

## Feminism in Children's Literature: The Importance of Retellings

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Children's literature has helped shape the minds of its readers since its inception, but have they shaped them for better or worse? As children's literature has grown over time, we have seen what makes for "good" children's literature. The illustrations, the message, the morals, but what about feminism? Feminism is essential in children's literature because there has been a detrimental issue with equality in these popular stories. As Paul Hunt states in *Understanding Children's Literature*, "there is good reason for appropriating feminist theory to children's literature. Both women's literature and children's literature are devalued and regarded as marginal or peripheral by the literary and educational communities." In tales from the Grimm Brothers, readers see the same layout of the damsel in distress, the silent woman, and the cursed beauty. All the stories in *The Grimm Reader: the Classic Tales of the Brothers Grimm* with female protagonists center around those three topics, sometimes all three, whereas the stories about male protagonists offer brave, clever, and heavily rewarded heroes that go on adventures and end up with everything they ever wanted. The stark contrast of protagonists centers around the separation of the two genders. As time has progressed, we have seen the remakes and retellings of these famous tales; more importantly, we have seen the expansion of feminism in these tales. In children's literature, most of the fairy tales are skeletons for feminism. First tellings of popular fairy tales offer a base understanding of feminism, but it becomes fully formed in the retellings. As time progresses, feminism in children's literature expands because of its lack of representation in the past.

So what is "good" children's literature? Feminist theories are "concerned with gender and the body, gender behavior, gender oppression, patriarchy, sexual norms and codes, and other issues with male and female identities" (Mollegaard, Lecture 4). By that, children's literature through feminism, when regarding *The Grimm Reader*,

would focus on gender behavior, gender oppression, patriarchy, and sexual norms. The Grimm Brother tales center around feminist ideas, whether they want to or not. Gender behavior, for example, centers around things like all the young girls in these stories sewing, looking at themselves in mirrors, gathering flowers, and other "girly" things. While the boys chop wood, go out to find things, and go adventuring. Those contrasting differences connect to gender oppression. The stories about male protagonists center around brave boys or men who go out on an adventure and by their cleverness or bravery are gifted a kingdom, a princess, and riches. However, most stories about female protagonists offer girls who are cursed with beauty and become the object of jealousy and are often in danger because of it. Feminism is equality amongst all genders, which is why these stories by the Grimm Brothers are not feminist. Stories in which the males triumph due to their wit while females' triumph due to their silence is not equality. There is also the trope where the male protagonists end up marrying beautiful princesses, not for love but status. Their reward is not a wife, but something that makes them king. Whereas the female protagonists, during their cursed silences, are married by kings because of their beauty. That kind of "moral" makes little girls think that in order to get their "happy ever after" they must remain silent and be beautiful enough that a king will find and marry them one day. "Feminism's most obvious contribution to children's literature lies in the ways that female protagonists have been liberated from inevitably growing into passivity" (Trites 11). The importance of feminism in children's literature is to make sure that those stories happening to the male protagonists happen to the females as well.

The Grimm Reader shows how the Grimm Brother's view feminism. Their stories focus upon the same idea of women being "in their place" and that "place" is not one of a hero. In "Snow White," readers are given a female protagonist who is despised by her step-mother because she is beautiful. Jealousy and pitting women against each other is a typical anti-feminist plot device. By making two women hate each other over their looks, it offers the idea that someone will always be prettier. Morals like those are what causes girls to grow up judging their bodies and constantly comparing

themselves to others. The story then follows the step-mother sending the child Snow White into the woods to have her killed because the child will grow up more beautiful than the Queen. When Snow White enters the forest, she finds a small cabin filled with small objects. When she meets the dwarfs who reside there, they tell her, “if you will keep the house for us, cook, make the beds, wash, sew, knit, and keep everything neat and tidy, then you can stay with us” (Tatar 171). They tell her this after she explained that her step-mother tried to have her murdered. Instead of taking in the poor child and protecting her, they tell her if she does all the things that women are “supposed” to do, then she can stay. The Grimm Brothers center her chores around gender behavior, the women must cook, clean, and keep the house in order to be welcome. As stated in *A Quest of Her Own: Essays on the Female Hero in Modern Fantasy*,

women’s work, as usual, is the maintenance of order and cleanliness, housekeeping, feeding and clothing people, childbearing care of babies and children, nursing and healing of animals and people, care of the dying... those unimportant matters of life and death, not part of history, nor of story. What women do is invisible. (Campbell 96)

As the story progresses, Snow White is seen as gullible, continually falling for the Queen’s evil tricks. At the end of each day, the dwarfs save Snow White from death and tell her to be on guard. Though they kept telling her to stop falling for the Queen’s tricks, every day Snow White continued to get tricked. Readers can see, it takes the work of men to save Snow White and to be the voice of reason. However, Snow White continues on her path and is cursed again by the Queen, this time to her death. The dwarfs find her and cannot bear to bury her in the ground because she is so beautiful. They build her a glass coffin and leave her out to be viewed. Snow White is then saved by a prince who, upon seeing her lifeless body, decides she is too beautiful not to be seen. “Make me a gift of it, for I can’t live without being able to see Snow White” (Tatar 176-177). The prince wants Snow White’s dead body as a gift. No one questions it because, in those fairy tales, it usually meant that

the beautiful young heroine would get saved. In that respect, Snow White is not even the hero of her story; the prince is. Snow White’s happy ending comes from her marriage to a man she only had “tender feelings for” and the Queen is killed by dancing to death. Unfortunately, there are no morals to be learned nor a colossal turning point for the heroine. Snow White did not learn to be braver, and she did not end up less gullible, all she got was to die a few times and a marriage to a prince she did not know. That is the feminism of the Grimm Brothers’ fairy tales.

