyme as discussed in the previous section. By beginning with Gretel singing childish songs, Wette momentarily pulls her out of her mature role, and places her in a sphere where she is still a child trying to have fun. But the stark truth soon comes back as Hansel sings his own version and is interrupted by Gretel singing about food. His version focuses on money and shelter while hers is on nourishment. These adult-like concerns take precedence over their childlike singing.

⁴⁵ Grimm, Grimm, *Kinder- und Hausmärchen: Ausgabe Letzter Hand mit den Originalanmerkungen der Brüder Grimm*, v. 1, 102.

Their work soon slackens and the children voice their discontent. Hänsel realizes his mother is unexpectedly late from the market and “wirft seine Arbeit fort und steht auf.”⁴⁶ Gretel retains her adult-like characteristics and tries to get him to return to his labor. “Und jetzt an die Arbeit zurück, geschwind, / Dass wir beizeiten fertig sind!”⁴⁷ Gretel’s admonishment, however, has very little effect on Hänsel. He is tired of working and sarcastically replies:

Arbeiten? Wo denkst du hin?
Danach steht mir nicht der Sinn.
Immer mich plagen fällt mir nicht ein,
Jetzt lass uns tanzen und fröhlich sein.⁴⁸

Hänsel, almost Peter Pan-like, has been made to grow up too soon and longs for an earlier time when he enjoyed the innocence of childhood, where he could play games.

Hänsel gives way to these childish ways when he tries to, and eventually succeeds in, convincing Gretel to come and dance with him, leaving aside their work. As they dance and sing around, they say something that gives the listener further insight into their position and longings. Together they sing “ich bin kein Freund von Traurigkeit, / und fröhlich will ich sein.” The children long for freedom from their responsibilities as providers for the family.

When the mother returns home, she solidifies the role of the children as laborers in the family. She enters the house and when she sees that they have been dancing and singing, she questions “[i]n Zorn ausbrechend”:

Nennt ihr das Arbeit? Johlen und singen?
Wie auf der Kirmes tanzen und springen?⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Humperdinck and Wette, *Hänsel und Gretel; Märchenspiel in drei Bildern von Adelheid Wette*, 6.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 8.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 8.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 11.

She expects them to have been only working. There is nothing else that is important. She continues by inspecting the work they should have done.

Lasst sehn, was habt ihr beschickt?
– Wie, Gretel, den Strumpf nicht fertig gestrickt?
– Und du? – du Schlingel! In all den Stunden
nicht mal die wenigen Besen gebunden?⁵⁰

Once again, she is only concerned with the role of the children as laborers.

As I will discuss in the next section, the children provoke the mother to anger and in the commotion that follows the milk is knocked over. After that happens, the children then become responsible for finding food for dinner that night. The mother commands “Marsch, fort – in den Wald! / Dort such mir Erdbeeren!”⁵¹ It is their position as laborers that forces them into the forest. The pattern repeats itself there as the children work to find food, but ultimately eat it all themselves while playing a childish game. Time and again during the opera, the role of the children is questioned and contrasted. One moment they are adults working to provide for the family, the next, children wasting the resources of the family. This draws attention to their position as child laborers, while at the same time, criticizing their ability to function in that role.

Hänsel kichert verstohlen

The Grimms’ version of “Hänsel and Gretel” displays one of the most important characteristics of children: innocence. The children never do anything that would warrant the abandonment by their parents at any point in the tale. Everything that happens occurs as the result of the circumstances that they were placed in. Wette’s account alternatively places the

⁵⁰ Ibid. 12.

⁵¹ Ibid. 12.

children in a position of responsibility and condemns them for their childish actions, thereby removing their veil of innocence. The children do things that cause them to be sent into the forest where they get lost and meet the witch. By illustrating the children in this manner Wette comments on how child labor can lead to the loss of innocence.

There are several places in the story where one can see that the children are the cause of their own problems, not simply innocent bystanders. After Hänsel complains about his hunger, and almost cries, Gretel reveals a secret

Guck her in den Topf. Milch ist darin,
die schenkte uns heute die Nachbarin.
Die Mutter kocht uns, kommt sie nach Haus,
gewiss einen leckeren Reisbrei daraus.⁵²

She reveals the secret milk and Hänsel instantly questions “[w]ie dick ist der Rahm auf der Milch? Lass schmecken!”⁵³ He then proceeds to pilfer a little bit of the cream off the top. Gretel questions his actions “Wie, Hänsel, naschen? Schämst du dich nicht? / Fort mit den Fingern, du naschhafter Wicht!”⁵⁴ Hänsel knows it is wrong, but he is so hungry he is willing to compromise for even a taste.

This milk later becomes the propelling force to the children’s expulsion from the home. When the mother returns and finds how little the children have done, she loses her temper, which I will discuss in a moment. In her fury, she chases after Hänsel and Gretel and knocks “... den Milchtopf vom Tisch, dass er klirrend zu Boden fällt.”⁵⁵ With the precious milk spilled, the mother also begins to cry. It is at this point that Hänsel sees her dress all covered

⁵² Ibid. 7.

⁵³ Ibid. 8.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 8.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 12.

with milk and “kichert verstohlen.”⁵⁶ By giggling, Hänsel shows little respect for his mother and she reacts by chasing the children outside and sending them into the forest where they get lost. The children are not innocently taken there and abandoned, but sent because of their actions.

