



Anthropology 324 Essay

“... Happily Ever After” (or What Fairytales Teach Girls About Being Women)

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Introduction

Fairytales are the common thread throughout the fabric of childhood in the United States. The Grimm’s Fairytales serve as the foundation to many of the stories that are common in a variety of mediums. A survey of these re-published stories yields a distinct trend that focuses on validating women through submissive beauty while men are portrayed as active and, at times, violent. Rather than being a mere reflection of societal ideals, these fairytales perpetuate Christian, patriarchal concepts as a means of maintaining the gender hierarchy. An analysis of the Disney version of *Sleeping Beauty* illustrates the changes that fairytales undergo, the stereotypes that they perpetuate and the more subtle forms of social manipulation that they employ. The effects of fairytales are evident in everything from studies done with children to the roles of males and females in current television programs. Movies, and more particularly horror movies, thrive on exploiting the stereotypes that tie together sexuality and violence that children are initially exposed to through fairytales. Fairytales have never been bedtime stories; in this day in age, they have morphed into a very effective means of exercising power over women and maintaining gender inequality.

Background

The Brothers Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm, collected their first fairy tales over one hundred years ago and influenced many other countries to begin preserving their oral traditions. They gathered the stories predominantly from German women, the majority of whom were spinners, as a means of preserving the oral traditions of Germany (Michaelis-Jena, 1971). Spinning during the 19th century was dominated by women and it was an activity that was often done communally. Tales were told at night as a means to “...keep themselves and their

company awake as they spun” (Bottigheimer, 1980). The original text was published without illustrations and was met without very much fanfare, perhaps because they originally targeted students of folklore rather than children. However, as they “doctored” the stories and published new editions, the Grimm’s fairytales became quite popular. As Jacob Grimm remarked after his brother’s death, “...on every page I see him before me, and recognize his mind at work.” (Michaelis-Jena, 1971). This statement is very telling in terms of the changes that the fairytales underwent as they moved away from the original source, women, and into the greater realm of patriarchal Germany. Many of the tales initially contained themes of ancestral rape or attempted rape of a daughter by her father. This dynamic of a father attempting to exploit a vulnerable child was largely replaced by the stepmother character that resents the beauty (perhaps also the perceived latent sexuality) of her stepchild and thus exploits her in one way or another (Marshall, 2004). It is also generally made known that the daughter was the product of a good, heterosexual woman that died in the role of “innocent victim”, a theme that is found throughout the Grimm’s fairytales (Bacchilega, 1993).

Gender Roles

The lead characters of fairytales, perhaps because they were originally told by groups of females, are women. However, several different types of women exist and the reader is often able to deduce each character’s moral character based on their physical appearance. Attractiveness is the most important attribute that a woman can possess, and is often an indicator of chances of future happiness. A study of the evolution of 168 tales that originated in 1857 found a strong correlation between the number of times a book was reproduced and the number of times the appearance (i.e. beauty) of the female lead was stated (Baker, 2003). The good female is generally submissively accepting of her lot in life while waiting for the prince to appear and take control of her destiny. In many ways, some of the more popular stories can be interpreted as elaborate “beauty contests,” emphasizing the message that a woman’s youthful appearance, especially when paired with the appropriately meek demeanor, is her most important asset (Lieberman, 1972). Conversely, women that are not beautiful are a source of suspicion. The “evil stepsisters” in *Cinderella* are an example of how, at

least in the author's minds, unattractive women treat their attractive counterparts. In this respect, a character's beauty puts them in danger; their tempting physical form sets them up for another form of victimization. Here again, one can assume that the authors have shifted the treacherous behavior of men to the actions of other females (Deszcz, 2002). The mutilation of the stepsister's feet in *Cinderella* also presents the notion that women will go to great lengths in order to undermine each other. This common theme sends a message to girls that they cannot trust one another, a message in approximately 17% of the tales (Baker, 2003).

If the heroine is beautiful and good, then the evil character must exhibit the opposite physical attributes and this largely holds true. The exception is the rare, beautiful girl that is not humble or submissive and is normally forced to learn these behaviors by the end of the story in order to reach the ultimate accumulation, marriage. These instances serve as an example to the reader that if they prescribe to the gender roles, they will be rewarded (Baker, 2003). Lazy girls and older women are generally ugly, evil, and determined to take advantage of the heroine. They also exhibit traits that directly threaten the feminine ideal; they are strong, determined, and perhaps even greedy (Lieberman, 1972). Rather than accepting their situation, they make plans to change it, occasionally without even the presence of a man. The only women that hold a certain degree of power for good are the relatively asexual fairies. This forces upon the reader the concept that a correlation exists between empowered female sexuality and evil. All of these stereotypes set up girls to be "predisposed to believe in a correlation between a loveable face and a loveable character" (Lieberman, 1972). If you are beautiful, you should passively wait, regardless of the situation you are in, for your prince to come and rescue you.

