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**“The Crane Wife” Versus *The Crane Wife*: A Case Study in  
Novelizing a Folktale**

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Once upon a time . . . a story is told, remembered, and told again. The art of storytelling is nothing novel. However, each telling offers something new. Storytellers alter themes, characters, genre, and ultimately interpretations in the way they tell their story. Many folk and fairy tales started as oral traditions before being written down. Retellings cross cultural and genre divides as each interpretation is infused with new meaning. Because of their seemingly simple form, fairy and folk tales have the unique flexibility to be incorporated into many cultures and genres. Even ancient Japanese tales, such as “The Crane Wife,” have made their way to modern Western audiences through the art of storytelling.

“The Crane Wife” or “Tsuru no Ongaeshi (The Gratitude of the Crane)” is a tale about a lonely man who rescues an injured crane. The next morning, the man meets a mysterious woman, and they marry happily under one condition: he must never see his wife at work. However, when curiosity and frustration get the best of him, the man learns that his wife is the crane he rescued. The crane-woman flies away and the man is again alone. Patrick Ness, in his novel *The Crane Wife* (2014), follows this same plot, but he places his characters in modern London and intersperses a second crane story told through collages produced by the characters.

While at their core both crane-wife stories are the same, differences lie in the shift from folk tale to novel.

Fairy tales are a simple and precise genre. Though the tales themselves do not often go in-depth, they allow “depth of response in the reader” (Bernheimer 67). The fullness of the tales comes not from the language but the audience. Novels, on the other hand, often create a fuller world while narrowing the focus to a specific theme or character. Ness combines traditional aspects of the novel with fairy tale elements to create layered and intersecting storylines that contextualize the larger story. As he writes in his novel: “There were as many truths—overlapping, stewed together—as there were tellers. The truth mattered less than the story’s *life*. A story forgotten died. A story remembered not only lived, but *grew*” (42). Ultimately, Ness’s work illustrates the idea that every story is an interpretation just as his novel offers one interpretation of the original crane-wife tale. He develops his interpretation of the crane-wife tale by moving beyond the genre constraints of the fairy tale, specifically its major formal components. In his novelization, *The Crane Wife*, Ness reimagines the tale as one that does not caution against loss but advocates embracing change.

### **Generic Differences: Fairy Tale to Novel**

In comparing these two crane-wife stories, an analysis of overlapping elements within these genres will prove important in understanding the execution of the adaptation and impact on the narrative. Kate Bernheimer identifies four elements— flatness, abstraction, intuitive logic, and normalized magic— that characterize traditional fairy tales. Due to its own generic qualities, Ness’s novel expands on these elements to present his own interpretation of the tale.

#### *Flatness*

Starting with flatness, Bernheimer writes, “Fairy-tale characters are silhouettes, mentioned simply because they are there” (66). Characters are archetypes, and settings are mere backdrops. The lonely man is a lonely man. He is not given personality beyond his curiosity and frustration towards his wife. The audience is not privy to his backstory or even what happens once the crane-woman has left him. The audience knows nothing of the crane-woman with whom he falls in love. She is merely a mysterious weaver with a secret. Because of this flatness, the characters of a fairy tale can fit almost any mold and can be manipulated easily to fit various narrative adaptations.

Ness's characters, by contrast, are more fully developed. He uses the two storylines to add depth to his characters by representing them in both a realistic and fairy tale context. The London characters contrast with the tiled characters in their depictions and treatment. The tiles, a combination of paper-cutting and collage represented in prose, tell of a battle and love story between a crane-woman and a volcano. In thirty-two segments, the tiles depict a struggle between two powerful forces. The volcano refuses to be like the other volcanoes as he is not content with creating, destroying, and then dying. The crane-woman only wants to free the volcano from his anger and self-destruction. However, neither can submit to the other, even in their love, so they remain separate. After many years of fighting, both are tired, and so the crane-woman submits to the volcano's anger. She wounds him with a bullet. He shoots her with an arrow, and she falls to the earth. The thirty-two tiles conclude here, but the story continues as it merges with the London sections to create a unified narrative.

