



Telling and Retelling Stories

In the preface, we talked generally about how individuals and cultures retell the same stories. In this chapter, we want to discuss more specifically how the same stories are told, retold, and read. As we said earlier, some literary historians argue that there are, in fact, a limited number of stories. In an age and culture such as our own, which often values the original, even the eccentric, over the traditional and communal, that may seem like a negative comment. In fact, though, an understanding of what different versions of the same story have in common—and, perhaps even more significant, how they differ—can often open a rich and exciting window into time, place, and culture. To read the same story told from a number of different temporal, geographical, and cultural perspectives enables us to isolate what makes each time and place unique and, at the same time, to recognize the kinship between ourselves and those whose cultures or periods in history would otherwise make them seem like strangers.

READING AND INTERPRETATION

The Influence of Culture: Three Tellings of “Cinderella”

Literary critics and anthropologists have been struck by how often the same story is told by many cultures. Many cultures have a Flood story, for instance, and many have strikingly similar stories about the origins of the universe. Whether these stories all harken back to an unknown **archetype**, or original model story that is the origin of all later stories, or whether there is some more direct means of transmission from one culture to another, a comparison among the versions of a story can tell us much about culture and narrative. To see how cultural influences shape a story, consider what happens to the Cinderella story when it is told by authors from different cultures separated by vast expanses of time and geography. Look first at the following Golden Book adaptation of Walt Disney’s *Cinderella*, a version familiar to many children who grow up in the United States:

Adapted by CAMPBELL GRANT

Walt Disney’s “Cinderella”

Once upon a time in a far-away land lived a sweet and pretty girl named Cinderella. She made her home with her mean old stepmother and her two stepsisters, and they made her do all the work in the house.

Cinderella cooked and baked. She cleaned and scrubbed. She had no time left for parties and fun.

But one day an invitation came from the palace of the king.

A great ball was to be given for the prince of the land. And every young girl in the kingdom was invited.

"How nice!" thought Cinderella. "I am invited, too."

But her mean stepsisters never thought of her. They thought only of themselves, of course. They had all sorts of jobs for Cinderella to do.

"Wash this slip. Press this dress. Curl my hair. Find my fan."

They both kept shouting, as fast as they could speak.

"But I must get ready myself. I'm going, too," said Cinderella.

"You!" they hooted. "The Prince's ball for you?"

And they kept her busy all day long. She worked in the morning, while her stepsisters slept. She worked all afternoon, while they bathed and dressed. And in the evening she had to help them put on the finishing touches for the ball. She had not one minute to think of herself.

Soon the coach was ready at the door. The ugly stepsisters were powdered, pressed, and curled. But there stood Cinderella in her workaday rags.

"Why, Cinderella!" said the stepsisters. "You're not dressed for the ball."

"No," said Cinderella. "I guess I cannot go."

Poor Cinderella sat weeping in the garden.

Suddenly a little old woman with a sweet, kind face stood before her. It was her fairy godmother.

"Hurry, child!" she said. "You are going to the ball!"

Cinderella could hardly believe her eyes! The fairy godmother turned a fat pumpkin into a splendid coach.

Next her pet mice became horses, and her dog a fine footman. The barn horse was turned into a coachman.

"There, my dear," said the fairy godmother. "Now into the coach with you, and off to the ball you go."

"But my dress—" said Cinderella.

"Lovely, my dear," the fairy godmother began. Then she really looked at Cinderella's rags.

"Oh, good heavens," she said. "You can never go in that." She waved her magic wand.

"Salaga doola,
Menchicka boola,
Bibbidi-bobbidi-boo!" she said.

There stood Cinderella in the loveliest ball dress that ever was. And on her feet were tiny glass slippers!

"Oh," cried Cinderella. "How can I ever thank you?"

"Just have a wonderful time at the ball, my dear," said her fairy godmother. "But remember, this magic lasts only until midnight. At the stroke of midnight, the spell will be broken. And everything will be as it was before."

"I will remember," said Cinderella. "It is more than I ever dreamed of."

Then into the magic coach she stepped, and was whirled away to the ball.

And such a ball! The king's palace was ablaze with lights. There was music and laughter. And every lady in the land was dressed in her beautiful best.

But Cinderella was the loveliest of them all. The prince never left her side, all evening long. They danced every dance. They had supper side by side. And they happily smiled into each other's eyes.

But all at once the clock began to strike midnight, Bong Bong Bong—

"Oh!" cried Cinderella. "I almost forgot!"

And without a word, away she ran, out of the ballroom and down the palace stairs. She lost one glass slipper. But she could not stop.

