

Final Project Critique

In their short manga “Hansel” and “Gretel,” Stephanie Stein and Anna Bessesen give the classic fairy tale two alternate face lifts: “Hansel” presents the tale as a shounen manga, while “Gretel” interprets it as a shoujo manga. At first glance, the crucial difference between the two versions is the art style. This critique, however, will focus mostly on the narrative itself. Stein’s storylines elicit two different generic flavors from one basic plot outline. In both versions of the manga, twins Hansel and Gretel—having lost their father to death in the shounen interpretation and been abandoned by him in the shoujo one—lose their way in the forest and stumble across a house made of candy. After inviting them into her home, the disguised Witch lulls them into a false sense of security before threatening to kill them, and the twins narrowly manage to defeat her and escape with their lives.

Both versions of the narrative speak to the theme of family, one that lends itself well to both shounen and shōjo styles. Examples of familial troubles or the importance of family abound in shoujo manga like Natsuki Takaya’s *Fruits Basket*, in which the orphaned heroine Tohru constantly worries about disappointing her departed mother. That said, the issue of family is hardly foreign to shounen manga. In Tite Kubo’s *Bleach*, for example, protagonist Ichigo demonstrates profound concern for the well-being of his two sisters. And in Hiromu Arakawa’s *Fullmetal Alchemist*, the protagonists’ botched attempt to resurrect their lost mother is the catalyst that sets off the entire plot of the manga. Stein and Bessesen’s “Hansel” and “Gretel” tales reinterpret the theme of family just as they do the tale itself, making the two versions read differently in a way that reaches beyond the art style. “Gretel” focuses on the reparation of the relationship between the twins and their

father, while “Hansel” instead allows its hero to avenge his father’s death and save his sister, who honors the bonds of family by refusing to leave her brother behind.

These divergent riffs on the central theme are particularly clear at the end of each manga version, both of which rewrite the ending of the original fairy tale. In the classic “Hansel and Gretel,” the Witch tries to trick Gretel into baking herself by asking her to check if the fireplace is working. Gretel turns the tables on her brother’s captor by claiming the fireplace is broken, and when the Witch goes to investigate, the girl shoves *her* into the fire instead. Rather than repeating Gretel’s cleverness twice over, each of these two manga versions re-imagines the ending. The new versions are similar to each other: in both, the Witch captures Hansel and threatens to kill him (to feed him to her dragon in “Gretel,” to eat him herself in “Hansel”). With the help of their pet sidekick (owl in “Gretel,” wolf in “Hansel”), the twins kill her and escape. The key difference between the two is that in the “Gretel” version, their father returns to help them. This ending places the emphasis of the tale on the restoration of a positive family dynamic between Gretel—who believes her father has abandoned her and Hansel on purpose—and her father, who had been enchanted by the Witch and must rush to save them (and redeem himself in his daughter’s eyes). The “Hansel” version instead places Hansel at center stage as an adventuring hero who saves his sister and avenges his father.

To detour briefly into the realm of art, the cover art also clearly reflects the shift of focus between the two manga treatments. The “Gretel” cover exhibits a more typically shoujo art style, with big sparkling eyes and embellished, fashionably textured clothes. Beyond the aesthetic, though, the key compositional choice is the focus on Gretel without either Hansel or her father, lying at peace on the grass in a situation one might imagine is perfect for daydreaming or emotional introspection. The “Hansel” cover instead depicts an action-based shot of Hansel and his wolf running through the forest, in keeping with this version’s interpretation of the pair as a shounen

manga hero and sidekick. The latter cover also sticks to a more typically shounen aesthetic style, with simpler clothing and more gravity-defying hairstyles.

The Hansel/Gretel project clearly demonstrates that either a shounen or shoujo face can be applied to the same story with minimal adjustment. Perhaps, then, we should refer to the two manga “genres” not by that term, but as “styles” (of art, of storytelling) instead. There are still clear-cut differences between the two styles: the shounen version of “Hansel and Gretel” focuses more on action and makes the Witch a monster that must be defeated to prevent physical violence, whereas the shoujo version focuses more on the heroine’s personal feelings toward her family. In the shoujo-style treatment, the Witch’s death is not the endgame; rather, her death serves to restore equilibrium to a family that has been strained by the enchantment-driven betrayal of its father.

The word “genre” is an inadequate description of shoujo and shounen manga because the term carries an expectation of certain plot elements. A mystery, for example, has a whodunit investigation at its heart, while a romance focuses on the development of a romantic relationship and a fantasy centers on magic and adventuring. The lines between genres do occasionally blur—we can imagine a fantasy-themed romance novel or a whodunit in a science fiction story—but overall, the genre “mystery” still describes principally works in the same vein as Sherlock Holmes and Agatha Christie’s Poirot. Referring to shounen and shoujo manga as “styles” instead of genres neatly sidesteps some of the definitional confusion that comes from, for example, “magical girl” stories, which are shoujo-style manga but feature adventure and fighting. These are plot elements we would generally expect to see in shounen manga, but a magical-girl manga like CLAMP’s *Cardcaptor Sakura* is likely to treat them differently than, say, Tite Kubo’s *Bleach*. This issue of narrative tone fits better under the heading of “style,” which can describe both art and narrative, as is clear in these two renditions of “Hansel and Gretel.”