There are two main characters in the tiles: the crane-woman and the volcano. Similar to the fairy tale's treatment of characters, Ness does not provide detailed depth to these tiled characters. Their descriptions remain flat because they are characterized only in relation to each

other. The crane-woman is soft in comparison to the volcano's anger. However, they hold more depth than traditional fairy tale characters due to the novel's form. Because the tiles and the London sections mirror each other, the crane-woman and volcano are reflected in their human counterparts—the crane-woman as Kumiko and the volcano as Rachel. As readers begin to understand who represents whom, the fairy tale characters begin maturing, and their development moves fluidly between the two spaces. Because of the intersecting storylines, these characters are no longer flat but become more complex as the tiled story merges with the London sections.

The central cast in the London sections includes George, Kumiko, Amanda (George's daughter), and Rachel. Marta Figlerowicz notes that a common mode of character construction is to introduce a "small community or even just a *pair* of represented people" (125). By focusing on a smaller cast, Ness creates round characters that contrast with the flat characters in the tiles. While the reader is privy to the characters' thoughts and personal lives, they are positioned closest to George. As the storyteller, George is the roundest of Ness's characters, and readers are given glimpses into George's childhood and backstory. Throughout the novel, George acts passive and kind. He often thinks of others before himself, and Ness establishes this trait early in both George's childhood and the novel. George tells a story of getting hit by a car, and though he was the one injured, he remembers his mom "hogging the spotlight at her own son's car accident" as the paramedics tended to her (Ness 38). For George, however, the event is not one of trauma but of utter calm. Looking back, George remembers "a moment of stopped time, a moment to live in forever. He stared back up at the sky with a kind of ecstatic disbelief and was only able to ever remember a single coherent thought, 'This is really happening'" (Ness 36). Though he's only eight at the time, he ends up calming his mother instead of her calming him.

Instead of being traumatized by the event, his reflections are peaceful. Through flashbacks and interactions, Ness fleshes out George's character and sets him apart from the flat descriptions of the crane-woman and volcano.

### *Abstraction*

While fairy tales often depict flat characters, they add some depth through their precision of language. This precision derives from abstraction, the second element. Fairy tales often tell audiences rather than show, using direct instead of indirect characterization. The man is lonely and poor, the crane is mysterious, the wife is beautiful and talented, and the audience needs to know little else. "The images in a fairy tale are very isolated, very specific. So precise. So deceptively simple," Bernheimer notes (67). Fairy tales present a specific, and often singular, image that leaves room for the audience's interpretation. Their simple language tells readers what they need to know, but at the same time allows the story to encompass many meanings. The audience does not need more detail because of the flatness of the characters. Readers are told the man is curious and frustrated by his wife's secret while the woman is content. The language is precise enough for readers to understand what is happening without the need for further explanation or detail. Even the setting is not mentioned often because the detail is not deemed important. Instead, audiences merely get a sketch of the setting, typically an ambiguous destination with few people and minimal resources. The setting becomes a mere backdrop for the characters to be placed in and often provides no added meaning or context.

The novel form, however, allows for an expansion of setting and space. With its mixing of forms, Ness's novel features many aspects associated with literary modernism. David Lodge asserts that a modernist novel "has no real 'beginning,' since it plunges us into a flowing stream of experience with which we gradually familiarize ourselves by a process of inference and

association” (56-57). Ness’s novel ends with the same sentence it begins on, and events are not always presented chronologically. Where the quality of abstraction in fairy tales relies on simplicity, *The Crane Wife* presents multiple perspectives and overlapping details through its intertwined plot and narrative structure. While some may argue that the modernist novel has little focus on plot, Robert T. Tally, Jr. asserts in his analysis on spatial elements of the novel that “a plot itself is spatial, for a plot is also a plan, which is to say, a map” (159). The plot organizes one event before another and helps orient readers both temporally and spatially. The plot in Ness’s novel provides the map that weaves through both the tiles and London. Though the events are always happening because of the cyclical nature of the story, the plot allows the reader to navigate the world of the novel and understand its themes. This organization allows Ness to present events from multiple viewpoints that provide complex nuance that abstraction does not have.