Into her magic coach she stepped, and away it rolled. But as the clock stopped striking, the coach disappeared. And no one knew where she had gone.

Next morning all the kingdom was filled with the news. The Grand Duke was going from house to house, with a small glass slipper in his hand. For the prince had said he would marry no one but the girl who could wear that tiny shoe.

Every girl in the land tried hard to put it on. The ugly stepsisters tried hardest of all. But not a one could wear the glass shoe.

And where was Cinderella? Locked in her room. For the mean old stepmother was taking no chances of letting her try on the slipper. Poor Cinderella! It looked as if the Grand Duke would surely pass her by.

But her little friends the mice got the stepmother's key. And they pushed it under Cinderella's door. So down the long stairs she came, as the Duke was just about to leave.

"Please!" cried Cinderella. "Please let me try."

And of course the slipper fitted, since it was her very own.

That was all the Duke needed. Now his long search was done. And so Cinderella became the prince's bride, and lived happily ever after—and the little pet mice lived in the palace and were happy ever after, too.

In this version of the Cinderella story, the emphasis is on romance and magic, not on violence. Although the stepsisters and stepmother are called "mean," the meanness is more a matter of pettiness and jealousy than of violent aggression. The mean stepfamily is forgotten as soon as Cinderella's life is magically transformed by her fairy godmother and the prince's love.

Now read the nineteenth-century German version of "Cinderella" by the Brothers Grimm:

BROTHERS GRIMM

Cinderella

The wife of a rich man fell ill. When she realized that the end was near, she called her only daughter to her bedside and said: "Dear child, if you are good and say your prayers, our dear Lord will always be with you, and I shall look down on you from heaven and always be with you." Then she shut her eyes and passed away.

Every day the girl went to the grave of her mother and wept. She was always good and said her prayers. When winter came, the snow covered the grave with

a white blanket, and when the sun had taken it off again in the spring, the rich man remarried.

His new wife brought with her two daughters, whose features were beautiful and white, but whose hearts were foul and black. This meant the beginning of a hard time for the poor stepchild. "Why should this silly goose be allowed to sit in the parlor with us?" the girls said. "If you want to eat bread, you'll have to earn it. Out with the kitchen maid!"

They took away her beautiful clothes, dressed her in an old grey smock, and gave her some wooden shoes. "Just look at the proud princess in her finery!" they shouted and laughed, taking her out to the kitchen. From morning until night she had to work hard. Every day, she got up before daybreak to carry water, start the fire, cook, and wash. On top of that the two sisters did everything imaginable to make her miserable. They ridiculed her and threw peas and lentils into the ashes so that she would have to sit down in the ashes and pick them out. In the evening, when she was completely exhausted from work, she didn't have a bed but had to lie down next to the hearth in ashes. She always looked so dusty and dirty that people started to call her Cinderella.

One day, the father was going to the fair and he asked his two stepdaughters what he could bring back for them. "Beautiful dresses," said one.

"Pearls and jewels," said the other.

"But you, Cinderella," he asked, "what do you want?"

"Father," she said, "break off the first branch that brushes against your hat on the way home and bring it to me."

And so he bought beautiful dresses, pearls, and jewels for the two stepsisters. On the way home, when he was riding through a thicket of green bushes, a hazel branch brushed against him and knocked his hat off. When he arrived home, he gave his stepdaughters what they had asked for, and to Cinderella he gave the branch from the hazel bush. Cinderella thanked him, went to her mother's grave, and planted a hazel sprig on it. She wept so hard that her tears fell to the ground and watered it. It grew and became a beautiful tree. Three times a day Cinderella went and sat under it, and wept and prayed. Each time a little white bird would also fly to the tree, and if she made a wish, the little bird would toss down what she had wished for.

It happened that one day the king announced a festival that was to last for three days and to which all the beautiful young ladies of the land were invited from whom his son might choose a bride. When the two stepsisters heard that they too had been asked to attend, they were in fine spirits. They called Cinderella and said: "Comb our hair, brush our shoes, and fasten our buckles. We're going to the wedding at the king's palace."

Cinderella did as she was told, but she wept, for she too would have liked to go to the ball, and she begged her stepmother to let her go.

"Cinderella," she said, "How can you go to a wedding when you're covered with dust and dirt? How can you want to go to a ball when you have neither a dress nor shoes?"

Cinderella kept pleading with her, and so she finally said: "Here, I've dumped a bowlful of lentils into the ashes. If you can pick out the lentils in the next two hours, then you may go."

The girl went out the back door into the garden and called out: "O tame little doves, little turtledoves, and all you little birds in the sky, come and help me put

the good ones into the little pot,
the bad ones into your little crop."

