Activity 3 - Analysing and Interpreting the Stories

Many of the Grimms’ stories have been analysed and re-interpreted again and again by writers, cultural critics, psychologists and Disney film-makers. There has recently been a new edition of the Grimms' stories in English by Philip Pullman, the author of the 'Dark Materials' series. You can hear him talking about it in this podcast: http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/audio/2012/dec/07/philip-pullman-grimm-tales-podcast?INTCMP=SRCH

The stories are so well-known that there are humorous versions of many of them. Here, for example, from a school website, are versions of the Frog Prince story written in teenagers’ slang:
http://129.143.224.18/b2evolution410/b2evolution/blogs/blog7.php/der-froschkoenig-die-quaktasche

You’ll probably find these stories quite hard to understand, because a lot of the words won’t be in your dictionary, but see how you get on – after all, you know the plot!

Because of the elements of sex and violence which the texts contain, however repressed by Wilhelm Grimm's re-writing, they have also been of enormous interest to psychoanalysts. The Wikipedia (German) page on the Frog Prince story gives an account of a lot of different interpretations:
http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Der_Froschkönig_oder_der_eiserne_Heinrich

As you will see, it refers to the story as belonging to a particular type of folktale, according to a scheme called the Aarne-Thomson classification system, which classifies stories from all over the world according to common motifs.

The Wikipedia page also mentions a lot of different interpretations of the story – as a story about sexual initiation, for example, or about how magical things lose their magic.

Psychoanalysts have seen a particular connection between the nursery fiction of the fairy tale tradition and the sorts of desires and anxieties that concern them in their treatment of mental disorders. A classic example of this would be Sigmund Freud's essay on the uncanny ('Das Unheimliche' (1919)). In exploring what makes certain types of experience uncanny for us, Freud examines the adult version of a classic fairy tale, 'Der Sandmann' (1817), by the Romantic writer and contemporary of the Grimm brothers, E. T. A. Hoffmann. Freud defines the 'unheimlich' as an unsettling combination of the strange and the familiar, and locates its origins in the hidden fears of the childhood home (drawing out the root of 'Heim' and 'heimlich' – 'homely' or secret). For Freud, the obsession in 'Der Sandmann' with viewing and the imagery of the loss of eyes is symptomatic of castration anxiety on the part of the protagonist, Nathanael. Literary critics with psychoanalytic interests have subsequently challenged Freud's reading as too fixated on that particular form of anxiety about loss, but all agree that Hoffmann's 'Der Sandmann' offers a powerful study of primal desires and fears as they return to haunt adult life.

You can read Hoffmann's classic Gothic tale free of charge at:
Some questions you might like to ask yourself include:

- Why does the tale begin with letters? What do they reveal?
- What should we make of the double figure Coppelius/Coppola?
- How should we understand Nathanael’s obsession with the automaton, Olimpia? What does it tell us about the relationship between humans and technology?
- How do visual obsession and distortion work in the narrative?
- How would a Gothic tale like this lend itself to filming? You might like to look at the trailer for a recent film version at: http://www.sandmann-derfilm.de/