There is one more example of the guilt in Wette’s “Hänsel and Gretel” while they are in the forest. After they have obediently gathered a basketful of strawberries they begin playing childish games. They hear the call of a cuckoo bird and imitate it by swallowing a strawberry whole. Before long they have eaten the entire basketful of strawberries. Their one act of obedience to their mother is eradicated by their childish games. They then realize that their diversions have led them far into the forest. Gretel, once again the more mature of the two, exclaims:

Ach, Hänsel, Hänsel! Was fangen wir an?
Was haben wir törichten Kinder getan?
Wir durften hier nicht so lange säumen!⁵⁷

She does not place the blame on her mother for sending them in the forest, but on themselves. She realizes that it was their play that led them into this dangerous situation. They are aware of their situation and take responsibility for themselves in a very adult-like manner.

Hänsel and Gretel were the ones causing the problems at home, not working; and they are the ones who wander off in the forest. They are not innocent children acted upon by the parents. They think and act as adults in many situations but it is their childish tendencies that lead them into jeopardy. By portraying the children in this manner, the libretto shows that

⁵⁶ Ibid. 12.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 21.

they have lost the innocence that is a major characteristic of children, lost perhaps to the labors they were required to perform.

... so hau ich euch, dass ihr fliegt an die Wand!

One of the biggest problems with child labor in the nineteenth century was the abuse that often accompanied it. Wette takes the mother's verbally and physically abusive character present in the Grimms' version of "Hänsel und Gretel" and exaggerates it. This abuse is, however, curtailed by the portrayal of a mother's concern for her children after she finds out they are in danger in the forest. By reproducing some of the mother's qualities, Wette elucidates the unfortunate reality of abuse that accompanies child labor.

The Grimms' "Hänsel und Gretel" is notorious for its terrible depiction of child abuse, but that mostly comes from the act of abandonment. When examining the text closely, one sees that the stepmother is verbally abusive, but never physically abusive. She labels them "Faulenzer"⁵⁸ when she is waking them up to go into the forest the first time. When they return, they get the blame for being "böse Kinder" who slept too long.⁵⁹ Aside from the abandonment, that is the extent of her abuse. When the children return home, she "war gestorben."⁶⁰ Many of the other Grimm tales include some sort of horrible punishment for evil actions.⁶¹ Although "Hänsel and Gretel" does not have a direct description of a horrible death, the mother does die. In the Grimm version, the parents are at fault for the abuse,

⁵⁸ Grimm, Grimm, Kinder- und Hausmärchen: Ausgabe Letzter Hand mit den Originalanmerkungen der Brüder Grimm v. v. 1, 101.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 102.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 108.

⁶¹ See Aschenputtel for example. As the sisters arrive at Aschenputtel's wedding and go into the church: "da pickten die Tauben einer jeden das eine Auge aus." Then after they leave "da pickten die Tauben einer jeden das andere Auge aus." Ibid. 144.

particularly the stepmother.

In Wette's version, there is a negative mother character once again. She is portrayed both similarly and in a different way. One first gets an inclination that the mother is violent when Gretel tries to get Hänsel to go back to work after he has tasted the cream from the milk. She says: "Kommt Mutter heim und wir taten nicht Recht, / Dann, weißt du, geht es den Faulpelzen schlecht!"⁶² This seems like a reference to an earlier experience of consequences when the work was not done. It is not explicitly referring to any physical abuse at this point, but it is clear that "Faulpelz" is a word that the mother has often used in describing her children. Much like the stepmother in The Grimms' version, she is verbally abusive to her children, which is confirmed later as well.⁶³

After Hänsel and Gretel dance around, they fall on the ground in exhaustion and the door suddenly opens. The children see their mother, quickly jump up and "eilen auf ihre Plätze."⁶⁴ They begin to blame one another and the mother becomes angry when she realizes that they have been dancing. She then "[g]ibt Hänsel einen Puff."⁶⁵ It is now clear that the mother is not only verbally abusive, but physically inclined as well. After she inspects their work and finds it unsatisfactory, she says: "Ihr unnütziges Volk, den Stock will ich holen, / und euch den Faulpelz weidlich versohlen!"⁶⁶ The mother resorts instantly to violence and chases them around the room with a stick. Her rampage is stopped before she can get to them when

⁶² Humperdinck and Wette, *Hänsel und Gretel; Märchenspiel in drei Bildern von Adelheid Wette*, 8.

⁶³ When she confronts the children upon her return home she calls them "ungezogenen Wichte," Schlingel," "unnützes Volk," and "Bengel." See Ibid. 11-12.

⁶⁴ Ibid. 11.

⁶⁵ Ibid. 11.

⁶⁶ Ibid. 12.

she accidentally knocks over the precious pitcher of milk. Hänsel and Gretel are spared physical violence.

The violence does not stop there, though. Hänsel sees his mother covered with milk and “kichert verstohlen.”⁶⁷ When the mother hears this, already so distraught about losing the milk, she yells at him: “Was, Bengel, du lachst mich noch aus?”⁶⁸ She then chases him around the room with a stick, but he runs out the door before she can catch him. He is spared violence a second time.