Two little white doves came flying in through the kitchen window, followed by little turtle doves. And finally all the birds in the sky came swooping and fluttering and settled down in the ashes. The little doves nodded their heads and began to peck, peck, peck, peck, and then the others began to peck, peck, peck, peck and put all the good lentils into the bowl. Barely an hour had passed when they were finished and flew back out the window.

The girl brought the bowl to her stepmother and was overjoyed because she was sure that she would now be able to go to the wedding. But the stepmother said: "No, Cinderella, you have nothing to wear, and you don't know how to dance. Everybody would just laugh at you."

When Cinderella began to cry, the stepmother said: "If you can pick out two bowlfuls of lentils from the ashes in the next hour, then you can go."

But she thought to herself: "She'll never be able to do it."

After she had dumped the two bowlfuls of lentils into the ashes, the girl went out the back door into the garden and called out: "O tame little doves, little turtle-doves, and all you little birds in the sky, come and help me put

the good ones into the little pot,
the bad ones into your little crop."

Two little white doves came flying in through the kitchen window, followed by little turtle doves. And finally all the birds in the sky came swooping and fluttering and settled down in the ashes. The little doves nodded their heads and began to peck, peck, peck, peck, and then the others began to peck, peck, peck, peck and put all the good lentils into the bowl. Barely a half hour had passed when they were finished and flew back out the window.

The girl brought the bowls back to her stepmother and was overjoyed because she was sure that she would now be able to go to the wedding. But her stepmother said: "It's no use. You can't come along since you have nothing to wear and don't know how to dance. We would be so embarrassed." Turning her back on Cinderella, she hurried off with her two proud daughters.

Now that no one was at home any longer, Cinderella went to her mother's grave under the hazel tree and called:

"Shake your branches, little tree,
Toss gold and silver down on me."

The bird tossed down a dress of gold and silver, with slippers embroidered with silk and silver. She slipped the dress on hastily and left for the wedding. Her sister and her stepmother had no idea who she was. She looked so beautiful in the dress of gold that they thought she must be the daughter of a foreign king. They never imagined it could be Cinderella for they were sure that she was at home, sitting in the dirt and picking lentils out of the ashes.

The prince approached Cinderella, took her by the hand, and danced with her. He didn't intend to dance with anyone else and never let go of her hand. Whenever anyone else asked her to dance, he would say: "She is my partner."

Cinderella danced until it was night, then she wanted to go home. The prince said: "I will go with you and be your escort," for he wanted to find out about the beautiful girl's family. But she managed to slip away from him and bounded into a dovecote. The prince waited until Cinderella's father arrived and told him that the strange girl had bounded into the dovecote. The old man thought: "Could it be Cinderella?" He sent for an ax and pick and broke into the dovecote, but no one was inside it. And when they went back to the house, there was Cinderella, lying in the ashes in her filthy clothes with a dim little oil lamp burning on the mantel. Cinderella had jumped down from the back of the dovecote and had run over to the little hazel tree, where she slipped out of her beautiful dress and put it on the grave. The bird took the dress back, and Cinderella had slipped into her grey smock and settled back into the ashes in the kitchen.

The next day, when the festivities started up again and the parents had left with the stepsisters, Cinderella went to the hazel tree and said:

"Shake your branches, little tree,
Toss gold and silver down on me."

The bird tossed down a dress that was even more splendid than the previous one. And when she appeared at the wedding in this dress, everyone was dazzled by her beauty. The prince, who had been waiting for her to arrive, took her by the hand and danced with her alone. Whenever anyone came and asked her to dance, he would say: "She is my partner."

At night she wanted to leave, and the prince followed her, hoping to see which house she would enter. But she bounded away and disappeared into the garden behind the house, where there was a beautiful, tall tree from whose branches hung magnificent pears. She climbed up through the branches as nimbly as a squirrel, and the prince had no idea where she was. He waited until her father got there and said to him: "The strange girl has escaped, but I believe that she climbed up into the pear tree."

The father thought: "Could it be Cinderella?" and he sent for an ax and chopped down the tree. But no one was in it. When they went into the kitchen, Cinderella was, as usual, lying in the ashes, for she had jumped down on the other side of the tree, taken the beautiful dress to the bird on the hazel tree, and slipped on her little grey smock again.

On the third day, when the parents and sisters had left, Cinderella went to her mother's grave and said to the little tree:

"Shake your branches, little tree,
Toss gold and silver down on me."

The bird tossed down a dress which was more splendid and radiant than anything she had ever had, and the slippers were covered in gold. When she got to the wedding in that dress, everyone was speechless with amazement. The prince danced with her alone, and if someone asked her to dance, he would say: "She is my partner."

