

The Politics of Children's Literature: Constructing Gender Identities through Fairytales

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Abstract

Jack Zipes, in *The Trials and Tribulations* (1994) wrote, "We all pass through fairy tales, which inscribe indelible marks on our imagination and affect our behavior and role playing" (xi). Perhaps the first literature that children encounter is fairytales. The aim of children's literature is to engage and amuse the young minds. But coupled with this it initiates children into accepting the social values and customs. The subtle orientation provided through literature is far more effective than other forms of tutoring.

This paper analyses how gender roles are emphasized through seemingly neutral stories of chivalry, adventure and wonder. The focus is to show how boys and girls are initiated into adult gender roles by reading fairy tales and how they act out the sexual roles that patriarchy has laid down. Tales like 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs', 'Cinderella', 'Sleeping Beauty' and 'Beauty and the Beast' all prepare girls for submissive roles and boys are cautioned that they are to display courage and reason at all times. Also the female characters in fairytales are either stereotyped as being in distress or are cast as witches or evil women. Often the plot of fairy tales is how a girl is rescued from misery by prince charming, the implication being that marriage is the key to happiness and assures the 'they lived happily ever after' ending to the story of a girl. Through the analysis of select fairy tales this paper showcases how children's literature in general and fairytales in particular advance the patriarchal sexual politics of carving men as physically and mentally strong and women as submissive, passive and emotional. Feminism distinguishes between the biological determinants 'sex' and questions the politics behind the gender based social categorization as men and women. Feminists assert that the social construct gender is often used to justify the inequities in different cultures in order to maintain the patriarchal hegemony. The gender roles propagated through innocent fairytales has far reaching implications.

Keywords: Children's literature, Gender, fairytales, feminism, patriarchy

Introduction

Children's literature is one of the earliest means by which young minds are exposed to stories and "it plays a powerful role in shaping how we think about and understand the world. Stories are key sources of images... attitudes, structures... when directed to children they are often bound up with education of one kind or another" (Reynolds 4). Though Children's literature envelops varied genres and includes nursery rhymes, ballads, songs and fairytales, it is genre of fairytales that is most popular amongst children from multifarious cultural milieu. Jack Zipes in *The Trials and Tribulations* (1994) writes, "We all pass through fairy tales, which inscribe indelible marks on our imagination and affect our behavior and role playing" (xi).

Fairy tales by the Grimm Brothers and Charles Perrault are widely recognized as authentic versions of the tales because of the fact "that fairytales were told and retold in many cultures before they were written down and that they have subsequently been written and rewritten by many authors for many reasons" (Parsons 138). The Grimm brothers, Jacob and Wilhem gathered their tales from German women spinners in order to preserve the oral tradition of the country. According to Ruth Bottigheimer the women spinners told these tales to each other so that they could "keep themselves and their company awake as they spun" (143). Fairytales the world over seem to have some similar characteristics and tales from varied cultures seem to be variants of the same pattern underlying different stories. Fairytales from different cultures are "wonder tales...that usually involve magic, tell of transformations... culminating in a happy end" (O Sullivan 94).

Like other forms of literature, fairytales also have significance beyond the aesthetic value. Literature plays an important role in socialization and the subtle orientation provided through the genre of fairy tales is far more effective than other forms of tutoring. Fairytales initiate children into accepting the social values and customs. Lois Tyson maintains that "Traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive. These gender roles have been used very successfully to justify inequities..." (85). Therefore the inferior position of women in society is culturally motivated by patriarchal forces and is not determined by biology.

Feminists believe that fairytales have also advanced the patriarchal agenda of the subjugation of women and a cursory glance through the fairytales "yields a distinct trend that focuses on validating women through submissive beauty while men are portrayed as active Rather than being a mere reflection of societal ideals, these fairytales perpetuate ... patriarchal concepts as a means of maintaining the gender hierarchy" (Neikirk 38). Patriarchal ideology underlies the seemingly neutral fairy tales and the tales are mostly woven around a common pattern. Tales like 'Sleeping Beauty', 'Cinderella' and 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs' show how:

...a beautiful, sweet young girl (for females must be beautiful, sweet, and young if they are to be worthy of romantic admiration) is rescued (for she is incapable of rescuing herself) from a dire

situation by a dashing young man who carries her off to marry him and live happily ever after. The plot thus implies that marriage to the right man is a guarantee of happiness and the proper reward for a right-minded young woman” (Tyson 89).

Since childhood is an impressionable period, the orientation provided through fairytales prepares children into accepting gender differences and hierarchy between sexes... until they become gender stereotyped members of patriarchy” (Peksen 151). This paper brings out how gender indoctrination finds its way in seemingly innocent fairytales and how boys and girls are initiated into adult gender roles by reading fairy tales and act out the sexual roles laid down by patriarchy. A threadbare analysis of tales like ‘Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs’, ‘Cinderella’ and ‘Sleeping Beauty’ shows how girls are prepared for submissive roles and boys are cautioned that they are to display courage and reason at all times. Also the female characters in fairy are either stereotyped as being in distress or are cast as witches or evil women. Often the plot of fairy tales is how a girl is rescued from misery by prince charming, the implication being that marriage to the right man guarantees happiness and assures the ‘they lived happily ever after’ ending to a girl’s story.