Still angry, the mother then orders the children into the forest to pick strawberries. This scene represents the principle divergence from the Grimm version of the fairy tale. In Wette’s account, it is the children who go into the forest by themselves. Even though it is at the urging of the mother, and despite her abusive tendencies, she is not portrayed as an evil stepmother figure like she was in the Grimms’ version, but simply as their biological mother.

She goes on to prove her real love for the children when the father returns home. The father asks where the children are and she tells him about the milk and how she sent them into the forest. He frightfully tells her about the cannibalistic witch and the mother reacts with immense love and concern for Hänsel and Gretel.

Mutter: (händeringend). O Graus!
Hilf, Himmel! Die Kinder! Ich halt’s nicht mehr aus!
(Rennt aus dem Hause)
Vater: (nimmt die Kümmelflasche vom Tisch)
He, Alte, wart doch! Nimm mich mit!
Wir wollen beide zum Hexenritt!
(Eilt ihr nach.)⁶⁹

When she realized they were in the woods with the witch, the mother redeems herself.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 12.

⁶⁸ Ibid. 12.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 18.

Although she was angry with the children, she didn't want them to die. She was the first one out the door to look for them, while the father paused to get a "Kümmelflasche" to take along. At the end of the opera, they are all reunited as a complete family again. The mother does not die as she did in the Grimms' version. Although the mother is portrayed in a positive light in the end, Wette's characterization of the mother as abusive in the beginning comments on the abusive nature of child labor.

In this chapter, I examined how Wette modernized the Grimms' "Hänsel und Gretel" for a country struggling with the place of child labor at the end of the nineteenth century. Throughout, I looked at how the children were turned into adults but struggled with that transition and often longed for a lost childhood. Wette took the responsibility that rested with the parents in the Grimms' version and gave it to the children, whether through expressions of hunger, or added responsibilities of labor. Their childlike innocence was taken away and they were abused verbally or threatened physically. All these changes indicate the prevalence of child abuse and the plight of working children. This ultimately indicates the need for a childhood free of abuse and these adult anxieties, a place where children are free to play, and to have fun, and to be children.

CHAPTER III

WHO'S IN CHARGE HERE? MEN VS. WOMEN

Hänsel and Gretel are first depicted on stage mending a sock and making a broom. This ironically foreshadows a discussion on gender that will permeate the opera. The children seem to be following traditional gender roles. Hänsel is stereotypically working to provide for the family as we later find out these brooms will be sold for income. Gretel is sewing and taking care of the clothes: a traditional matriarchal responsibility. The listener soon realizes, however, that Gretel is actually the one in charge, not Hänsel. This feminine authority is confirmed several times throughout the opera, not only in the children's relationships, but also in that of the parents. In the first section of this chapter, I will examine the way Wette's depiction of a dominant character comments on gender roles. I will then explore not only how Wette comments on gender, but how Humperdinck enters the discussion with his music. I will show how an analysis of his composition turns the broom into a symbol of patriarchal authority and, in turn, a criticism of the traditional use of that power. This entire discussion of gender functions to suggest the need to give both boys and girls equal treatment in education and upbringing.

Eilt ihr nach

When the Grimms' wrote their tale almost one hundred years before Humperdinck and Wette, they were maintaining a patriarchal order. In their version, Hänsel has all the authoritative power. As mentioned earlier, after the children overhear the parents' plan to

abandon them, Gretel is described as crying bittere Tränen.”⁷⁰ Hänsel instantly takes on a protective paternal position. He says “gräme dich nicht, ich will uns schon helfen.”⁷¹ Gretel is portrayed as helpless and Hänsel authoritatively controls the situation. The same pattern occurs two other times in the tale; once in the forest after they are lost, and again the second time after the children overhear the parent’s plans.⁷² Both times that the children are abandoned, Hänsel comes up with the idea to save them while Gretel submissively follows.

When the children are captured by the witch, it might seem that Gretel actually gains some power, but that is only temporary. The narrator still describes her in conventional feeble terms. After Gretel learns of the witch’s plan to eat Hänsel she “fing an, bitterlich zu weinen, aber es war alles vergeblich, sie mu[ss]te tun, was die böse Hexe verlangte.”⁷³ Without Hänsel, she seems to have no power of her own. Only when Gretel realizes that the witch is going to push her into the oven does she temporarily acquire enough courage to give her “einen Stoß, daß sie weit hineinfuhr.”⁷⁴ She then, however, instantly frees Hänsel and restores the patriarchal order of the story. He leads them home and when they come to the river, Hänsel crosses first. Gretel only momentarily breaks out of the customary subordinate role of women, and that is only by necessity. Hänsel leads from the beginning and is restored to that position by the end.

⁷⁰ Jacob Grimm, Wilhelm Grimm and Heinz Rölleke, *Kinder- und Hausmärchen: Ausgabe Letzter Hand mit den Originalanmerkungen der Brüder Grimm* (Stuttgart: P. Reclam, 1980), v. 1, 100.

⁷¹ Ibid. 100.

⁷² The second instance occurs when the children are first lost in the forest. Gretel “fing an zu weinen.” When they find out they are going to be taken into the forest to be abandoned Hänsel says “[w]eine nicht, Gretel.” The last instance happens after they have been taken captive by the witch. The witch informs of her plan to eat Hänsel after he is fattened up, after which “Gretel fing an, bitterlich zu weinen.” Ibid. 102, 103, 106.