At night, Cinderella wanted to leave, and the prince wanted to escort her, but she slipped away so quickly that he was unable to follow her. The prince had planned a trick. The entire staircase had been coated with pitch, and as the girl went running down the stairs, her left slipper got stuck. The prince lifted it up: it was a dainty little shoe covered with gold.

The next morning he went with it to the father and said to him: "No one else will be my bride but the woman whose foot fits this golden shoe." The two sisters were overjoyed, for they both had beautiful feet. The elder went with her mother into a room to try it on. But the shoe was too small for her, for she couldn't get her big toe into it. Her mother handed her a knife and said: "Cut the toe off. Once you're queen, you won't need to go on foot any more."

The girl sliced off her toe, forced her foot into the shoe, gritted her teeth, and went out to meet the prince. He lifted her up on his horse as his bride, and rode away with her. But they had to pass by the grave, where two little doves were perched in the little hazel tree, calling out:

"Roo coo coo, roo coo coo,
blood's in the shoe:
the shoe's too tight,
the real bride's waiting another night."

When he looked down at her foot, he saw blood spurting from it and turned his horse around. He brought the false bride back home, and said that since she was not the true bride, her sister should try the shoe on. The sister went into her room and succeeded in getting her toes into the shoe, but her heel was too big. Her mother handed her a knife and said: "Cut off part of your heel. Once you're queen, you won't need to go on foot any more."

The girl sliced off a piece of her heel, forced her foot into the shoe, gritted her teeth, and went out to meet the prince. He lifted her up on his horse as his bride, and rode away with her. When they passed by the little hazel tree, two little doves were perched there, calling out:

"Roo coo coo, roo coo coo,
blood's in the shoe:
the shoe's too tight,
the real bride's waiting another night."

When he looked down at her foot, he saw blood spurting from it and staining her white stockings completely red. Then he turned his horse around and brought the false bride back home. "She's not the true bride either," he said. "Don't you have another daughter?"

"No," said the man, "there's only puny little Cinderella, my dead wife's daughter, but she can't possibly be the bride."

The prince asked that she he sent for, but the mother said: "Oh no, she's much too dirty to be seen."

The prince insisted, and Cinderella was summoned. First she washed her hands and face completely clean, then she went and curtsied before the prince, who handed her the golden shoe. She sat down on a stool, took her foot out of the heavy wooden shoe, and put it into the slipper. It fit perfectly. And when she stood up and the prince looked her straight in the face, he recognized the beautiful girl with whom he had danced and exclaimed: "She is the true bride." The stepmother and the two sisters were horrified and turned pale with rage. But the prince lifted Cinderella up on his horse and rode away with her. When they passed by the little hazel tree, the two little white doves called out:

"Roo coo coo, roo coo coo,
no blood in the shoe:
the shoe's not tight,
the real bride's here tonight."

After they had called out these words, the doves both came flying down and perched on Cinderella's shoulders, one on the right, the other on the left, and there they stayed.

On the day of the wedding to the prince, the two false sisters came and tried to ingratiate themselves and share in Cinderella's good fortune. When the couple went to church, the elder sister was on the right, the younger on the left side: the doves pecked one eye from each one. Later, when they left the church, the elder sister was on the left, the younger on the right. The doves pecked the other eye from each one. And so they were punished for their wickedness and malice with blindness for the rest of their lives.

Most readers familiar with the Disney version of *Cinderella* will probably be struck by how different the German version is. Though we know, for instance, that the Disney Cinderella's mother has died and that her father has remarried, in the German version we see more vividly the young girl's grief and her ultimate rejection by her father, for whom she seems only an afterthought. There are other differences as well; the German heroine is much more active and resourceful than the more passive and demure American Cinderella: she calls the birds to her aid, and she runs from the prince and returns to her place in the ashes. She also apparently receives help from her dead mother, rather than from a magical fairy godmother appearing from nowhere. Most obvious, however, are the differences in the atmospheres of the two stories. Nowhere in the Disney version is there the suggestion of violence that permeates the German version, with its broken promises, bloody feet, and blinded eyes.

A comparison of the German and Disney versions may, then, reveal much about the two cultures' ideas of ideal womanhood, justice, magic, and spirituality. It will reveal as well something about each culture's way of looking at childhood. Although the Grimm version was available for telling, most American parents of the mid-twentieth century were more drawn than their earlier German counterparts to images of a sentimental happily-ever-after world in which romance, rather than punishment, dominates. That was the world in which they wanted their children to live.