Furthermore, the plot introduces an overarching storyline that allows the two narratives to merge—the story that George is writing after all of these events have taken place. The entire novel consists of George’s attempt to remember Kumiko and tell their story. Tally states that the novel is a “constant mapping and remapping of the real and imaginary spaces of the world” (165). The change in time and setting designates Ness’s novel as a modern adaptation of the original crane-wife tale. Moving the tale from ancient Japan to the bustling city-life of London remaps not only the physical location of the story but also the characters’ journeys. Different from the ambiguous settings of fairy tales, the novel has room to expand and situate readers in context. While the descriptions are intentional, they are not precise in the same way that fairy tale details are. The readers know they are in a London full of cyclists and war memorials and modern technology, all details that are not given in traditional fairy tales, and these details situate

the reader exactly where they need to be and do not leave room for interpretation. Instead of a singular image, multiple details populate the setting. However, the mapping of London is not entirely complete as only the locations important to the characters are important to the reader. The audience can understand relationships and conflicts through location. Readers are invited into both George's and Amanda's homes and places of work. However, Kumiko's home stays closed off to both characters and readers. The expansion of the setting allows the narrative to incorporate different perspectives that disrupt the precision typical in fairy tales.

Conversely, the world of the tiles only gives readers a brief description to distinguish it from that of London. The world of the thirty-two tiles is not given a name, date, or defining characteristics. Interestingly, this abstraction of detail is exactly what defines the space. Like the original tale, the setting remains elusive. As told in tile 3: "The world below [the crane-woman] is young, too young to have quite grown together. It exists in islands of floating earth, some connected by rope bridges or bamboo walkways, others reached across expanses of sky by rowing boats made of paper, others to which she can only fly" (Ness 78). The tiles take place somewhere in the same world as the London sections, but readers do not know where or when. However, the story implies the tiled events begin long before Kumiko and George meet. The language is open enough to provide a general backdrop. The prose is lyrical and marked by exactness and simplicity of detail but provides no concrete detail to situate the reader. Instead, connections are made intuitively.

### *Intuitive Logic*

Precise language often comes with intuitive logic, the third element. A fairy tale's narrative arc is often propelled by *this happened* and *then another thing happened* and *later this happened*. Similar to the other noted elements, intuitive logic does not explain. Instead, the

language simply conveys the story with almost no judgment and presents the story like a list of facts. Bernheimer explains that the language is associative and notes that “many fairy tales rely on the sensed relationship of words to story—the art of putting words together in a strange yet marvelous order that simply feels right” (69). The order of the language and events is important because it threads the story together and provides the structure. The appearance of the crane and the appearance of the woman are written as two separate events. While the connection is not confirmed until the end of the story, the two events mirror each other in their mystery, and the audience is drawn to intuit the connection. The associative language tells readers what they need to know through the placement of words and events but allows the reader to draw these conclusions themselves.

Ness plays with intuitive logic through his interpretation of symbols. Symbolism appears in both modernist fiction and fairy tales, and the intuitive connection between what is being said and what is being implied provides depth to the narrative. The three main symbols in *The Crane Wife* are the crane-woman, the volcano, and art. Instead of letting the reader interpret the symbol, Ness clearly defines each symbolic element to further his interpretation of the tale. Throughout the novel, the crane-woman symbolizes freedom. While her ability to liberate is not elaborated on, the reader does get a description of the process. Tile 6 states: “Quickly, mercifully, she bites out both of the fisherman’s eyes and plunges two sharp fingers through his heart” (Ness 79). The fisherman is the volcano’s creation, a being created to be lonely and disquieted. Through this act of violence, the crane-woman liberates characters and free their spirits. She releases them from the volcano’s possession and anger. In the London sections, Kumiko also utilizes her freedom. While she does not liberate spirits, she expresses freedom through her choices. Her decision to

remain independent allows her to maintain her freedom from George and any others who might try to claim her.

While the crane-woman symbolizes freedom, her shadow self, the volcano, symbolizes creation and destruction. In the tiles, the volcano's power is obvious. However, translated into the modern world through Rachel, he becomes more subtle though no less powerful. Set opposite of Kumiko, Rachel is forceful, angry, and jealous. Another of George's failed romances, she tries to wedge herself between George and Kumiko. However, when the two storylines merge, the symbols become more complex as George finally understands the tiles' meaning. Kumiko tells him, "We are all the lady, George. And I am your crane and you are mine . . . And we are all the volcano" (Ness 269). At the end of the novel, the crane-woman becomes a phoenix and embodies both freedom and creation. Her transformation furthers Ness's interpretation of advocating for change. The symbols of the crane-woman and the volcano merge to offer an in-depth understanding of the characters and further develops each of their relationships.