⁷³ Ibid. 106.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 107.

In Wette's version of the tale, Gretel takes on an entirely different role. She becomes the protector, leader and dominant figure. By reversing the role the children play in the opera, Wette's libretto displays a more sympathetic view of women and their position in society. There are several places in the libretto where this dominant character is expressed.

As already discussed, Hänsel does not want to work and often expresses his distaste for it. Whenever that happens in the text, Gretel reminds him of their responsibility. The first instance occurs right after they sing their opening songs. Hänsel longs for food that he once tasted. He is "[d]em Weinen nahe" and begins a sentence "Ach, Gretel, ich wollt,"⁷⁵ but before he can finish it, she comforts him. She says, "[s]till, nicht verdrießlich sein: / Gedulde dich fein, / sieh freundlich drein!"⁷⁶ She then goes on and teaches him a lesson about controlling his feelings that will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

After the song has ended, Gretel shows Hänsel some milk in a jug to give him some hope, but after he tries to steal a little bit she reprimands him. "Wie, Hänsel, naschen? Schämst du dich nicht? / Fort mit den Fingern, du naschhafter Wicht!"⁷⁷ She is in control of the situation and orders him "jetzt an die Arbeit zurück, geschwind, / dass wir beizeiten fertig sind!"⁷⁸ She is the clear leader of the pair.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Humperdinck and Wette, *Hänsel und Gretel; Märchenspiel in drei Bildern von Adelheid Wette*, 6.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 7.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 8.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 8.

⁷⁹ Neither the Grimms', nor Wette directly indicate which child is the older one, but it might be interesting to look for subtle hints within the text that specify one or the other. Rachel Freudenburg catalogues some of the pictures from Grimms' versions of the tale and they all depict Hänsel as the older of the two. Rachel Freudenburg, "Illustrating Childhood-'Hansel and Gretel'," *Marvels & Tales: Journal of Fairy-Tale Studies* 12, (1998): 263-318. It would be interesting to look for some opera programs from Humperdinck's "Hänsel und Gretel" and see if any depict Gretel as the older of the two. The characters themselves are both sung by women (soprano and mezzo-soprano), but young boy's parts in operas were, and still are often played by women to portray their higher voices.

Hänsel is not ready to go back to work and tries to convince Gretel to come dance with him. She concedes, but Hänsel does not know how to dance. He “versucht’s, jedoch ungeschicht”⁸⁰ and asks Gretel for help.

Tanzen soll ich armer Wicht,
Schwesterchen, und kann es nicht!
Darum zeig mir, wie es Brauch,
dass ich tanzen lerne auch!⁸¹

Hänsel recognizes he is subject to Gretel and asks her for help. It is not as if she is trying to get the power; she has it and even the male figure in the story recognizes her authority. After this admission, Gretel teaches Hänsel how to dance. This could also have some significance in regard to gender. Traditionally a male takes the lead in dancing, but here Gretel takes over that responsibility. In a very literal sense, she becomes the male figure, with all its power.⁸²

The mother soon comes home and Gretel takes on a subservient role again, but only to another female, the mother. As discussed in the second chapter, the mother retains some of the abusive tendencies from the Grimms’ version of the tale, but also redeems herself when she finds her children in danger. Wette’s libretto also carries over the authoritative power of the mother. When the father arrives home with food he questions where the children are. After he learns that they are “am Illsenstein” where the witch is, he “[n]immt einen Besen von der Wand”⁸³ as if he were going to leave to save them. The mother, however, commands

⁸⁰ Humperdinck and Wette, *Hänsel und Gretel; Märchenspiel in drei Bildern von Adelheid Wette*, 9.

⁸¹ Ibid. 9.

⁸² There is another example of Gretel’s dominance in the woods after Hänsel eats all the berries. Gretel says “Hänsel, was hast du getan? O Himmel! / Alle Erbeln gegessen, du Lümmel!” and then commands him “Komm, wir wollen rasch neue suchen!” They then realize it is getting dark outside and Gretel takes control again “Ach Hänsel, Hänsel! Was fangen wir an? / Was haben wir tōrichten Kinder getan? Wir durften hier nicht so lange saumen!” Ibid. 21.

⁸³ Ibid. 16.

him: “[d]en Besen lass nur an seiner Stell,” after which he “lässt den Besen fallen und ringt die Hände.”⁸⁴

The father then proceeds to try to convince his wife of the danger the children face.⁸⁵ It is not until the mother finally concedes that they are in trouble and leaves the house that the father calls after her, “He, Alte, wart doch! / Nimm mich mit! / Wir wollen ja beide zum Hexenritt!”⁸⁶ He then is allowed to leave and “[e]ilt ihr nach.”⁸⁷ When the father wants to leave, he has to first persuade the mother and then he is allowed to leave, but he still follows after her. She leads the expedition to rescue the children, not the father. There is no patriarchal authority that says what the family can and cannot do; it is the matriarchal power that decides. Gretel’s dominance over Hänsel and the mother’s supremacy over the father both illustrate that the ultimate authority in Wette’s opera rests with the women.

Der Besen! Der Besen!