Perhaps even more interesting, though, is a comparison of these Western versions of the Cinderella story to the Chinese story of Yeh-hsien, which was written over one thousand years ago and is the first known version of "Cinderella." As you read the tale, think about how it compares with the other Cinderella stories printed here.

Yeh-hsien

Among the people of the south there is a tradition that before the Ch'in and Han dynasties there was a cave-master called Wu. The aborigines called the place the Wu cave. He married two wives. One wife died. She had a daughter called Yeh-hsien, who from childhood was intelligent and good at making pottery on the wheel. Her father loved her. After some years the father died, and she was ill-treated by her step-

mother, who always made her collect firewood in dangerous places and draw water from deep pools. She once got a fish about two inches long, with red fins and golden eyes. She put it into a bowl of water. It grew bigger every day, and after she had changed the bowl several times she could find no bowl big enough for it, so she threw it into the back pond. Whatever food was left over from meals she put into the water to feed it. When she came to the pond, the fish always exposed its head and pillowed it on the bank; but when anyone else came, it did not come out. The step-mother knew about this, but when she watched for it, it did not once appear. So she tricked the girl, saying, "Haven't you worked hard! I am going to give you a new dress." She then made the girl change out of her tattered clothing. Afterwards she sent her to get water from another spring and reckoning that it was several hundred leagues, the step-mother at her leisure put on her daughter's clothes, hid a sharp blade up her sleeve, and went to the pond. She called to the fish. The fish at once put its head out, and she chopped it off and killed it. The fish was now more than ten feet long. She served it up and it tasted twice as good as an ordinary fish. She hid the bones under the dung-hill. Next day, when the girl came to the pond, no fish appeared. She howled with grief in the open countryside, and suddenly there appeared a man with his hair loose over his shoulders and coarse clothes. He came down from the sky. He consoled her saying, "Don't howl! Your step-mother has killed the fish and its bones are under the dung. You go back, take the fish's bones and hide them in your room. Whatever you want, you have only to pray to them for it. It is bound to be granted." The girl followed his advice, and was able to provide herself with gold, pearls, dresses and food whenever she wanted them.

When the time came for the cave-festival, the step-mother went, leaving the girl to keep watch over the fruit-trees in the garden. She waited till the step-mother was some way off, and then went herself, wearing a cloak of stuff spun from kingfisher feathers and shoes of gold. Her step-sister recognized her and said to the step-mother, "That's very like my sister." The step-mother suspected the same thing. The girl was aware of this and went away in such a hurry that she lost one shoe. It was picked up by one of the people of the cave. When the step-mother got home, she found the girl asleep, with her arms round one of the trees in the garden, and thought no more about it.

This cave was near to an island in the sea. On this island was a kingdom called T'o-han. Its soldiers had subdued twenty or thirty other islands and it had a coast-line of several thousand leagues. The cave-man sold the shoe in T'o-han, and the ruler of T'o-han got it. He told those about him to put it on; but it was an inch too small even for the one among them that had the smallest foot. He ordered all the women in his kingdom to try it on; but there was not one that it fitted. It was light as down and made no noise even when treading on stone. The king of T'o-han thought the cave-man had got it unlawfully. He put him in prison and tortured him, but did not end by finding out where it had come from. So he threw it down at the wayside. Then they went everywhere through all the people's houses and arrested them. If there was a woman's shoe, they arrested them and told the king of T'o-han. He thought it strange, searched the inner-rooms and found Yeh-hsien. He made her put on the shoe, and it was true.

Yeh-hsien then came forward, wearing her cloak spun from halcyon feathers and her shoes. She was as beautiful as a heavenly being. She now began to render

service to the king, and he took the fish-bones and Yeh-hsien, and brought them back to his country.

The step-mother and step-sister were shortly afterwards struck by flying stones, and died. The cave people were sorry for them and buried them in a stone-pit, which was called the Tomb of the Distressed Women. The men of the cave made mating-offerings there; any girl they prayed for there, they got. The king of T'o-han, when he got back to his kingdom made Yeh-hsien his chief wife. The first year the king was very greedy and by his prayers to the fish-bones got treasures and jade without limit. Next year, there was no response, so the king buried the fish-bones on the sea-shore. He covered them with a hundred bushels of pearls and bordered them with gold. Later there was a mutiny of some soldiers who had been conscripted and their general opened (the hiding-place) in order to make better provision for his army. One night they (the bones) were washed away by the tide.

EXERCISE: TRYING IT OUT

If you had not been told that this was a "Chinese Cinderella," would you have recognized it as a Cinderella story? Why or why not? Write down the elements of the story that seem most like the Cinderella tale you know and the ones least like it.

