

Proposed question for independent inquiry: Do traditional fairy tales need to be completely transformed to fit into the contemporary idea of gender and gender roles?

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Three keywords: Fairy Tales, Gender Roles, Representation

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Throughout the duration of this context of writing I will be investigating three chosen words with the assistance of and several artists and/or thinkers. My exploration of these images and thinkers will link the words **Fairy tales**, **Gender roles**, and **representation**, together to help form a question for my dissertation next year. I will explore the meaning of each word and how I intend to utilise it by linking them together and creating an overarching question.

The words will be expressed with visuals from artists such as J. Howard miller (gender Roles), G. Cruikshank (Fairy tales), along side thinkers including Naomi Wolf (gender roles and fairy tales) Stuart Hall (representation) and Elizabeth Wanning Harris (fairy tales).

Fairy Tales

“A story about magic or fairies, usually for children”

(Oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com, 2021)

Sub words include storytelling, myths, legends, folklore, Maid, mother, crone, prince, heroes.

Definitions of fairy tales struggle to represent this wide and varied genre of storytelling. They omit many aspects by calling them children’s stories, however,

Nearly all fairy tales are framed in some way. When we think of fairy tales, we think of them as bracketed between a “once upon a time” and a “happily ever after.”

(Harris, 2003, p. 104)

Fairy tales are easily categorised like this when looking at ‘modern’ media-based depictions of them. The earlier written versions were much more graphic though. Often with scenes of violence (stepsisters and stepmother in Cinderella had their eyes pecked out by birds), deaths, sexual abuse (sleeping beauty was assaulted in her slumber) and some extremely unhappy endings (the little mermaid turned to sea foam, dying, and didn’t get the prince). Whilst the original stories, or as original as they can get when most are re-written from other stories, have been sanitised over the last 100 odd years to remove a great deal of the obvious darker sides of them. They still maintain a great deal of implied idealised behaviours with negative consequences for those who oppose and reject them. These can be seen as cautionary tales for children. Getting them to act in certain ways so as not to incur terrible consequences for bad behaviour.

The visuals that accompany these stories, such as illustrations and more recently in the last century, animations, help reinforce the ideals of the text. With a limited description of a fairy tale, it is easy to imagine the characters

any way you like but with an illustration there it forces you to visualise them in a pre-prescribed way. The little mermaid has red hair not because it was described that way in Hans Christian Andersen's story, but because of Disney's portrayal of her in the movie.



Fig 1., Cruikshank, G (1854) Cinderella having fitted on the Glass Slipper produces its Fellow.

In figure one we see Cinderella depicted in black and white, an inked illustration of the scene in which she is fitted for the lost shoe and then produces the matching one to create a pair. Its an iconic scene that many know from the Disney movie and countless other iterations of Cinderella. This

particular image has an interesting differentiation, however as it shows Cinderella on a chair with her two stepsisters, the king's heralds but also the fairy Godmother hiding in the corner of the image, seemingly watching her machinations unfold as well as a lacking a certain stepmother in this scene. Cinderella also seems to be the only blonde-haired person in this image too. Blonde hair has often been seen as an ideal beauty standard especially in western culture. While this story doesn't specifically call the stepsister ugly, unlike alternative versions, the visuals do suggest that Cinderella's blonde hair makes her unique amongst them and is another means of emphasising her beauty without words.



Fig 2.
Offterdinger, C
(late 19th century)
Snow white.

In figure two Snow White is comparable to that of a housewife preparing and serving her family/husband dinner. She is the housekeeper, cook, and seamstress maintaining the home whilst the dwarves are out at work. This narrative is enhanced by the visual imagery of snow white. this narrative is one that can be argued as outdated and sexist bringing up the question 'Do traditional fairy tales still have value in today's society, or do they need to be updated to accurately depict contemporary life and stay relevant?' and 'what is the future of fairy tales?'

This line of enquiry leads me to my next key word.

Gender Roles

A set of behaviour patterns, attitudes, and personality characteristics stereotypically perceived as masculine or feminine within a culture. See also gender. (Oxford Reference, 2021)

Sub words include modern society, restriction, women, men, damaging, binary, sexism, ignorance, gender, identity, sexuality.