As mentioned in the introduction, brooms play an important role in the opera. Wette first uses the broom to represent patriarchal authority, but then Humperdinck alters it musically to make it the source of evil as a symbol of the witch. When the father returns from the market, Humperdinck has him introduce the broom leitmotif for the first time. This same musical theme plays many times throughout the entire work. When the mother asks about how he sold so many brooms, he sings as if he were still at the market, “Kauft Besen! / Gute Feger! / Feine Bürsten! / Spinnejäger!”⁸⁸ The melody in the music here is a very distinct upward

⁸⁴ Ibid. 16.

⁸⁵ See Ibid. 16-18.

⁸⁶ Ibid. 18.

⁸⁷ Ibid. 18.

⁸⁸ Humperdinck and Wette, *Hänsel und Gretel; Märchenspiel in drei Bildern von Adelheid Wette*, 15.

jump of a fourth with the emphasis on the second word.⁸⁹ This theme is introduced again when the father explains to the mother why the children are in such danger. He takes a broom off the wall as the melody repeats in the background, then he begins

Der Besen! Der Besen!
Was macht man damit? Was macht man damit?
Es reiten drauf, es reiten drauf,
die Hexen!⁹⁰

The exact same upward jump of a fourth is repeated again and again as the father describes the witch and her evil ways. Symbolically, Humperdinck uses the theme that represents the father and Hänsel and applies it to the witch. This is not only heard here, but later when the witch flies around the stage in delight at having captured the children, and again during the final moral of the opera when everyone is on stage talking about “Himmels Strafgericht.”⁹¹

It is a common practice in music to change heroic themes when describing the antagonist.⁹² Humperdinck chooses, however, not to distort the theme at all. The broom becomes the symbol for evil, and the father and son as the source of the evil. By leaving the theme unaltered, he subtly associates Hänsel and the father with the witch. The witch is just another symbol for male power with her phallic broom symbol. By placing the witch as the

⁸⁹ To add to the emphasis Humperdinck uses the jump from a dominant 5th of a chord to the tonic root note in the key.

⁹⁰ Humperdinck and Wette, *Hänsel und Gretel; Märchenspiel in drei Bildern von Adelheid Wette*, 17.

⁹¹ See *Ibid.* 36, 41.

⁹² The third movement of Franz Liszt's *Faust Symphony* (1854), Mephistopheles, is a brilliantly distorted manifestation of the noble Faust themes from the first movement. Liszt saw Faust, as every good Romantic did, in terms of himself. He knew that the devil is only the negative side of one's own personality, the “Geist der stets verneint” as Goethe makes his Mephistopheles say. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust: Der Tragödie Zweite Teil* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2001), 139. He read himself into Faust's introspection, his urgent striving, his pride and lofty-mindedness, and his love for a pure and beautiful woman. But he also sensed the other side of the coin, which made Faust a dislikable as well as an attractive person, and thus he understood that Mephistopheles was part of Faust. The music starts out in C minor in remembrance of Faust's movement but then jumps into F sharp minor, the devil's interval away and the distortion begins.

ultimate source of evil, the text criticizes patriarchal authority.

This chapter has focused on how alterations in the text comment on gender. The altered role that Gretel plays in the opera shows her with more power and authority than had been typical in past versions. She is no longer subject to the will and power of predominant patriarchal authority, but instead, assumes that role herself. The mother retains her position of authority in Wette's version of the tale that she held in the Grimms' version. Humperdinck even adds to the discussion by musically connecting the male characters with the source of evil in the story and denigrating their long held patriarchal position of power. Ultimately this discussion serves to elucidate the equality between the upbringing of boys and girls.

CHAPTER IV

HÄNSEL UND GRETTEL LEARN A NEW LESSON

Adelheid Wette changes the nature of the Grimms' "Hänsel und Gretel" by altering the actions of the characters and the language they use throughout the entire opera. In this chapter I will explore what pedagogical function those changes ultimately serve. I will first examine how the opera teaches children that they can have control over their own feelings, no matter what situation they may be in. Then, I will investigate how Wette's portrayal of Hänsel and Gretel as redeemers gives children confidence in themselves. Finally, I will look at how the didacticism found in the moral of the opera encourages religious faith.

Griesgram, hinaus!

At the beginning of the opera after Hänsel and Gretel have sung their nursery rhymes, Hänsel grows nostalgic for food that he once tasted. He is "[d]em Weinen nahe" and begins a sentence "Ach, Gretel, ich wollt..."⁹³ One could imagine a possible ending to the sentence would be food, or to go back to earlier times, or something along those lines. One can feel the depression in Hänsel's voice before Gretel "hält ihm den Mund zu."⁹⁴ She then proceeds to teach him a valuable lesson about his emotions and ability to control them. She says:

Still, nicht verdrießlich sein:

⁹³ Humperdinck and Wette, *Hänsel und Gretel; Märchenspiel in drei Bildern von Adelheid Wette*, 6.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* 7.

Gedulde dich fein, sieh freundlich drein!
Dies lange Gesicht – hu, welcher Graus!
Siehst ja wie der leibhaftige Griesgram aus!⁹⁵

Gretel compares Hänsel's long face to a living *Griesgram*. This could be translated as a bellyacher, a grumbler, or someone who is just plain crabby.