Further, Ness uses art as a symbol of connection. He illustrates George's relationship with the women in his life through art. George connected to his ex-wife, Clare, through sketching. He would spend afternoons making nude charcoal drawings of her, and she would pose with headdresses. George notes: "These were usually precursors to sex, of course, though none the worse for that, and perhaps, an emblem of their eventual marriage, as she misunderstood the sort of person he essentially was" (Ness 62). When George fails to progress the way Clare wants him to, the drawings become fewer, the sex becomes naps, and their marriage ends in a divorce. Years later, George gets the impulse to start drawing again. However, he finds sketching insufficient. Instead of running the print shop, George often works with his paper-cuttings, a hobby he made out of collecting "the most damaged, unloved and

unlovable books” (Ness 65). These paper cuttings lead him to collaborate with Kumiko and ultimately to tell her story. However, though they are collaborating, Kumiko forbids George from watching her work. Their separate-but-together collaboration foreshadows the end of the novel and Kumiko’s eventual departure. Ness’s incorporation of symbolism allows him to illustrate more than he directly states and to move fluidly between the tiles and the London sections.

### *Normalized Magic*

The invisible barrier between the tiles and London can be explained by the fourth element of fairy tales: normalized magic. In Bernheimer’s words: “The day to day is collapsed with the wondrous” (69). Within the folktale, the lonely man never questions the existence of the crane nor the appearance of the woman on his doorstep. Cranes appear out of nowhere and beautiful women fall in love with lonely men without introduction. The woman’s tapestries bring in wealth, and no one questions how such a thing is done or where the money is coming from. Even the revelation that the woman is the crane is not given much fanfare. Instead, the most surprising moment of the story becomes the crane-woman’s departure, a breaking of the status quo rather than the limits of realism. Normalized magic allows reality and magic to become one in a way that everything is at once magical and completely normal.

The novel, as a whole, acts as a kind of normalized magic as it presents a very permeable boundary between the fairy tale world of the tiles and the modern world of London. Cristina Bacchilega describes normalized magic in fairy tales as an “effort to conceal its ‘work’ systematically . . . to make everything so clear that it works magic, no questions asked” (8). Kumiko becomes the channel that tries to communicate reality from magic. She is at once human and magic. She crosses the boundaries as she exists in both the fairy tale tiles and in London.

George describes her as “almost a half-remembered dream, yet not” (Ness 93). Kumiko is fully flesh and blood lying beside him, but she remains just out of his reach as she refuses to divulge her past and shapeshifting ability. Contrastingly, George revels in the magic and finds it wondrous. The night he finds the crane, he thinks: “But if it wasn’t a dream, it was one of those special corners of what’s real, one of those moments . . . where the world dwindled down to almost no one, where it seemed to pause just for him, so that he could, for a moment, be seized into life . . . it was in places like this that eternity happened” (Ness 11-12). Unlike the other characters in the novel, George never truly seeks out a justification for the magic he experiences. He just wants to bask in the wonder. When he learns Kumiko’s secret, he finds himself horrified as the magic seems to cease, and reality crashes in. While other characters rationalize the magic in their lives, George seeks out the wonder. Through George, Ness draws readers to the mystery of Kumiko while normalizing her presence and actions.

By looking at the four elements within fairy tales, readers begin to understand the changes that Ness makes in writing his novel. While he uses some of the fairy tale elements in his tiled storyline, he ultimately breaks from the traditional fairy tale genre to present a new interpretation of “The Crane Wife.” By altering the formal elements of the original crane-wife tale, Ness infuses his own interpretation into the themes of the narrative.

### **Themes of Power and Subversion**

The themes of power and subversion are depicted through characterization, plot, and symbolism. While the original crane-wife tale cautions against loss, some critics suggest that Ness’s *The Crane Wife* is about embracing change after loss. In his review, Niall Alexander writes that “[Ness’s novel] functions, over and above, as a fable about family, friendship, memory, age and the ways in which we change” (“A Wealth of Warmth and Wit”). James

Bradley agrees, asserting that the novel “explicitly echoes Japanese notion of *mono no aware*, or the beautiful transience of things,” specifically in the notion of letting go to truly live (“Mono no aware: The Crane Wife by Patrick Ness”). This thesis, while agreeing with these two critics, looks specifically at how Ness’s interpretation diverts from the original to transform the story. The reimagined ending advocates not just for change but a reflection of societal norms. Ness’s novel transforms not only the genre but the impact by asking readers what kind of change there can be if the crane-woman cannot have what she wants without the man disrespecting her wish.