You might have noticed some similarities between the Chinese "Cinderella" and the Western ones. For example, all the Cinderellas have an unusually small foot, a characteristic that probably comes from the Chinese original. For the Chinese, a small foot was a sign of femininity, a cultural value supported by the practice of foot binding. We also see in the Chinese tale the wicked stepmother and a hint of the wicked stepsister familiar to those who know the Western versions of "Cinderella."

At the same time, the tale of Yeh-hsien is very different from the two later stories, and we may well wonder if those differences are the result of cultural differences. Most notably, Yeh-hsien seems less central to the story than do the American and German Cinderellas. Is that, perhaps, the result of a culture that valued the communal more than the individual? In the Chinese version, there is also less emphasis on the labor performed by the heroine: most modern readers are used to seeing a Cinderella among the cinders, sweeping the hearth and doing the hardest, dirtiest tasks of the household. Did nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western culture perhaps place a different value on domestic labor than did the China of a thousand years ago? Did the long-ago Chinese storyteller view work differently than do Western Europeans and Americans? Or did the ancient Chinese simply assume that life was difficult for everyone and so find no need to mention the heroine's daily routine?

Other elements emphasized in the two modern versions are also less important in the Chinese original. For example, the stepsister in the Chinese story plays a surprisingly minor role. Is sibling rivalry perhaps a modern invention, something we become more aware of only as life becomes easier? In addition, though Yeh-hsien becomes the "chief wife" of the king, he does not seem a Prince Charming; there is no sense that he provides the completion of the story, the "happily ever after" of the

more modern stories. Does that perhaps suggest that romantic love was not as important to the Chinese audience as to German and American ones?

No matter how you view the Cinderellas of the three versions, you will undoubtedly see that the heroine is different in each of the stories. The characterizations of the heroine and those she meets, her actions and reactions, and the atmosphere of the world around her—all tell us something about what each culture values and how it looks at the world.

EXERCISE: TRYING IT OUT

The story of Cinderella you are familiar with probably goes back many years. Write an updated version of the story to make it more contemporary. What changes did you make—and why? How would you preserve the story as a children's story?

The Influence of Time

As we have just seen, different cultures tell the same stories differently. No less important is the fact that different cultures—and different individuals within those cultures—also read the same stories differently. Our readings of those stories are sometimes informed by years of personal and cultural history that separate us from the stories' first tellings, and our interpretations of them are a kind of retelling. Consider, for instance, what happens when we read about a hero like Shakespeare's Prospero (the main character of *The Tempest*). Many years before the play starts, Prospero's brother had stolen his dukedom from him and cast Prospero and his daughter adrift. Shipwrecked on an island, Prospero has used magic to rule the island and control its inhabitants, among them the "slave" Caliban and the spirit Ariel. At the end of the play, though, Prospero renounces his magic, leaving the island and returning home. Do we see that ending as fully positive?

In answering that question, we need to think not only about our own twenty-first-century response but also about the response that Shakespeare's original audience would likely have had. Although we can work to immerse ourselves in Renaissance history and literature, try as we might, we cannot fully recapture the sensations that an early-seventeenth-century theater audience must have had when watching Prospero renounce the magic that had allowed him to keep the bestial Caliban in check. Unlike the audiences of earlier times, we no longer believe in monsters. In fact, we have often come to distrust those who seek to dominate or who label as monstrous those who are "different." We may, then, be far less likely than the original audience to find Caliban bestial or Prospero admirable, and we may be far more tempted to brand Prospero's actions as "patriarchal" or "colonial." However knowledgeable about early literature and history we are, we cannot completely shake from our vision the perspectives brought by our living in the twenty-first century.

Rather than lament our inability to recapture the literary response of a time gone by, we ask you here to confront that inability head-on. One way to do that is, of course, to attempt to read the stories as their original audiences would have heard

them, to learn about the assumptions and values that they would have brought to their hearing or reading of a piece of literature. When those of us who quite happily and comfortably inhabit the New World read Shakespeare's *Tempest*, it is important that we learn to see it as a drama written partly in response to the tensions experienced by European explorers who, leaving the known world, voyaged into alien territory rumored to be populated by subhuman beasts. Hindsight and an understanding of indigenous cultures have shown us that the New World is hospitable and fertile, a place that is now—and was during Shakespeare's time—home to sophisticated and humane civilizations. But for those traveling to uncharted lands, no such assurances existed, and it is important for us when we read works such as *The Tempest* to attempt to recapture that mixed air of excitement and anxiety that infects all explorers. It is important as well to understand, even if we do not share, the assumptions and biases of an earlier time.