Throughout time, a lot of these fairy tales have been remade, “Snow White” from the Grimm Brother’s became one of Disney’s first princess movies in 1937 titled “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.” Other retellings from the original have also produced other movies and books. *Blood and Snow* by RaShelle Workman is one of those retellings. Published in 2017, this retelling of “Snow White” follows a young heroine named after the original character. In this story, Snow White is sixteen and lives next door to seven boys. The seven guys, representing the seven dwarfs, vary in age and are very close to the heroine. The retelling focuses less on a jealous step-mother and more on another queen, a vampire queen who wants Snow White’s body as her own. Snow White is supposed to be coerced into drinking the blood of the man she loves most in order to become a vampire. After she turns, the vampire queen will take over her body and become the fairest of them all. The story is very different from the original. Though the main difference is between the Snow White from the original and the Snow White in the retelling. Snow White in the retelling is smart, and though she struggles with finding out who she is as a person and what she wants in life, the narrative helps her figure that out along the way. As stated earlier, Snow White, in the original tale, does not develop as a character. Towards the end of her story, she is not less gullible, nor is she brave or clever. Her story ends how it began; she is only beautiful. Snow White, in the retelling, is young and scared about who she is supposed to be. When she finds out about the vampire queen wanting to take over her body, she begins to question whether or not that is her fate in life; to not be in control of herself and her feelings. When she finds out

her fate of losing her body, she does everything she can to fight against it. In “Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis and Children’s Fantasy Fiction – Modelling a New Approach,” the author states,

the feminist influence on children’s literature studies has led to rereading of classic books from a feminist point of view, identifying ‘sexist,’ ‘anti-sexist’ and ‘feminist’ stories...

While these are important projects, instead of problematising concepts such as ‘gender’,

‘girl’ or ‘woman’, they have aimed at identifying stories with female heroes who

transcend their world in positive, female-oriented ways... or are true to the nature of both

genders and capture the essence of femininity and masculinity” (Lehtonen 1).

Snow White in *Blood and Snow* questions everything about her existence, but she does not give in. She allows herself to feel everything, “all of my sadness, all of my loneliness, my pent up hurts, and fears seemed to crash into me” (Workman 20). In this story of “Snow White”, readers are offered a character with complex feelings and thoughts. Though the story follows the original tale in name and key characters like the seven brothers, Snow White in *Blood and Snow* is a young girl who wants to find herself through the experience of life, something the original Snow White did not do. Snow White, in the retelling, is also looking for love, she feels very fondly for one of the seven brothers, and in the visions sent by the vampire queen, she must consume the heart of the one she loves the most. Workman’s retelling still centered on the character of the same name, is a vastly different tale from the original. Retellings create an essential expansion of themes and details, and when paired with older stories, offer a new perspective of morals and lessons in a modern theme. The essay “We Said Feminist Fairy Tales, Not Fractured Fairy Tales” suggests that “in order to truly revision a fairy tale, thereby creating a work that is artistically new and rings true to a child, feminist authors must cease attempting to reverse gender roles simply. Rather, they must re-vision the entire

work and create something from the ground up” (Kuykendal and Sturm 40). That is what Workman does in her retelling of “Snow White.” She could have easily reversed the gender roles; Snow White could have saved the prince from a deep slumber or lived with seven women. Instead, Workman offered a twist on the classic by offering a young girl stuck in a moral dilemma of finding herself and going against what others want of her. Workman gives readers a girl who does not know who she is. A girl who is told that she has to be a certain way in order to fulfill her “destiny” then shows that character doing everything to avoid that destiny. Readers get offered a relatable character, a teenager who questions herself and what she knows, who through trial and error, finds a way to accept herself. Snow White goes on to save herself and everyone she loves. Compared to the original, where a prince saves Snow White, it seems in the retelling readers can see the difference feminist retellings make.

Feminism has developed over time and so has the response in literature. The detail that feminism adds to children’s literature has expanded from young girls reading stories about getting rescued, to stories about the girls doing the rescuing. There has been an increase in boys and girls switching gender roles. By exploring new areas of feminism and masculinity, the overall outlook is that gender should not stop anyone from being a hero. Feminism in children’s literature has come to a time where boys and men can embrace their feelings, and girls and women no longer have to remain silent. Those lessons of being so strong and brave that someone marries for status over love is over with feminism in children’s literature. The moral that in order to get a “happily ever after” you have to marry a prince and be the most beautiful, is where it belongs, in the past. Between new age feminism and retellings of old tales, children can now grow up reading about any character being strong but vulnerable, seen as beautiful for their intelligence, and rewarded for their hard work through love and honor. The lack of representation from the past has now moved forward into the future. The skeleton provided by the Grimm Brothers and other fairy tale authors can now become a full-fledged body of work through feminism.

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