Judith Butler asserts that gender is performative and solidified through repetitive performances (523). In the original crane-wife tale, the crane-woman holds all the power. Throughout the tale, she assumes both male and female roles. Though she first appears naïve and submissive, her arrival dictates the rest of the story. Fumihiko Kobayashi, in his study on animal-wife tales, notes that instead of the man beginning the story, the animal-woman claims this honor. Her arrival sets up the story’s arc: “The Japanese animal-woman enters the man’s realm in order to cohabit with him or, in other words, to captivate him” (Kobayashi 242). She appears first as a crane to be saved and then as a mysterious woman. Though she appears as a damsel in distress, she quickly subverts the trope when she charms the lonely man. Instead of continuing to be the damsel, she assumes the role of Prince Charming. The crane-woman enters the lonely man’s life, and the tale simply tells readers that they fall in love and get married. The man becomes entranced by the woman and allows her to control the story. By stepping into his realm, the crane-wife asserts her power and subverts gender expectations. She pursues him directly and is successful through their partnership and eventual marriage. The crane-woman’s actions are what makes the story worth telling.

Ness's novel also primarily centers on the crane-woman. Kumiko's character drives the action of the novel. George uses his story as an attempt to understand Kumiko's presence in his life and what her absence could mean. Different from more traditional Western tales, the girl is not chasing the man in this story. Butler states, "Gender reality is performative . . . these acts either conform to an expected gender identity or contest that expectation in some way" (527-528). Because Kumiko assumes the role of Prince Charming, George becomes the damsel. George constantly tries to keep hold of Kumiko, though she does not allow herself to be caught. She draws him in with her mystery and beauty but never allows him to get close. George compares his relationship with Rachel to what he has with Kumiko: "He could possess [Rachel] (and she, him) in a brief but total way that had never happened with Kumiko, that felt like it never *could* happen. Kumiko was unknowable" (Ness 220). While Rachel offers herself to George, Kumiko holds herself back. Throughout the novel, George constantly searches for some way to truly know Kumiko and be satisfied with that knowledge. His need for some control over their relationship drives his desire to possess her. Instead, he finds himself always falling short, and this foreshadows the loss at the end of the novel. The power that Kumiko holds over George reflects the power the crane-woman holds over the lonely man. Both crane-women are characterized as independent and self-sufficient. Neither crane-woman needs the man, but both men are searching for something in the woman. However, neither man can change his behavior. Because the crane-woman never submits to the man's desires, she protects her agency within the relationship and subverts gender expectations. Though there is loss in the story, the loss is not the woman's.

Nevertheless, there is loss for both characters in the tiles. The crane-woman and volcano are evenly matched. Within the tiles, the crane-woman and the volcano battle. Neither wants to

submit to the other, and neither can overpower their opponent without something giving in. Even in the tiles, the crane-woman flips the gender dynamic by acting first. Her character dictates the action of the tiles, and she uses this power to affect other characters. She hates and loves the volcano, and she is tired of fighting. To end the war, she becomes a bullet and lodges herself into the volcano's chest. The crane-woman explains, "It is a bullet with a name. A bullet whose name will eventually be the death of you. A bullet whose name is Permission . . . You have permission to harm me" (Ness 244). The volcano incurs no harm, but he becomes horrified when he realizes what she has done. Though she submits first, she ultimately holds the power over the volcano. Through her decision, the crane-woman exercises her agency and ultimately wins the war. While the volcano can now overpower her, in doing so, he will lose her and himself. However, when he does choose to act, his actions bring the crane-woman to George's doorstep.

