

In this essay I will be exploring my influences and creative decisions in the short story I wrote for Applied Storytelling. Writing this story was a different experience to other times. It was the first time since losing my hair that I actually enjoyed the process of writing. It is also the first time that I was writing something I knew would definitely be adapted visually. Retelling old stories with fresh perspectives is something absolutely invaluable. Welsh mythology is something rich and complex that is so often overlooked, and this was a way of bringing those stories to a new audience whilst also giving characters who are usually voiceless a voice. A common trend in modern literature is not only retelling myths but to re-centre marginalised people in order to provide a new outlook and perhaps allow another group of people to connect to them. It was also an opportunity to explore themes I had previously been hesitant to explore such as a more nuanced exploration of consent and feminism, as I usually am far heavier handed in my depiction of these themes. This essay allows me to re-examine common trends and themes in my writing through a more critical lens whilst also considering how this project ties in with not only my future work for university but also my long-term goals as a creative.

In the foreword to 'The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories' by Angela Carter, Helen Simpson writes that Carter 'took traditional fairy tales and used them to write new ones' (2006, p.ix.) By this Simpson elaborates on how Carter did not want to write versions, but rather new stories. They have identifiable roots in well known tales but exist independently in a state where having a knowledge of the source will enrich the experience but isn't wholly necessary. This was something I wanted to emulate, allowing my stories to act as a sort of jumping off point to introduce people to lesser known elements of Welsh folklore whilst also re-centring the characters who are so often voiceless, in this case, Anwen and the monster. In Jack Zipes' 'The Enchanted Screen,' he states that the monster bridegroom tales usually follow a similar narrative, with aquatic stories this is usually the 'serpent... steals her clothes. He refuses to return them unless she marries him' (2011, p.225.) Here the monstrous bridegroom actively forces the maiden into a relationship, taking away her autonomy and her ability to consent. Additionally, in the traditional Afanc myth, the maiden is just a tool for the killing of the beast. I immediately knew that I did not want this to be the case in my own work. I am drawn to people who are not in control of their own identity and giving those who have usually been overlooked an identity that is theirs is a natural thing for me.

Within the story the only character given a name is Anwen, who fulfils the maiden role, and every other character merely had their role as their identifier (i.e the holy man or the blacksmith.) Furthermore, nothing Anwen does in the story is coerced. She uses the information available to her and makes the active decision to go to the Afanc, she chooses to bare her body and swim with the Afanc and finally, she chooses to die in

order to be with that which she loves. This breaks the traditional patriarchal style of monster bridegroom fairy tales where the maiden is used as either payment or bait on the father's orders in order to either appease or trap the monster, many view this 'pattern of submission as a horror story' (Zipes, 2011, p.229.) This is something I completely agree with. As a writer, encouraging independence and individuality is something of paramount importance. This story highlights the dangers of intense group mentality and the importance of questioning the dominant ideologies, Anwen's own family were prepared to kill her for her supposed sins. Updating traditional narratives is not something new to society, and whilst it can be a controversial topic, it reminds us that 'there is no "definitive" version of any myth, legend or story' (Cosslett, 2020.) There are different ways of telling almost every story, and no way is more or less valid than another. My goal is to re-imagine the stories and legends that form the basis of so many things. I have always been interested in stories, and definitely have wanted to explore retellings but usually have just settled for taking elements of inspiration from texts I enjoy to shape my own work. Intention is a funny thing when writing. I had initially planned for this to be a much shorter and less complex piece, designed to be immediately translatable to an animated format. However my ideas ran away with me and I became completely caught up in the story. Philip Pullman, regarding intention in writing, writes 'that 'intended' should have been hoped' (2017, p.115.) Therefore, more accurately, I had hoped that my piece would be a relatively simple retelling of a lesser known myth. As such I hope to continue the theme of retelling. My initial hesitation would be that all my work would end up looking the same, however every fairy tale is unique and therefore every retelling is also unique. My current approach of retelling feels the most comfortable, whilst still being engaging.

I also did not want to make a completely happy fairy tale, instead I tried to write something more in keeping with traditional myths and fairy tales. Whilst my narrative does contain some warnings (the dangers of group mentality and unchecked power) I was certain that it wouldn't be a story to warn misbehaving children about their behaviour. The most commonly known fairy tales, such as those by the Brothers Grimm and Charles Perrault, despite having roots in peasant culture and oral storytelling, were re-written to contain strict morals in keeping with the time and with the audience's expectations. As Sarah Roller writes, the stories were transformed into 'moralistic tales for social good...warnings for children to behave themselves as anything else- discipline instilled through fear' (2021.) Furthermore, many stories had the explicit violence or sexual content removed in order to make them more palatable for children. As I previously stated I wanted something that followed the style of the original folk tales. There are violent elements to my work, and the relationship between Anwen and the Afanc while written to be solely romantic, could be interpreted as sexual. This is more in keeping with the original style of fairy tales, which were simply entertainment that

passed the time rather than guides for behaviour. Additionally, it is interesting to see how my own retellings reflect modern culture. Many fairy tales taught the virtue of being chaste, modest and obedient. To conform. My work most definitely does not teach this. Despite her suffering, Anwen stays true to herself and chooses her own fate. This is something I aspire to, and I believe that it is something to be celebrated.