Through the majority of the story, the heroine's beauty, rather than her actions, drives the plot (Baker, 2003). The male lead may not enter the picture, other than the victimized heroine dreaming of her savior, until the last portion of the story. The hero, often a prince, is generally described as brave and handsome. His handsomeness, however, is a secondary characteristic to his actions. While the female heroine is often weeping or locked in a state of ageless sleep, the male proves his masculinity through killing the "evil" older woman. While the appearance of older women is made known the majority of time, the appearance of older men is conspicuously absent. This unequal emphasis of female versus male appearances reinforces the stereotype that a woman's character

is directly tied to her appearance and that youthful beauty is the ideal (Bacchilega, 1993).

Maintaining a Patriarchal Society

During the 1980s, women successfully gained many rights and raised awareness regarding issues of gender inequality. Women have the right to control their reproductive health, pursue education endeavors and seek employment options. An interesting trend in fairytales arose during this period as well; rather than reflecting these changes in society, the focus on, and therefore perceived importance of, female attractiveness intensified (Lieberman, 2003). The new fairytales that began to emerge may portray a female in a more powerfully independent role, yet the physical appearance rarely departed from the heterosexual "Barbie doll" with a slight range of hair colors. The new message seemed to be that women can achieve things on their own but they have to be attractive in order to do so. "Fairytales are being used as a source and a vehicle of powerful self-mirroring images affirming the existing value system" (Deszcz, 2002). Again, it is evident that the stories have changed in an attempt to maintain the patriarchally-imposed gender roles. The concept of what is beautiful is intrinsically tied to the society one lives in; thus, by focusing on female beauty as a form of status, it very effectively undercuts the other achievements of women (Webster, 1983). Beauty is also arbitrary to a certain degree, making it a less tangible and more elusive achievement than a prestigious job or successful business.

Christian and Biblical themes are alive and well in fairytales. This is illustrated somewhat by the fact that nearly every fairytale culminates in marriage. In several instances, the prince and the heroine have never spoken but the female's beauty is enough to ensure that their marriage will be "happily ever after". The message this sends to girls is that the cultural expectation that they settle down and marry is of utmost importance. Another Biblical theme that rears its head is the "woman as the temptress." The female lead is dangerous to herself and others because of her physical appearance. Her weakness also puts men in dangerous situations. The apple of knowledge and temptation appears in Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. Unable to overcome her curiosity, much like Eve, she bites the apple and falls asleep (Girardot, 1977). The sequence of her fall and subsequent reawakening by the prince contains strong parallels to the biblical "fall of man." The kiss necessary to reawaken her also could similarly symbolize the shift from innocent childhood to sexual (or sinful) adulthood.

Specific Analysis

Sleeping Beauty is a fairytale that illustrates both the changing biases of the writers, the perpetuation of stereotypical gender roles and the presence of underlying patriarchal ideals. Originally published in 1697 by the French Charles Perrault, it was later picked up by the Grimm brothers (Velten, 1992). The Disney version focuses on a slender, blonde heroine who woos her prince through her beautiful dancing abilities. However, the promise of a curse by an evil fairy looms in the distance. This evil female fairy has dark hair, is older, and though largely asexual, contains hostility towards the fair princess. The spindle that Jacob Grimm described as “an essential characteristic of a wise woman” would bring about her downfall (Bottigheimer, 1982). Like in *Snow White*, the promise of knowledge, and in this instance the symbol also carries the promise of economic independence, results in the demise of the innocent heroine. In the Grimm’s version, the prince had never met the princess but heard stories about her great beauty and risks his life in order to fulfill his role as savior. The Disney version introduced the association between violence and masculinity. The murder of an angry woman that presents herself in the form of a dragon is the necessary duty of the male lead. The double-fold message is that violence is a necessary trait of males and that females, when angry, become unruly and violence may be necessary to control them. Additionally, the ugly older woman was attempting to disrupt the social order. By destroying her, social order is restored (Deszcz, 2002). This again perpetuates and reinforces the common theme that women cannot trust each other. It also reflects the assumption that God is a male deity that is responsible for saving or disposing of people. The male lead acts as one would suppose the Euro-American God would, saving the passive blonde maiden from herself while killing the dark haired woman that is asserting herself.

Influences on Society

The effects of fairytales on the perspectives of children are remarkable. A study of close to twenty-five hundred eight to ten year old German school children revealed a startling trend in the effectiveness of fairytales in terms of associating specific behaviors with a certain gender (Wardetsky, 1990). The boys and girls were given a variety of introductory sentences and then instructed to write their own story or fairytale based off of that opener. What the researchers discovered was that if the introductory sentence suggested victimization or repression of the main character, both female and male characters

would write about a girl (Wardetsky, 1990). Similarly, if the opening sentence suggested the character was leaving home or striking out independently, both genders would pick a male as the main character. This suggests that the fairytales that these children had admitted to reading or having read to them are informing and influencing their views of what behaviors are expected of them based on their genders.