Though the original Japanese tale is often translated as "The Gratitude of the Crane," the crane-woman's power is still evident in her actions. The title implies that the crane-woman's weaving and subsequent wealth is a gift to the man for rescuing her. To this point, Jack Zipes writes that "our notion of female protagonists in fairy tales has been greatly informed by male collectors and writers who often domesticated the heroines and made them more passive than they actually are" (95). The crane-wife is an exception to this rule. While she may provide for her husband, she still holds the power to take away both financial security and her presence. The crane-woman embodies both feminine and masculine traits as she provides for her family through art. She weaves beautiful cloth and tapestries that bring in much wealth while the man's occupation is not given or even noted. Kobayashi states that many animal-wife tales have the women's behavior running "completely counter to conventional social norms for women" (245).

Oftentimes, the prince provides for his princess and saves the day. However, “The Crane Wife” subverts this trope. Before her arrival, the man is implied to be poor, but the crane-woman’s art allows them to have financial security. Flipping societal expectations, the crane-woman takes up the responsibility of providing and gracefully succeeds and thus exerts her power over the man’s life. Even if her gratitude seems submissive, she controls the flow of wealth and lays the foundation for their relationship. The crane-woman’s presence solves both of the man’s problems by providing wealth and companionship, and she can withdraw the security she provides at any time.

Similarly, in Ness’s novel, Kumiko provides some security for George. Kumiko’s art brings in much wealth for her and George, and she insists that they split the profit. While George is not wealthy, he lives a comfortable life, but the profit allows him to modernize his print shop and raise wages. The main security George seeks, however, is companionship. Unlike traditional relationships, Kumiko provides no feeling of home for George. Her character is self-sufficient and subsequently independent, and Kumiko does not play the role of affectionate girlfriend or dependable wife. George is constantly grasping and clinging to whatever she gives him. He writes that “she had given him the whole world. Just not enough of herself in it” (Ness 231). For all that Kumiko provides George, she withholds the security of permanence and stability. When he says “I love you,” she merely responds with “I know” (Ness 140). He becomes greedy for knowledge of her, though he is always aware that he might lose her. George’s need for companionship and connection drives his desire for Kumiko, and he tries to control the relationship. Butler writes that “performing [one’s gender] well provides the reassurance that there is essentialism of gender identity after all” (528). George hopes that by asking for her hand in marriage and moving in together, he can have some semblance of permanence and control.

However, in these two crane-wife stories, the woman controls the relationship and sets the boundaries. The man can only agree or risk losing her. George's fear of losing Kumiko foreshadows his loss when he is unable to control his desire for security.

The volcano is similarly scared of losing the crane-woman. They are engaged in a battle, and the only way to win is to defeat the other. The volcano must either submit to the crane-woman and become a mountain, or he must somehow overpower her. For a while, he refuses the freedom she can grant him, but eventually, he realizes that neither will be able to fight for much longer. He kneels before the crane-woman and begs for freedom. This pleading gives the crane-woman the power and the decision to act. However, she refuses to liberate him. Tile 24 says, "She cannot ever forgive him. She will not end his torment. She will not end hers. She lowers her hand and lets him live" (Ness 211). Both the crane-woman and volcano understand the crane-woman's power and the consequences of her actions. Because of her strong character, the volcano cannot overpower her without permission. The volcano cannot destroy her, but her permission can release both of them. However, to be free, they will lose each other. Different from traditional gender norms, only through the crane-woman's actions can change occur. She controls the story.

In both the folktale and the novel, the relationship is not equal because the crane-woman holds all of the power. Though the crane-woman may be supposedly working out of gratitude towards her husband, she is ultimately who the story is about. As seen throughout the tale, the crane-woman dictates the action. Bacchilega writes, "Within a feminist frame that critically recognizes the power of 'magic,' fairy tales are sites of competing, historically and socially framed desires" (10). Another way the crane-woman exerts her power is through her wish: she does not allow her husband to watch her work. The plot of the tale hinges on the crane-woman's

secret: she is a shapeshifter. Though the husband is implied to be happy, he grows more frustrated and curious as the story progresses. The man is unused to the reversal of roles, but he cannot yet break his wife's restriction. Readers know the crane-woman's secret through intuitive logic, and they know the ending. She holds the power, and the man can only make one of two choices. To know the secret is to ultimately lose everything the man has gained. The crane-woman's magic allows her to hold her authority both as a magic being and as a wife. However, the man cannot adjust to the new hierarchy and grows frustrated. To keep the loss at bay, the crane-woman shields her secret from her husband, but the loss is inevitable.

