

## Paper 2 First Draft

They began as moral fables spoken in hushed whispers around the fire and told by whoever had the keenest memory to recite handed-down stories pieced from generations long-passed. Young or old, rich or poor—they provided all kinds with lessons they could both enjoy and learn from. These ‘fairy tales’ taught boys that bravery and valor were the attributes of a proficient man and girls that beauty and passivity were the keys to desirability. Over the centuries, some of these yarns vanished completely while others were written down and changed repeatedly, branching off into different forms and shapes. However, for many fairy tales the basic messages remain the same. Every little girl dreams of being a princess. In fact, my first Halloween costume was a fake Cinderella gown. Every little girl knows that being the ‘fairest of them all’ is the reason *Snow White* received her prince’s waking kiss. In the end, these tales push girls back into the roles and thought processes of times when the glass ceiling was made of steel and women had little to no rights under a male-dominated society. Fairy tales reinforce sexist principles of femininity by emphasizing the feminine beauty ideal, portraying women as subservient and solely dependent on men in a patriarchal world, and promoting a strict initiation into womanhood and happiness through marriage alone. I am not saying that all fairy tales should be banished from the shelves from public libraries or that parents should never let their little girls watch *Sleeping Beauty*. Rather, it is simple a word of warning to parents to switch things up a bit. Girls need a balance between good and pathetic role models in what they watch and read. After all, there are no ‘Handsome Princes’ in America, unless you count Will Smith in *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*.

To begin, the thing most feminists will rave about first and foremost when regarding fairy tales is how the stories push the importance of a woman’s physical appearance. “The feminine

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beauty ideal-- the socially constructed notion that physical attractiveness is one of women's most important assets, and something all women should strive to achieve and maintain-- is of particular interest to feminist scholars” (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003, p.2). We see the feminine beauty ideal throughout most tales. Off the top of one’s head, a person might easily name *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, and *Sleep Beauty*. Some may argue that this trend is utilized merely because most people innately prefer stories with attractive protagonists. However, according to Zipes (1998), “fairy tales written during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were intended to teach girls and young women how to become domesticated, respectable, and attractive to a marriage partner and to teach boys and girls appropriate gender values and attitudes” (qtd. in Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003, p.5). These fairy tales served as a template, teaching how one must behave in accordance to one’s own gender. While men were expected to show bravery, women were expected to remain pretty and docile. They were given impossible expectations to live up to and still are. In the modern world, that emphasis on gender values can be seen transferring into female youths. One of my worst nightmares as a child is a prime example of this incorrect emphasis on appropriate gender values. I dreamed that a handsome prince was picking his princess from a group of finely-dressed ladies, of which I was among. Each girl was adorned in an elaborate ball gown—glitter and all—just as pretty princesses were meant to be dressed. However, when I looked down to see what color my own dress was, I found myself instantly traumatized by the sight of jeans and a T-shirt. Needless to say, I woke up screaming. In the modern world, attributes and values for young women that might have seemed crucial in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries no longer apply. That doesn’t stop Disney from stuffing sexist modified fairy tales down the throats of today’s youth. “In the great majority of the tales, to be a heroine, in even a limited sense requires extreme youth and extreme physical

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beauty; it would not be sufficient to be merely beautiful, one must be ‘the greatest beauty in the kingdom’- ‘the fairest in the land’”(Oates, 1997, pg. 4). People might argue that the ‘fairest in the land’ phenomenon is passé, but it still exists even today. Beauty pageants are held all over the world and while the contestants nowadays may argue that the judges no longer simply look at outer beauty, everyone has seen one of those six-year-old ‘beauty queens’ with makeup smeared all over her face, an orange fake tan, and oversized permed hair whose mother is fist-fighting another stage mom behind the scenes. It seems the fairy tale sponsored idea of someone being the fairest in the land has hardly died off. Fairy tales have further impressed the importance of physical appearance and youth in women by linking it with virtuousness. This is why we see ugly stepsisters, less-attractive step mothers, and frightening witches as antagonists as opposed to beautiful heroines. Beauty is good. Ugly is evil. “Discourse analyses reveal several themes in relationship to beauty. Often there is a clear link between beauty and goodness, most often in reference to younger women, and between ugliness and evil (31 percent of all stories associate beauty with goodness, and 17 percent associate ugliness with evil)” (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003, p.9). The Grimm’s fairy tale, *Mother Holle*, expressed this same notion of beauty being good and virtuous while ugliness is frowned upon. In the story, a widow has two daughters who receive the chance to work for a woman named Mother Holle. One of the daughters is portrayed as beautiful and industrious while the other is made ugly and therefore lazy. When the first daughter admits she is homesick, Mother Holle showers her with gold on her way home for being so lovely. When the other daughter was dismissed from the household, instead of gold a kettle of pitch is poured on her that can never be removed from her person. In this extreme example, beauty is rewarded whilst ugliness is punished (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003). Men in fairy tales are hardly held to this same standard. In fact, in a statistical analysis performed