The roles of males and females that fairytales prescribe are formative in a child’s sense of being. Identities are created by “interacting with socio-cultural ideas, artifacts and activities” (FisherKeller, 1997). Rather than mirroring our society, television and movies often reflect a distorted view that bears a striking resemblance to the thematic elements found in fairytales. A study performed in 1982 found that on primetime television, women interacted with other women, independently of a male presence, only seven percent of the time (Hess, 1983). The fairytale message that women cannot trust each other, and that the role of a female is intrinsically tied to a male, is glaringly evident. Males are also more likely to not only be represented on television, but they generally hold the leading role. Additionally, in the past twenty years, female actresses have been becoming younger while their male counterparts largely remain the same age (Lincoln, 2004). Again, this reinforces the ideal of youthful beauty of females and implies on another level that the success of a female is determined by one’s physical appearance. These ideas also strongly mirror the value of beauty that fairytales emphasize.

In terms of violence, men in movies are much more likely to be depicted as participating in violent crime than are women (Eschholz, 2001). This simultaneously reflects and enhances the concept that masculinity and manhood are intrinsically linked, which is a common theme in fairytales. Studies of popular movies put out in 1996 suggest that the stereotypical roles that fairytales prescribe are still flourishing. The “virgin and the whore” dichotomy is common, with the female stepping away from the traditional feminine characteristics often being met with violence or victimization (Escholz, 2001). According to the Department in Justice, in 1996 men were 44% more likely than women to be victims of a violent crime. However, in television and movies the violence against men and women occur almost at the same rate. One key difference is that men are generally depicted as “doing something” about the violence, rather than accepting the act. Men are portrayed as being more likely to turn around and inflict violence on the original perpetrator in order to overcome their victimization. This trend suggests that

the conception that males control their destinies while women wait for a male to control hers, is still being perpetuated.

Influence on Movies

The movie genre which seems to thrive on the victimization of women is the horror genre. Alfred Hitchcock attempted to “artistically” portray violence towards women, an act that he perceived as a universal aspect of the human experience (Thomas-Allen, 1985). In perhaps the most famous Hitchcock movie, *Psycho*, the female lead exemplifies many stereotypically female characteristics. Dressed demurely in a pencil skirt with a conservatively feminine haircut, she works as a secretary. These behaviors have strong parallels to most Grimm’s fairytales: a demurely beautiful female that stays within her socially-imposed boundaries. In the movie, as in the fairytales, the female attempting to step out of her role is met with punishment. In *Psycho*, by stealing money and attempting to control her own destiny, the female heroine sets herself up to be punished. The ironic parallel between Hitchcock’s “masterpiece” and typical fairytales is that the theme of females punishing each other still punctuates the story. In the movie, the male murderer dons the clothes and mannerisms of his dead mother in order to kill the heroine. Rather than a man inflicting pain on a woman, a man is possessed by a jealous, older woman who demands that the younger, more attractive and sexual woman is punished. In this case, the heroine meets a more permanent fate which cannot be fixed through the kiss of a prince. However, the dashing masculine detective can unravel the plot twists and “save” the female from being victim to an unsolved crime.

Hitchcock and many other “disciples” have recognized the commercial value of tying female

sexuality and victimization together. The female, due to her physiology, is continually put in a vulnerable position. Once she becomes a victim to violence, rather than avenging her victimization, she waits for her “prince,” typically in the masculine role of a policeman, to rescue her. Again, the appearance of the female is very important in suggesting to the audience that a beautiful woman that has been hurt merits more attention than a less attractive one. This serves to objectify women and enforce socially-constructed beauty ideals while ensuring that women remain dependent on the “stronger” male.

Conclusion

Fairytales change and evolve depending on the biases of the interpreter. Starting with the Brothers Grimm, changes occurred that replaced the traditional male villain with a female one that was ugly, jealous, and old. Disney went a step further, giving the audience a visual ideal of beauty and introducing the association between violence and masculinity. These male interpreters have, perhaps unwittingly, enhanced characteristics that support stereotypical female behavior and downplays or punishes attributes that threaten the patriarchy of society. The distorted view that remains keep women, regardless of the other freedoms they may enjoy, slaves to the beauty myth. Fairytales plant an influential seed in the minds of children and as children grow, these subtle concepts morph into their perspective of reality. Movies can be viewed as both the by-product of these early fairytales, inspired impressions of reality, and as another means of perpetuating gender ideals that hyper-masculine men while objectifying and subordinating women. The themes in fairytales that reward female submissiveness and place an emphasis on beauty remain influential long after the fairytale is over.

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