The inevitability of the loss becomes more apparent in Ness's novel. Though Kumiko forbids George from watching her work, she tells him her story through the tiles. However, George is unable to see the tiles as an answer and cannot understand their meaning. He becomes increasingly frustrated and greedy for more knowledge of Kumiko's past life and the security she does not offer. To Butler's point, "performing one's gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect" (528). George's position in the relationship does not grant him much control. His frustrations manifest in his dreams, though even his dream-self will not cross Kumiko's boundaries. Ness writes: "[George] began to dream of locked doors and knowing she was beyond them, knowing also that the locks were only there at her request and his observance of that request. He could look any time he chose. But in his dreams, he stayed behind the door. In agony" (Ness 135). The only thing keeping George from opening the door is the fear of losing Kumiko. He both craves and fears the knowledge as he continues to pursue a deeper relationship with her. While he is afraid to lose her, he is unable to realize that knowing her secret will inevitably result in her departure. Kumiko's act of withholding her secret flips the trope of the man indulging the woman's curiosity only to trick her and enact an ultimate punishment of

death. While she does not intend to harm George, she cannot reveal her secret and remain with him.

While George thinks that knowing Kumiko's secret would give him peace and satisfaction, the tiled characters prove him wrong. Kumiko tells George everything if only George could understand. The crane-woman and the volcano have no secrets between each other, but they are not immune to loss. The plot of the tiles mirrors the plot in the London sections. Neither can act against the other without losing something. There are no secrets in the tiles, but the volcano is still unable to overpower the crane-woman because they are essentially the same. Ness writes, "But neither ceases to be what they were before" (Ness 168). Because the tiled characters refuse to change, they must continue fighting. While the crane-woman holds the power, she is also the volcano. She cannot truly act against herself without losing. However, in giving the volcano permission to harm her, she sacrifices some of her freedom to ultimately gain it back.

The crane-woman's departure becomes her final act of establishing agency over the narrative and effectively ending the story. Curious and frustrated by his wife's secret, the man breaks her one rule and sneaks in to watch her work. What he finds is not his wife but the crane-woman weaving her feathers into the famous tapestries. Kobayashi says that "it seems, at a glance, that the man has gained a significant victory over her" (249). However, the crane-woman, upon being discovered, neither reprimands the man nor is shamed for hiding. Instead, she simply leaves, and the story is left almost where it began. The crane-woman's reveal and departure subvert both gender norms and societal expectations. She grants her husband limited agency because she ultimately has the control. She has the power of shape-shifting which allows her independence and separation from the man even while they are married. Further, she uses

this ability to her advantage. She uses her feathers to make her weavings, and her wings also provide her mode of departure without having to rely on another. The crane-woman sets her boundaries at the beginning of the story and removes herself when those boundaries are violated. The crane-woman's abrupt departure, not the lonely man, is what makes this story memorable. There is loss and the story ends with her flying off.

While the man in the original crane-wife tale loses everything, Ness reimagines the ending in his novel. Though there is loss, *The Crane Wife* advocates for embracing change after loss. The tiles show that the loss is inevitable, but Ness furthers the plot past Kumiko's departure and allows George to experience hope along with his grief. The ultimate symbol of Ness's interpretation comes in the form of a phoenix: a symbol of rebirth and renewal. The crane-woman and the volcano merge into one symbol after George discovers Kumiko's secret. She says to him: "'We are all the lady, George. And I am your crane and you are mine . . . And we are all the volcano. Stories shift, remember?'" (Ness 269). By extending the symbolism to encapsulate all of the characters, Ness grants them all permission to change and grow. They are no longer stuck in the original story but can now write their own. They are allowed their own choices and freedom through Kumiko's transformation.

The symbolism of the phoenix, often depicted as a bird of flames, reflects the new interpretation. Phoenixes may be traced back to Egyptian sun myths revolving around the idea of renewal and rebirth (Hill 61). Other interpretations of the phoenix depict "resurrection and immortality" (Hill 64). Because phoenixes are commonly given the ability to regenerate through fire or the sun, they hold a higher power over other mythical creatures. Thus Kumiko, being both crane-woman and volcano, becomes a phoenix in the final chapters of Ness's novel. Her

transformation is shown in saving George and Amanda from the fire but also through her rebirth.