Gretel then grabs one of the brooms and using the broom as a traditional symbol to protect ones self against evil, begins a song in which she symbolically sweeps the grumbling and bellyaching out the door. She sings.

Griesgram hinaus!
Fort aus dem Haus!
Ich will dich lehren,
Herz zu beschweren,
Sorgen zu mehren,
Freuden zu wehren!
Griesgram, Griesgram, gräulicher Wicht,
griesiges, grämiges Galgengesicht!
Packe dich, trolle dich, schäbiger Wicht!⁹⁶

Wette personifies *Griesgram* in this song and thereby creates a visual picture that children can relate to. *Griesgram* then becomes the source of pain in the children. It caused Hänsel's heart to *beschweren*, his sorrows to *mehren*, and his joy to *wehren*. By personifying sorrow in this way, Wette creates an example of children sweeping sorrows out of their own life that one could learn from.

The effects of this teaching on Hänsel are instantly apparent. He “fasst mit an den Besen” and sings:

Griesgram hinaus!
Halt's nicht mehr aus!
Immer mich plagen,
Hungertuch benagen,

⁹⁵ Ibid. 7.

⁹⁶ Ibid. 7.

muß ja verzagen,
kann's nicht ertragen!⁹⁷

Hänsel also focuses his critique of *Griesgram* on his desire for food. *Griesgram* causes him to long for food, but Hänsel declares his own independence from this sorrow. He then sings the same last three lines of Gretel's song with the "Gebärde des Hinausfegens."⁹⁸ By using the same melody every time the words *Griesgram, hinaus!* were used, Wette creates a theme about controlling emotions capable of teaching children that they have power over their own feelings.

Erlöst – befreit – für alle Zeit!

Another example of didactic teaching can be seen in the actions of Hänsel and Gretel together. One of the most significant things that happen in the Grimms' version of "Hänsel und Gretel" occurs when Gretel finally musters up enough courage to push the witch into the oven. At that point, she has overcome her fears. She runs to Hänsel and says, "Hänsel, wir sind erlöst, die alte Hexe ist tot." Children reading the Grimms' version of the tale often identify with the children in the story. When Hänsel and Gretel overcome the witch, it gives the young modern readers self-confidence. Wette took this redemption and carried it over into the opera, but exploited it even further by allowing Hänsel and Gretel to save the other children earlier captured by the witch. This redemptive act emphasizes the power the children have within themselves and gives those identifying with the opera more certainty in their own power.

After Hänsel and Gretel push the witch in the oven and celebrate a little bit, the oven

⁹⁷ Ibid. 7.

⁹⁸ "Griesgram, Griesgram, gräulicher Wicht, / griesiges, grämiges Galgengesicht! / Packe dich, trolle dich, schäbiger Wicht!" Ibid. 7.

“knistert ... gewaltig, die Flamme schlägt hoch empor; dann erfolgt ein starker Krach, und der Ofen stürzt donnernd zusammen.”⁹⁹ They were startled, but “[i]hre Verwunderung steigt aufs Höchste, als sie die Kinder gewahr werden, deren Kuchenhülle inzwischen abgefallen ist.”¹⁰⁰ These are the other children that the witch turned into gingerbread earlier, now freed because Hänsel and Gretel have defeated the witch. They have become a redemptive force for the other children. Wette then confirms their role as saviors when the gingerbread children all begin to sing together “Erlöst – befreit – für alle Zeit.”¹⁰¹

Although the newly saved children are no longer gingerbread, they are still under the power of the witch’s curse. They wander around with their eyes closed. They continue in their song by asking for Hänsel and Gretel to touch them so that they can awake. Hänsel doesn’t trust himself, but Gretel still illustrating her dominant position, reaches out and “streichelt das nächste Kind” who “öffnet die Augen und lächelt.”¹⁰² Gretel then goes around and touches all the children, who open their eyes, but stop moving. They still do not have control of their bodies. In the final redemptive act, Hänsel “ergreift ... den Wacholder”¹⁰³ and frees the children of the witch with a spell of his own. All the children

⁹⁹ Ibid. 39.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 39.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 40.

¹⁰² Ibid. 40.

¹⁰³ Ibid. 40. The choice of Wacholder, or juniper surely has some sort of significance. Ernest Parkin explores the significance of the juniper tree in his study on the Grimms’ “The Juniper Tree.” He explains how the juniper is “an evergreen, and the word’s etymology is in the Latin ‘juniperis’, literally ‘youth-renewing’ from ‘iuuenis’ (young), and ‘parere’ (to produce). Predictably, these Latin roots yield the English ‘juvenile’, and ‘parent.’” He later elaborates that the tree is also a “symbol of generation and regeneration.” “The Juniper Tree: A Study of a Tale from Grimm.” *Words in Edgeways Online Journal*, Issue 5, November 2003; (Accessed 20 February 2006), <http://www.edgewaysbooks.com/5th/Juniper_Tree.html>. Wette may have chosen the juniper as the source for Hänsel’s magical wand as a symbol of the regenerative, and redemptive power of his actions in un-cursing the children.

rejoice together when the parents arrive on the scene. Wette could have had the parents arrive earlier and change the children back, but she chose to allow Hänsel and Gretel to fill that role. By choosing to have the children save the other children, Wette creates a scene in which the children are the saviors. This strengthens the self-confidence of the children who are listening to the play and identifying with Hänsel and Gretel.

