Feminist or Fractured Fairytales? Comparing Perrault’s Cinderella or The Little Glass Slipper and Munsch’s The Paper Bag Princess

Feminist Vs. Fractured Fairytales

Fairytales are often where children first look to learn lessons about the world and society around them. The ways in which women and men are presented in most classic fairytales often differ, and the roles that both genders presumably play are very different. In popular children’s folktales and fairytales rewritten by Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm, there is often an underlying idea that the female protagonist is weaker or less capable than her male counterpart. In Cinderella or the Little Glass Slipper by Charles Perrault, Cinderella is incapable of saving herself and must rely on the prince to come and rescue her from her evil stepmother. In the article “We Said Feminist Fairy Tales, Not Fractured Fairy Tales!”, by Leslee Farish Kuykendal and Brian W. Sturm, there is a quote that accurately describes the two roles of a woman in popular tales like Cinderella: “there are two definitions of woman [in fairy tales]. There is the good woman. She is a victim. There is the bad woman. She must be destroyed. The good woman must be possessed. The bad woman must be killed, or punished. Both must be nullified” (Kuykendal and Sturm 39). Cinderella is the victim in this case and her stepmother is the so-called “bad woman.” Both roles are not nearly as favourable as the prince. Although he is not the protagonist, he is the one who saves Cinderella from her dreadful family, resulting in both the prince and Cinderella living happily ever after.

In classic children’s fairytales like those of Perrault and the Brothers Grimm, princesses are seen as dainty and almost clueless. They are expected to be enchanting yet still submissive to the male. In contrast to the classic damsel-in-distress tale, Princess Elizabeth, in The Paper Bag Princess by Robert Munsch, is responsible for saving her prince from the dragon. Unlike Cinderella and many other princesses in children’s literature, she saves the day. After she saves her prince, he decides that he no longer wants to marry her because of her appearance. Although a very simple story, this tale is an example of a female not only taking the lead role, but also being in a position of power and authority. It can be assumed that because certain gender norms have already been set in place, it is harder for a child to see Elizabeth as a true hero. According to Kuykendal and Sturm, in studies where children were asked...
about this particular story, the children “admired strong female protagonists, [but] these were not the characters they wished to emulate” (Kuykendal and Sturm 40). Parsons writes “in many traditional tales, being rewarded with the prince and the security of marriage is the result of the heroine’s submission and suffering, along with her beauty, rather than her agency” (Parsons 137). This ideology directly contrasts a book like The Paper Bag Princess where the heroine is not rewarded with a prince nor marriage. Instead she gains independence and self-sufficiency which by the end of the book proves to be more valuable.

Children Interacting With Feminist Fairytales

In a study done about feminist picture books in their relation to children, the children did not quite understand the significance of the books, but the young girls did appreciate the idea of a strong heroine as the protagonist (Bartholomaeus). Unlike popularized tales, feminist picture books for kids teach lessons, or “upside down” fairytales, that attempt to reinvent a child’s way of viewing a traditional tale. In her article, “Ella Evolving,” Linda T. Parsons makes the point that “we tend to accept the gendered discourse embedded in [fairy tale storylines] as natural, essential, and conclusive” (Parsons 136). Parsons is reinforcing the point that it has become acceptable for us to see male characters and dominant and female characters as submissive making it even harder to reimagine these roles.

Bartholomaeus studied how young girls identified with upside down fairytales in her study on six-year-olds to eleven-year-olds and feminist picture books. Her research in conjunction with the research of other scholars proposes that for both young girls and boys to avoid seeing traditional gender roles, the characters in these stories should be involved in activities that are not gender based. The books that Bartholomaeus chose to read to her participants, the children, to were visibly feminist books with titles such as Cinder Edna by Jackson and O’Malley, William’s Doll by Zolotow and Pène du Bois and A Fire Engine for Ruthie by Newman and Moore. For certain books like Cinder Edna, when it came to distinguishing between “girl” activities and “boy” activities, the children did not categorize the books based on gender but rather on how the characters in the books were treated or the qualities that were attributed to these characters. They described them as different or happier as opposed to being a boy or a girl. In the story of Cinder Edna, two princesses, Cinder Edna and Cinderella, marry two princes. Cinder Edna and her prince live happily ever after, presumably because Cinder Edna is more is less reliant on her husband and is interested in other non-domestic activities. The children were able to identify that Cinder Edna and her prince were happier than Cinderella and her prince (Bartholomaeus 940). In the case of the other books, where gender reversal was more evident, the children initially could not identify what gender each character was because they were not used to the reversal in gender roles like girls playing with ‘boy toys’ in A Fire Engine for Ruthie and boys playing with ‘girl toys’ in William’s Doll.
Feminist Fairytales Redefined

Parsons explains that “a feminist text deals with issues of freedom, choice, and expanding the subject positions available to women and men, and it makes visible the fact that the tales have functioned historically to reproduce social values” (Parsons 139). She references Jack Zipes study on the evolution of folktales. He uses the word contamination to describe the changes in the literature over the years and how it can be used for the betterment of the evolution of literature. Feminist folkloric texts in a sense are trying to contaminate historical literature and reorganize gender norms to create different ideas and reshape the way society views classic fairytales. Parson also brings up the point that fairytales for children have been retold and popularized by Perrault and The Brothers Grimm but actually belong to and are ruled by women seeing as most of the dominant characters, both princesses and villains, are women. The feminist re-visions of fairytales popularized by Perrault and The Brothers Grimm aim to break down the gender binaries that the favoured editions of these stories have constructed.

Princess Elizabeth and Cinderella represent two different views of what it means to be a true princess. From what the revised folktales tell us, princesses are expected to be saved by a prince and are only useful in domestic settings. When determining what, it is important to note that the objective of feminist fairytales are not simply to switch gender roles. The protagonist should be empowered despite its gender. The Paper Bag Princess is an example of a typical damsel-in-distress story that turns into a feminist tale because by the end of the book the main female protagonist is empowered. Fractured fairytales slightly differ because their objective is not necessarily to prove what gender is dominant but is rather focused on simply reversing the plot or character roles to alter the story. Feminist fairytales and stories are very useful in constructing different ideas of gender and exposing readers to different views that can possibly change the way that male and female protagonists are seen.

Works Cited


French. Intermediate. They began to try it on the princesses, then on the duchesses, and then on all the ladies of the Court; but in vain. It was brought to the two sisters, who did all they possibly could to thrust a foot into the slipper, but they could not succeed. Cinderella, who saw this, and knew her slipper, said to them, laughing. He obliged Cinderella to sit down, and, putting the slipper to her little foot, he found it went on very easily, and fitted her as if it had been made of wax. The astonishment of her two sisters was great, but it was still greater when Cinderella pulled out of her pocket the other slipper and put it on her foot. The Paper Bag Princess has 44,757 ratings and 1,834 reviews. Lola said: It's so important for children to be exposed to feminism through their reads. The... Robert Munsch's writing is simple yet sassy and hilarious at the same time and what I really loved about this book was that Robert Munsch made the heroine, Elizabeth into a clever and brave girl and I loved the way that she tries to go and rescue the prince by herself even though she lost everything that she owned and the way. The Paperbag Princess subtly teaches the little ones(girls, especially) several things; one, material possession is fleeting, two, beauty is more than skin-deep, three, wisdom is a weapon, four, you can be your own hero, and five, acceptance and respect comprise genuine love. Did I miss anything?