Ness writes:

They left the body on the hallway floor, but it was different now. Different, finally and forever. Kumiko guided Amanda through the flames, through the blazing walls of the sitting room and into the kitchen, though nothing seemed to burn them and the smoke was only the remotest concern. They reached the edge of the fire, where a door opened, out into the world beyond. (291)

Kumiko leaves her physical body behind in the fire, and while readers do not know what has become of Kumiko after the fire, she is not truly gone. Kumiko's transformation symbolizes her power and the change that inevitably comes after death. While she disappears, she leaves a lasting impression upon the characters and the story. The volcano becomes a mountain, and though Kumiko is no longer physically present, her presence is felt throughout the rest of the story. Unlike in the original tale, the story does not end with the crane-woman's departure. Instead, George gets the last word.

After the fire and funeral, George finds a lost papercutting: "a crane, made of paper. Made of *blank* paper" (Ness 302). Though he thought he had only cut one crane, he takes this paper crane as a sign. Kumiko might have vanished, died in a fire or returned to her own story, but he could remember her. George decides to write about Kumiko, a story that becomes *The Crane Wife*: "*This* is where he would remember her. *This* is where she would live. He would tell her story. Not her whole story, of course, but the story of him and her, the story *he* knew" (Ness 304). Ness's novel becomes George's journey of remembrance and moving through the pain of his loss. Further, his artistic expression has changed once again, from papercutting to writing. Kumiko lives on not just because she is a phoenix but because her story will be retold. Through

George's story, she becomes immortal and is ever experiencing loss and change. George writes: "And maybe that way the Kumiko he knew would live on and on and on" (Ness 305). Though George now has the opportunity to control the narrative, he ultimately relinquishes that power to Kumiko. Even though the novel is told from George's perspective, Kumiko still guides the plot and affects every characters' interactions. Every event revolves around her, and ultimately, the novel becomes a creation of something new, not only through the title but the story itself.

### **Conclusion: The New Crane Wife**

Patrick Ness's *The Crane Wife* transforms the original crane-wife tale not only through a generic shift but through the interpretation of the themes and impact. An analysis of the two stories through the lens of the four fairy tale elements— flatness, abstraction, intuitive logic, and normalized magic— shows how Ness expands on these elements in his novel. The original tale depicts only simple images and one-dimensional characters. The audience relies on association and logic to connect the events but much is left to the reader's interpretation. Ness, on the other hand, presents round characters through George and Kumiko, while also providing a complex world for the characters to inhabit. His use of parallel storylines allows readers to gain a more nuanced insight into character motivations and flaws. Readers are privy to Kumiko's shapeshifting ability while the separation of the storylines leaves George grasping. Further, the tiled storyline provides additional context for the London sections and foreshadows the loss at the end of the novel. However, Ness reimagines the ending of the crane-wife story as not one of loss but change.

By reimagining the story, Ness also provides new meaning for the themes of the narrative. Power and subversion are depicted through the gender dynamics of George and Kumiko. While George is the storyteller, he relinquishes his control and power to Kumiko. She

maintains her independence through her abilities to make art and shapeshift. George, however, struggles with the power imbalance and fails to understand Kumiko's tiled warnings. When he finally acts, his decision results in Kumiko's departure. Though she, like George, experiences loss, Kumiko embraces each change and transformation. The dual storylines depict the crane-woman's ever-changing nature and triumph through the cyclical nature of the tale. Though she is no longer with George, she lives on in his memory and writing of her. As the crane-woman, the volcano, and ultimately, the phoenix, she holds complete agency over the story and its events.

This thesis demonstrates how *The Crane Wife* is a tale of loss but also of transformation. Ness asks readers what true change there can be without loss. His novel represents the cycle of rebirth and renewal not only through its characters but through its adaptation from folk tale to novel. While there is loss, there is also something to be gained. *The Crane Wife*, through its generic and thematic transformations, represents the power of progress and cautions against the stagnation of art and expression. Instead of retelling the same tale, Ness infuses his crane-wife story with new meaning for his modern audience that ultimately reflects society and invites them to tell their own stories. *The Crane Wife* illustrates a reimagined tale that pays homage to the original inspiration. Through his novel, Ness invites readers to reimagine the crane-wife and other tales and encourages them to tell their own stories.

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