Gott der Herr die Hand euch reicht!

Wette takes the medieval folktale written down by the brothers Grimm and recasts it in a modern late nineteenth century religious setting. She does this by taking the one-line references to God that exists in the Grimms' version of the tale and expanding them into a religious motif about the protection of God. Gretel introduces the theme at the beginning of the opera and it runs through to the final scene. In this last section, I will examine the way Wette expresses this motif throughout the opera, but first I will explore the Grimms' references to God.

In the Grimms' "Hänsel und Gretel," there are only three references to deity. Two occur after the children hear of the parents' plans to abandon them in the forest the next day. Hänsel reassures Gretel first that "Gott wird uns nicht verlassen," and the second time that "der liebe Gott wird uns schon helfen."¹⁰⁴ Although he puts his trust in God, they seem to be only fleeting comments to reassure Gretel, for Hänsel then makes plans to save themselves and God is never referred to again by him.

The third reference to deity comes from Gretel as she is called upon to get the water ready to cook Hänsel. She cries out "Lieber Gott, hilf uns doch."¹⁰⁵ Although she calls on God to

¹⁰⁴ Grimm, Grimm and Rölleke, *Kinder- und Hausmärchen: Ausgabe Letzter Hand mit den Originalanmerkungen der Brüder Grimm*, v. 1, 101, 103.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* 106.

help her, there is no further reference to God or his help. Gretel is the one who takes the action and pushes the witch in the oven. By having one of the children take over the role of redeemer in their version, the Grimm brothers create a world marked by the absence of God, a world in which God is not there to help when people need help.

Wette, on the other hand, introduces a religious motif that promotes faith in God and is an intrinsic part of the redemption of the children. When Hänsel wants to eat some food, but none is to be found, Gretel reminds him:

Still, Hänsel, denk daran, was Vater sagt,
wenn Mutter manchmal so verzagt:

The theme is then introduced and emphasized in long deliberate half notes as she continues.

‘Wenn die Not aufs Höchste steigt,
Gott der Herr die Hand euch reicht!’¹⁰⁶

It is as if the children had been taught this lesson many times in their lives. Gretel instantly resorts to this traditional source of hope. Even though they may find themselves in a terrible situation right now, they only need to have faith in God, and he will watch over and provide for them. The importance of this theme is confirmed in the final scene which I will discuss in a moment.

The theme is next repeated after the mother angrily sends the children into the forest to gather strawberries. In despair she addresses God:

Herr Gott, wirf Geld herab! Nichts hab' ich zu leben,
kein Krümmchen, den Würmern zu essen zu geben;
kein Tröpfchen im Topfe, kein Krüstchen im Schrank,
Schon lange nur Wasser zum Trank.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Humperdinck and Wette, *Hänsel und Gretel; Märchenspiel in drei Bildern von Adelheid Wette*, 6.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.* 12.

She pleads with God in almost utter despair for some sort of relief for their present condition. She then repeats her petition for money once more, “[l]egt den Kopf auf dem Arm und schläft ein.”¹⁰⁸ By portraying the mother in such a deprived state, Wette sets up the audience for the next scene and the deliverance.

As if from heaven, the father’s voice is heard singing in the distance. He soon arrives with relief for the entire family in the form of food. Although the father represents patriarchal power in the opera, he momentarily steps out of this role to substantiate the answer to the prayer. The audience sees the mother’s prayer answered. For a moment, this little subplot is resolved, but when the parents realize the children are in danger their pleas for help begin again. When the mother first senses they might be in trouble, she calls out “O, Himmel.” This could be just a passing reference, as it would have been in the Grimm version, but when she finally learns how much peril they are really in, she calls out again: “(händeringend). O Graus! / Hilf, Himmel! Die Kinder! Ich halt’s nicht mehr aus!”¹⁰⁹ By having the mother call on heaven for help, although not vocalized once more, Wette deliberately reintroduces the theme: “Wenn die Not aufs Höchste steigt, / Gott der Herr die Hand euch reicht!”¹¹⁰

God’s protection is once more reaffirmed in the forest. After the children realize they have lost their way they begin to grow very afraid. They start to see strange figures in the forest and Wette describes them in a way that induces feelings of sympathy and fear in the listener. Hänsel begins to speak “stotternd,” while Gretel speaks “ängstlich.”¹¹¹ They hear something

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. 12.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. 18.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. 6.

¹¹¹ Ibid. 22.

behind them and “schmiegen sich erschreckt aneinander.”¹¹² Wette creates even more terror as the children ask if anyone is there and receives an answer out of the fog: “Ja!”¹¹³ Gretel begins to cry and cries for her father and mother before running under a tree to hide. Just in this moment of great terror on the stage, a kindly sandman, followed by fourteen angels, appears, quiets their fears and sings them to sleep. The children in the audience then see the mother’s plea for her children’s protection answered. The children awake the next day right next to the witch’s house.