In reading literature from the past, we gain a better understanding of earlier times and begin to understand how our own age shapes our responses to life and literature. An audience fearful of the creature emerging from the wilderness is hardly likely to want to stop to think about how that creature might be looking at things. But, perhaps more comfortable in a modern society's ability to defeat any monster, in 1969 Caribbean author Aimé Césaire did something like that, offering us a version of Shakespeare's play with an articulate "monster." In Césaire's *A Tempest*, Caliban raises questions about the heroism of Prospero, who has, after all, overrun the land of the New World and sought to dominate its inhabitants. In reading Césaire's play, we come to understand how Shakespeare's assumptions about civilization and humanity differ from our own; at the same time, as we reread Shakespeare's play in light of Césaire's later one, we begin to see a complexity that we might not otherwise have noticed. Perhaps Shakespeare meant *The Tempest* to contain a hint of criticism about Prospero's treatment of Caliban and a small bit of sympathy for the natural "savage" who has lost his land and his freedom.

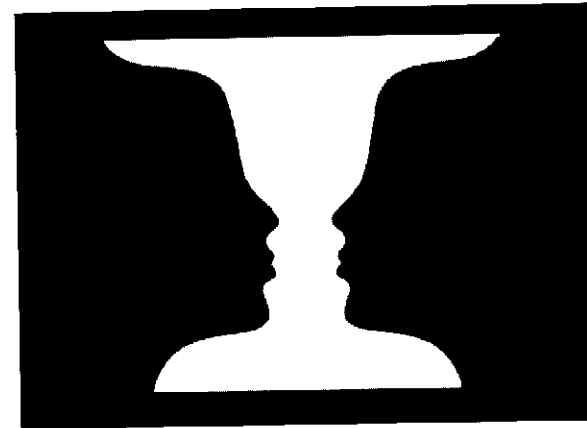
EXERCISES: TRYING IT OUT

1. Think of a story from long ago—a fairy tale, perhaps—that pits a hero against a monster or villain. Usually such stories are sympathetic to the hero. Rewrite that story from the monster's or villain's point of view. How would you get your readers to sympathize with the monster? How would you tailor your story to an audience of children? An audience of teenagers or adults?
2. In a small way, the time-related reactions we have been discussing occur even from one generation to the next. Perhaps parents of most generations have found the popular music of teenagers discordant or shocking, and perhaps most teenagers have been equally dismissive of the music of an earlier generation. Take the lyrics from one of your favorite songs and retell them in the style of your parents' generation; or do the opposite, and take the lyrics from a song of their generation and retell it in the language and beat of today's music.

The Importance of Perspective

All of these different tales and responses to them are, finally, a matter of **perspective**, and in *Retellings* we are asking you to think about the ways in which the perspectives of the teller, the artistic center (the hero, the **protagonist**), and the audience all figure into an interpretation of a work of literature. *Perspective* is, of course, a term that pertains to how we see something. In representing a three-dimensional object on a two-dimensional surface, an artist must think about how large or small something seems when seen from a distance, how the angle from which it is viewed changes what the observer sees, or how the juxtaposition, the placing side by side, of two items causes us to see each differently.

The importance of perspective and the difficulty of keeping in mind two perspectives at once become especially clear at the visual level when we look at optical illusions. Look, for instance, at this familiar optical illusion:



Do you see two lovers? A wine goblet? Both images? Once you have trained your eyes to see both the lovers and the goblet, you can easily move back and forth between the images, and your mind will begin to recognize that the two exist simultaneously. It is a similar kind of mental exercise that we are asking you to perform in your reading of literature. It is not a matter of whether Shakespeare's Prospero is a **perfect hero** or a **flawed man**; he may well be both, and the reading of alternate versions of his and others' stories will, we think, help you begin to see that works of literature can support these contradictory readings, these opposed perspectives.

Years ago, literary critic Norman Rabkin called this creation of simultaneously opposed, or different, images and ideas *complementarity*, and he said that complementarity is the hallmark of much great literature. It is also, we think, the hallmark of much great reading of literature, and for that reason this focus on multiple perspectives is at the center of our approach in *Retellings*. To be able to see the ideas or events of a piece of literature (or of life, for that matter) from the varied perspectives of its many participants and observers is, we think, to see it whole, in its full complexity. That means, then, seeing the piece from the perspectives of its author and its original audience while at the same time comparing those earlier perspectives to the perspectives of readers who are outside that author's mind and time.