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by Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz, it was found that there are about five times as many references to women's beauty per tale as to men's handsomeness and the number of references to men's hotness ranges from 0 to 35 per story, whereas the range for women is 0 to 114. Indeed, it is obvious to see what values were deemed important for women to garner. In fact, beauty was seen as such an important value that the fairy tales placed a dangerous after-effect on it. Beauty was seen to be the object of envy. "Of the tales in which danger or harm is associated with physical attractiveness (28 percent of all tales), 89 percent involve harm to women. Forty percent of these acts of victimization are the direct result of the character's physical appearance" (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003, p.10). Cinderella was forced into a world of drudgery and filth because her step mother and sisters were so utterly jealous of her jaw-dropping and Snow White's step-mother strived to have her murdered so as to relinquish any competition between their appearances. All in all, the fairy tales mark beauty as the key to womanly success. Perhaps one of the only fairy tales where a woman's main attribute was anything other than beauty lies in the tale of Hansel and Gretel. In this story, it is Gretel who kills the wicked witch to save herself and her now-obese brother, but tales like this are few and far between and utilize children or animals rather than young women.

Next, the portrayal of women as subservient and dependent on men in fairy tales is unsurprising considering the times in which they were told. However, the extent of this depiction might come to a shock to those who have not thought to look into the tales they read. Everyone has heard of the expressions 'damsel in distress,' 'wicked witch,' and 'the knight in shining armor.' Fairy tales push for women to be solely dependent on men by illustrating their powerlessness without men in the world around them, marking them as mere property, and shredding ties between girls and older women by enforcing a strict rivalry between those who are

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young and passive and those who are ambitious and elder. “Ultimately, the prince delivers the heroine from women's wrath. His power to save her and her utter dependence on him seem key to their imagined future happiness” (Fisher and Silber, 2000, p. 121). The prince is a necessity in fairy tales. It is because of him that the princess is rescued and everyone lives happily ever after. The majority of fairy tales center around a beautiful woman being tossed into peril while a man comes to her rescue. Knights in shining armor save damsels from dragons, princes rescue their future queens from witches, and hunters slice open wolves’ bellies to liberate young ladies just reaching puberty. My favorite Disney movie was *Mulan* for this very reason. She was the only ‘Disney Princess’ to save everyone else rather than depend on a man to rescue her. Needless to say, *Mulan* was based on Chinese folklore and not European fairytales, hinting that the two might be vastly different. Fairy tales also marked women as property to further express their subservience to men. In *The Girl Without Hands*, a father informs his daughter that he must cut off her hands to save himself from the devil whom he had sold her soul to. Cutting off her hands would stop her from keeping them clean with her tears and therefore obtainable to the devil. She simply replied, "Dear Father, do with me what you will, I am your child" (Grimm). Women were truly seen as mere property and this type of horridly meek docility was seen as ideal for young women. The father was willing to forfeit his daughter’s soul to save his own by chopping off her hands and she willingly gave in to his selfish pleas. “All **good** heroines accept their fate passively, unquestioningly. To express even normal distress at being viciously mistreated would be in violation of the narrow strictures of fairy-tale **goodness**” (Oates, 1997, p. 100). It seems that women in fairy tales have an inability to feel even the most natural of emotions. Resentment towards one’s own situation is expressly forbidden in favor of silent acceptance. The last way fairy tales force women into a dependent light is by shattering their relationships with other

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women around them. We have all watched as the evil stepmother and or witch makes the heroine's life a living hell. In fact, the presence of a good woman figure in the young lady's life is almost always obsolete. "While the fairy tales consistently polarize the characterization of motherhood, a profound imbalance in these opposing maternal portraits stands out: as a character, the bad mother is at the center, dominating not just the princess, but the plot. In contrast to the good mother (Cinderella's or Snow White's, for example), who has a barely perceptible part to play - appearing literally for a sentence or two before dying - the wicked stepmother assumes a starring role as the girl's tenacious adversary" (Fisher and Silber, 2000, p. 123). Why must the only other woman in the plot serve as the girl's sworn enemy? It seems Freudian ideals come into play where girls must hate their own mothers innately. However, the more natural attribution for this occurrence might be seen in the views of the time. Relationships between women were secondary and fairy tales showed girls that stepping into the patriarchal world was protected and safe in comparison to world of women. They also showed the strains between different generations. "The lot of women in a patriarchal society which privileged them as valuable possessions (of men), or branded them as worthless and contemptible, made it inevitable that women should perceive other women as dangerous rivals; that there are so many "step" mothers in the tales suggests how frequently women died in childbirth or as a consequence of constant childbearing; how frequently they were replaced by younger wives" (Oates, 1997, p. 99). Oftentimes, these older women were simply trying to stay somewhere on the social ladder, struggling not to be forgotten or shunned from the light of the patriarchal world. They were ambitious; something was morphed into a portrayal of malevolence in fairy tales. They were always made to be the 'bad guy' while the heroine was sweet, young, and docile. It is found in the Brother's Grimm that women who wished for a high social status, power, or bear

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any drive whatsoever, resorted to devious behavior to reach their goals. However, the men in these stories hold their positions of power in society simply through being male alone and were therefore hardly displayed as evil. In the end, the older woman's goal is using her own malicious wit to get her way and grasp the man's attention (Fisher and Silber, 2000). This, undoubtedly, leads to her death and the heroine and reader learn from her demise that it is better to be pretty and passive than competitive and intelligent.