The paper analyses popular fairy tales ‘Cinderella’, ‘Snow White and the seven Dwarfs’ and ‘Sleeping Beauty’ from *Grimm’s Fairytales* (1812) and *The Original Folk and Fairytales of The Brothers Grimm* (2014) translated and edited by Jack Zipes to show how children’s literature advances the patriarchal sexual politics. Fairytales are instrumental in propagating gender stereotypes as well as transmitting societal norms to children. The way in which gender is enacted in fairytales contributes to the images that youngsters envision about their own role in society. Stereotypes relating to “appropriate “masculine” and “feminine” roles exist in the content, language, and illustrations in many of these tales” and thereby encourage girls “to be sweet, naive, passive, and self-sacrificing, whereas boys are encouraged to be strong, adventurous, self-sufficient heroes and saviors” (Louie 75).

The patriarchal imagination underlying the fairytale genre naturalizes the subordination of women in a man’s world and girls are oriented into accepting subordinate roles. The most detrimental consequence of such tutoring is that girls seem to internalize the passive and submissive attitudes expected of them. Jack Zipes rightly states that:

Children are conditioned to assume and accept arbitrary sex roles. These socially conditioned roles prepare females to become passive, self-denying, obedient, and self-sacrificial ... as well as nurturing, caring, and responsible in personal situations...They prepare males to become competitive, authoritarian, and power-hungry as well as rational, abstract, and principled. (*Don’t Bet on the Prince* 3)

The moral of most fairytales is that if the protagonist submits to patriarchal dictates and displays patience and virtue at all times she will be bestowed with marital bliss and “live happily ever after” with

her prince charming. Women in fairytales who are not 'feminine' according to the male standards are incarnations of evil; portrayed as undesirable, ugly and usually are represented as witches, stepmothers and step sisters etc.

Gender indoctrination is central to 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs' (1812) the story of a princess whom her step-mother wants to kill and who escapes into the woods where she is given shelter by the seven dwarfs. The step-mother is jealous of her beauty. The jealousy surfaces because "one day when the queen went to her magical mirror and said, 'Looking-glass upon the wall, who is fairest of us all?' it answered, 'Queen, you are full fair,'tis true, But Snow-white fairer is than you'" (1-2). The Queen plans to get rid of her and instructs a huntsman to kill her and bring back her heart as a token. The implication is that to put her plan into practice she needs a man. The Queen needs a male hunter to put Snow White to death. However, the huntsman takes pity on Snow white and lets her off.

Roaming in the woods Snow White reaches the house of the seven dwarfs. The dwarfs upon hearing her story agree to let her stay with them save a few conditions. They tell her, "If you keep our house for us, and cook, wash, and make the beds, and sew and knit, and keep everything tidy and clean, you may stay with us, and you shall lack nothing" (3). The role that a woman is expected to perform in a patriarchal society is clearly spelt out by the dwarfs and Snow White has no choice but to comply. In the morning the dwarfs go to the mountain side "to dig for gold; in the evening they came home, and their supper had to be ready for them" (3). The dwarfs leave Snow White to the household chores while they dig for gold implying that the woman is made for the hearth while as the man shoulders the financial burden. The idea propagated through the tale is perhaps that Snow White is happy to stay at home and perform the chores and the lesson to be drawn from her tale is that women should be passive. Snow White's passive attitude is rewarded towards the end of the story in the shape of prince charming. Such stories orient girls to be passive and dependent whereas boys are encouraged to be proactive to rescue the poor women. Female children reading these stories internalize the gender stereotypes and "never question the fixed roles but accept them as they are". The case is similar with boys as well. They are always expected to be the breadwinners, the heroes who never cry, who are never frightened and who should always take the first step (Peksen156). When the children attain adulthood, they simply act out these internalized roles.

Children are exposed to fairytales at a very tender and impressionable age and the gender lessons learnt during childhood tend to have an everlasting imprint on their minds. 'Cinderella' (2014) contributes the idea that women must adhere to the norms of the society, show patience in misery and wait to be chosen by a wealthy and prosperous man to be his wife. The story draws parallels between 'patient endurance of suffering' and the 'happily ever after ending' and implies that patience is rewarded in the end as in the case of Cinderella.

At the beginning of the tale Cinderella's mother advises her to "be good and pious" (69). Therefore it is because she is pious and passive that she is labeled as 'good' according to patriarchal standards. Cinderella's life is miserable because of her step-mother and step-sisters who force her to do all the household chores. The King holds a ball to select a bride for the prince. The two step-sisters go to the ball and Cinderella remains at home until the appearance of her fairy godmother. The Prince falls in love with her, but she leaves the ball midway but leaves behind a slipper.

The Prince searches for the woman whose foot fits the slipper. When the slipper fits Cinderella, the prince marries her. The moral of Cinderella's story can be defined as 'patience and endurance is rewarded' thereby women are instructed to suffer in silence with the hope that their patience too will be rewarded. It is also implied that the only desire that women have is to get married and they have no other aspirations and goals. Another standard set by Cinderella's story is that women have to be beautiful because she attracts the prince entirely because she is beautiful.

Tales like 'Sleeping Beauty' portray women as passive. In 'Brier-Rose', popularly known as 'Sleeping Beauty' the protagonist who is under an evil spell sleeps for a hundred years until her Prince wakens her. She is extremely beautiful and the prince falls in love with her. The prince not only awakens her from sleep but also marries her and they live happily ever after. The princess in the whole tale is portrayed as an object of male gaze and has absolutely no opinion to express. Patriarchal ideology used docile characters to provide subtle orientation to females through such tales.

Maud Ellmann wrote, "'gender' unlike 'sex' is an artifact of culture" (21) and it is evident from the analysis of the fairytales that children are initiated into these gender roles and constructed as 'boys' and 'girls.' Children learn their sex based identities through socio-cultural practices, education and even stories. Hence the innocent tales of wonder and chivalry 'inscribe indelible marks' on the imagination of children and prepare them for gender roles to facilitate the patriarchal agenda of sexual politics.

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