In many ways, what we are asking you to do is to apply to literature a kind of thinking that you are already familiar with. To understand the importance of perspective to interpretation, you need only think about a controversial or highly charged family event, say, a public fight between you and your sister. Would all those who witnessed the event emphasize the same details? Would you, in other words, all tell the same story? Your version may be no more or less true than, say, your mother's or father's version or that of a sibling; it may be no more or less true than that of a friend or stranger who observed the scene. What gets emphasized, though, is both enhanced and limited by the teller's perspective. You know more than anyone else what was going on in your mind; at the same time what you were thinking and feeling is bound to have influenced both what you observed and how you narrate it. In other words, your understanding—and your ability to see and interpret fact—is influenced by your perspective and by your assumptions.

EXERCISE: TRYING IT OUT

Think back to an important event in your life, and interview as many of the participants and observers as you can. How much do their tellings differ from one another? What do the differences tell us about the tellers' needs, values, and beliefs?

Such complexity of thought is already inherent in much of our thinking. When Rabkin wrote about complementarity, he was, in fact, borrowing a term coined by physicists Niels Bohr and J. Robert Oppenheimer to describe the physicist's dilemma in seeing an electron as both a particle and a wave. How can it be both? More important, perhaps, what happens when we need to see it as both, and what can be gained by alternating between apparently opposed theories and trying to hold them in mind simultaneously? We move back and forth between supposedly competing theories in other disciplines as well. Is alcoholism caused by a chemical imbalance? Is it a psychological dependency? A learned behavior? Is the manic depressive the victim of a personality disorder best studied by psychologists or of a physiological process that can be put in check by a neurologist? How the "story" of the alcoholic or the manic depressive is told has far-reaching implications for how that person is treated and perceived, and there is some danger in thinking that a simple cure can come from a single avenue of healing. In physics and medicine, as well as in literature, the perspectives of the teller and observer significantly affect the interpretation of fact.

EXERCISES: TRYING IT OUT

1. At the linguistic level, Rabkin's idea of complementarity can be demonstrated by the use of **oxymorons**, words or phrases that contain within them their opposites. (A San Francisco newspaper columnist once called these "self-canceling phrases.") Examples of oxymorons include "bittersweet," "wise fool," "make haste

- slowly," "deceitful truth," and "burned with a cold anger." List five or more oxymorons. Then write a brief (one-page) story or poem that demonstrates the principle behind one of the oxymorons.
2. Think of an area of complex social concern (for example, public art, transportation, poverty, the economy). Write down five or six different "perspectives" on that area, considering how these different perspectives might make consensus difficult. For example, how might an engineer, a social worker, a taxpayer, a senior citizen, and a politician all view the issue?

Riddling: Multiple Perspectives Literary texts open themselves up to the kind of multiplicity of understanding that we have been discussing even more deliberately than do medical cases or physical phenomena. Indeed, from your earliest experiences with texts, whether oral or written, you were already beginning to play with the importance of multiple perspectives and to understand the ways the same story can be retold. Most riddles and jokes, and many childhood songs, rely on their tellers' ability to play with literary perspective and surprise, to hold simultaneously two contrary, or different, readings of a work. One of the first riddles that many children learn relies on a sound play that allows for two different endings:

What is black and white and red/read all over?

The child who tells this riddle anticipates two different responses, each of which has the potential to be "right," and each of which has the potential to be "wrong." To his listener, there is no difference in sound between "red" and "read," so the teller can easily "fool" his listener. If that listener thinks she knows the answer to the riddle—a newspaper is certainly black and white and read all over—the teller can trick her into believing that she was wrong: the answer isn't "a newspaper" but rather "a blushing zebra," which is black and white and red all over. If the savvy listener responds with "a blushing zebra" from the beginning, she, too, will discover that she is "wrong," for the answer this time around is "a newspaper." Finally, of course, neither riddle solver is wrong; both answers exist simultaneously in the riddle, and the joy—for the child learning to riddle and for the adult reading a sophisticated piece of literature—is often in discovering that very fact.

Such riddling is also found in more serious, adult works, sometimes even in pieces of literature that are not technically riddles. Consider, for instance, the poem "you fit into me," by Margaret Atwood. The poem deliberately uses an ambiguity similar to that of the newspaper/blushing zebra riddle. Rather than give you the entire poem at once, we are going to ask you to read it line by line, thinking along with us about how you would "solve" the riddle of the poetic narrative. As we read each line, we will be doing what all readers do: telling ourselves the story of the poem. Each additional line we read will help us tell an increasingly complex story and force us to revise our earlier impressions of emotions and events. As we read, we will, then, be casting our minds forward to what is about to happen and backward to what has already happened; we will be telling and retelling the poem.

The poem begins:

you fit into me

The line asks us to envision a perfect relationship, probably a relationship between a man and a woman perfectly matched to each other. There is in the idea of "fitting" a suggestion both of sexual intimacy and of a oneness that encourages us to believe that