The story also opened my eyes to some unconscious biases that I want to be more aware of. It wasn't until I critically examined the story that I realised I had written the Afanc as a male character. Whilst I am not disappointed with myself for it, as I think in this instance the gender of the characters was not important, I am somewhat surprised. As a queer woman myself I had believed that I was more aware of how societal norms could influence my writing. I am not entirely sure I will change it in this particular story, but I am glad that I am now more aware of it. I want to ensure that my writing challenges societal norms of what love should look like, and that sometimes it is important to 'separate gender identification from sexuality' (Stacey, 1996, p.249.) Would it have affected the outcome or atmosphere of the story had the Afanc been coded as female, or left without a gender? In this instance I am unsure but it has definitely brought it to the forefront of my mind. In my current projects I am now re-examining my presentation of characters' genders and sexualities, making a conscious effort to pick up on any predisposition to present and code characters a certain way. It has also prompted me to do further reading in order to better understand what is a very nuanced and complex issue. This will also allow me to better incorporate aspects of intersectional feminism into my work.

Furthermore, Welsh mythology and folklore has been poorly recorded in comparison to other cultures, as such there hasn't been a great deal of moralising except for the recording of texts such as the Mabinogion, which was written down by English Christians. This meant that the version of the Mabinogion that we know today is anglicised and censored. I am adamant that I will never anglicise my work, as evidenced by my use of Welsh names throughout the piece. The creature is called 'Afanc' rather than 'Avanc,' maintaining the original Welsh spelling. Anwen's grandfather is referred to solely as 'Tadci,' therefore his identity is not only solely tied to his role in the story but also in the Welsh language and, by extension, Welsh culture. This also ties in with other classic aspects of mythology and fairy tales. Names have long been associated with power. As previously mentioned, Anwen is the only character given an actual name, which loosely means 'blessed.' Within folklore and modern fantasy novels names have long been given importance and 'language is linked to power' (Uszerowicz, 2018.) This once again reinforces the importance I place on the Welsh language. Every story is different, and therefore the language in which the story is told will also affect it. With cultural norms and subtexts adding nuance to every version. In my version I make

mention of other aspects of Welsh mythology, helping solidify the world and hint at a world steeped in magic, as the pre-Christian peoples believed it to be.

During the year I stopped writing, after writing continuously for about a year. This was due to a number of reasons. However taking the extended break from writing allowed me to reevaluate what I wanted to focus on. It was then I decided that I wanted to focus on retelling Welsh and Celtic folklore, bringing my love for them to a new audience. In his book *Daemon Voices*, Pullman writes that stories, particularly folklore, are a 'treasure-house... but treasure should not be hoarded. This is for spending... and the more you give away, the more you have left' (2017, p.177.) This summed up exactly what I wanted to write and why I was writing in the first place. The idea of being able to update and share the stories I grew up with was irresistible for me. Furthermore, during this period I was able to truly reflect on my work, particularly on what I submitted for the first year. In first year I experimented widely with a variety of genres and storytelling styles to find out what suited me better. For example, when writing the piece for the 2015 submission I adhered rigidly to genre conventions. It was based in science fiction and depicted the traditional tropes of a totalitarian government and acts of rebellion by a small minority. I also focused on creating large scale plots and wide reaching worlds, none of which were successful. When looking back on these ideas I do understand what I was trying to achieve but it felt more like creating something because there was a deadline approaching rather than for the joy of creation. I am still interested in building entire worlds but my strengths lie in character work, with plot and worldbuilding being secondary areas of focus. There are more elements within this story that I am pleased with in this story, and when it came to rewriting and editing I was far more attentive and less overwhelmed. Being able to pinpoint key ideas that maybe needed tweaking was much easier in a more grounded piece.

Despite the shifts in my work there are a great many elements, particularly themes that have carried through. Ideas such as individuality, the exploration of sexuality, atheism and religion and belief. However, I do not believe that themes are the core of my work, but rather act as an enhancement to the story. I was keen not to read other versions of the Afanc myth and just adapt what I knew from spoken storytelling. This meant that I was more in tune with my own writing goals rather than being influenced by what I thought the story should be. 'Stories are about something... I never know what that is till I'm in the process of writing them down' (Pullman, 2017, p.35.) I didn't realise quite how strong the themes of religion would be until I began writing it, having initially presumed that sexuality would be the predominant focus. However I am not unhappy with how it turned out as I believe that the predominant themes enhance and fit the story well, helping me to shape it in the best way possible.

To conclude, writing this story was a very different experience to my other modules. I was able to completely immerse myself in what I was writing, and was able to better explore ways of telling a story without the fear of creating something overly complex and impenetrable. It felt grounded and exciting to be writing it. Additionally, it was very interesting to learn more about the story and its place in Welsh mythological and literary canon. I was able to isolate what it is I want to prioritise in writing going forward and endeavour to make a career out of. Inspiration came naturally during this project and I truly believe that it shows in the story. I also had the opportunity to reflect on my previous work and really consider my strengths and weaknesses as a creative. I thrive when writing character based stories and I find them infinitely more enjoyable. Also, writing fairy tale style fantasy allows me to bring fantasy elements into my work without worrying about explanation. I am able to highlight issues and stances that are important to me in a way that feels natural to me.

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