As already discussed, Gretel calls on God for help in the Grimms’ version of the tale but there is no apparent help from God. Wette does not include any passing plea to God for help before they defeat the witch. Instead, she reintroduces the didactic theme again after they have been reunited with their parents. As they are celebrating, one of the redeemed children sees a large gingerbread witch on the stage. They place the gingerbread witch in the center of the stage and the father sings:

Kinder, schaut das Wunder an,
wie die Hexe hexen kann.
Wie hart,
knusperhart,
selber nun zum Kuchen ward!¹¹⁴

The witch has ironically been punished by the same thing she sought to do to others. She got the just reward for what she sought to do to others. To further strengthen the theme, everyone else on stage then sings the same words as the father. The opera becomes very absorbed at this point in its didactic efforts. The father continues:

¹¹² Ibid. 22.

¹¹³ Ibid. 22.

¹¹⁴ Ibid. 41.

Merk des Himmels Strafgericht:
böse Werke dauern nicht!

And then he repeats the religious motif twice:

Wenn die Not aufs Höchste steigt,
Gott der Herr die Hand uns reicht!¹¹⁵

As if repeating the moral twice were not enough, the entire cast then comes forward on stage toward the audience and concludes the opera by repeating the theme once more in long deliberate half notes. Whether or not God visibly played a role in the redemption from the witch is irrelevant, for the people *believe* it was through his power that the children were protected, able to defeat the witch, and found again by the parents. The most important thing in the story is faith and it is through faith that everyone is saved, a distinctly Lutheran thought. This is quite different from the Grimm brothers' empty references to God. The rewriting and constant reemphasizing of the moral of the story brought it into a religious setting teaching children faith in God.

In this chapter, I have shown how some of the changes Adelheid Wette made to the Grimms' "Hänsel und Gretel" serve a pedagogical function. Wette's "Griesgram hinaus!" adds a distinct didactic section to the opera and provides an example of children overcoming their feelings. She also adds religious didacticism to the text by including a moral repeated throughout the opera geared at promoting religious faith. These additions to the text turn it into a didactic example in the nineteenth century for its audience, children.

¹¹⁵ Ibid. 41.

CHAPTER V
FAIRY TALE OPERAS IN CONCLUSION

Today, in the twenty-first century, it is often said that children are forced to grow up too soon.¹¹⁶ With the onslaught of technology and an augmented emphasis on education, children start learning at an increasingly early age, often sacrificing more traditional playful activities for the sake of academic preparation. Issues concerning childhood, gender and pedagogy, however, are not new in our era. For many centuries there have been authors, poets and composers who also struggled with the place of children in society. They often immortalized their thoughts within the works they wrote and composed, preserving them for future generations to look back on, and learn from. Humperdinck's opera *Hänsel und Gretel*, as we have seen, contains powerful lessons concerning childhood that were applicable not only then, but today as well.

Throughout this thesis I have tried to explore how the changes Wette made to the Grimms' version of "Hänsel und Gretel" in her fairy-tale opera comment on child labor, gender, and pedagogical function in the nineteenth century. I started out by exploring some of the scholarship surrounding the most well-known version of "Hänsel und Gretel," written by the brothers' Grimm. I then tried to explicate the opera itself, both textually and to a smaller extent musically, to show how the opera commented on childhood. In the first chapter it was my argument that by changing the role the children played in the opera to a

¹¹⁶ See *Peter Pan*. Barrie, Frank, and Torrey 1957.

more labor-intensive one Wette commented on the deplorable nature of child labor, and the need for an abuse-free, anxiety-free childhood. The dramatic change in the choice of leadership explored in the second chapter, along with the change in the profession of the father, comments on gender and the need to educate both boys and girls equally. The third chapter explored the significant pedagogical functions added to the libretto and some of their implications for children's confidence and religious faith.

Hänsel und Gretel was not the only fairy-tale based work Humperdinck wrote. In fact, Humperdinck collaborated with librettists to compose four other fairy-tale related musical works. He began work with Wette to write a *Liederspiel* entitled "Schneewittchen" (1888) five years before his most famous opera *Hänsel und Gretel* even opened. Then after the success of his fairy-tale opera he teamed up with Wette one last time in writing another *Liederspiel* "Die sieben Geislein" (1895).¹¹⁷ A *Liederspiel* is "a kind of dramatic entertainment developed in Germany in the early nineteenth century in which songs are introduced into a play."¹¹⁸ Because the emphasis is on the play, the words become much more important. It would be interesting to explore these two lesser known works and look for implications about child labor, gender, and pedagogical function as well as the two fairy-tale operas he wrote with other librettists, "Königskinder" (1897), and "Dornröschen" (1902).

Fairy-tale operas were non-existent before Humperdinck invented the genre and first made it popular with his *Hänsel und Gretel*. Although extremely well-liked, there has been little

¹¹⁷ Ian Denley: 'Humperdinck, Engelbert', *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 8 March 2006), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>.

¹¹⁸ It also "differs from the older Singspiel principally in its inclusion of songs that as lyric poems already enjoyed some currency; the melodies (normally with simple instrumentation) were new, though some of the songs from such works later came to be regarded as folksongs. Ensembles and choruses were not at first admitted, and the music had an almost entirely lyrical rather than a dramatic character." Peter Branscombe: 'Liederspiel', *Grove Music Online*, (Accessed 8 March 2006), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>.

research into the literary significance of the operas themselves. If fairy-tale operas are indeed, like their literary Grimm counterparts, meant to give children a “moral education,” it would be useful to take a better look at this oft neglected genre to see what it has taught, and continues to teach our children today.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, 17.

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