Fig.3 Schlitz Beer Advertisement, (1952)



Fig. 4 Miller H.J (1942) *We can*

do it (Rosie the Riveter)

Traditional gender roles were prevalent in 1950's advertisement, depicted above in fig three is a beer advert where the woman is dressed in an apron and has been making dinner and burnt it, while the man is dressed in a suit which implies, he has been out working. There is no doubt in this image which person takes on which traditional gender role. This is a strange back step however from the next image, fig five, which is the well know propaganda poster of 'Rosie the Riveter'. She is posing in a traditionally masculine stance, dressed in overalls but maintaining a feminine look with the makeup and head scarf. This combination of the feminine identity and yet being shown as strong and

reliable is drastically different to the advertisement which was produced 10 years later. Whilst it is felt by many to be that progress for equality for women is linear, a case can be made that that is not true as these two images represent women in very different ways. They have women being depicted during the war as strong, capable, and necessary, to being depicted as weak, unintelligent, objects whose only good qualities are their appearances and what they can offer to the man in just a single decade.

It is not fair however, to pit these two images against one another by judging the women alone. The beer advert is clearly aimed towards men as it shows the man being light-hearted and directing the gaze to the beer whilst the woman is crying and looking despondent. It was also most likely created by a man therefore is seen through the eyes of a man. The poster on the other hand is aimed at women, trying to encourage and gain women to help in the war effort by being supportive and act as a role model.

You do not win by struggling to the top of a caste system, you win by refusing to be trapped within one at all... A woman wins when she feels that what each woman does with her own body—unforced, uncoerced—is her own business.

(Wolf 2002, pg. 290)

The colour palettes of figures one and two are very similar, they both have a strong presence of yellow, which is bright and eye catching along with red and white mixed fabrics of the head scarf and apron. Hints of blue on the kitchen floor with bold blue on the overalls. Whilst the colours mirror easily the compositions are drastically different. Rosie Riveter is in a powerful commanding stance. She takes up the whole poster and stares confidently forward not smiling but not aggressive. Strong. Whereas the advert has the woman smaller than the man, help in his embrace tilting her head and looking adoringly up at him with a sad face and handkerchief as she is upset.

These two pictures depict women in vastly contrasting views. One as small and weak the other and capable and sturdy. The housewife is shown as being overtly emotional whilst Rosie Riveter is showing little to no emotion at all.

A question arises from the comparison of these two images. At what point do women stop being seen as people, individuals valued for their skills and abilities, and instead become submissive objects, or helpless beings in need of men to save them?

If such a change in ideals can happen in such a short space of time going one way, is it then possible for those ideals to change course and be made more positive in the same short time frame? Or are there too many other factors at play for that to be possible?

Traditional gender roles only work in the binary, male, and female. There is no room for anything else. Questions that emerge from this. Are gender roles as a concept something that should still be maintained or disregarded completely?

Do gender roles allow for more than two genders? And if so, where would they fit?

With men and women being the only two featured and talked about much of this idea can be questioned and further explored if we consider the genders a spectrum rather than a binary system. How the roles of men and women develop and change if they are no longer the only two. But also, what happens when 'traditional' gender roles start to overlap or fall apart?

Looking at this quote and this image has led me to the question how are gender roles are represented in fairy tales? linking back to my previous word.

Representation

“The way that someone or something is shown or described” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021)

Sub words include visibility, acknowledgment, diversity, expression, women, race, ethnicity, multi culturalism, racism, classism, sexism, signs, semiology, icons, gaze, male gaze.

Representation can be the start of many avenues. It can be in reference to semiotics, a signifier, an object, or idea holding more information than is immediately obvious. It could be in reference to the lack of representation, something missing, or done poorly. To understand representation, research into ‘*The Work of Representation* (1997) by Stuart Halls’, and ‘*Ways of seeing* (1972) by John Berger’ was done as both explore and discuss the concepts of semiotics and meaning within specified context.



Fig 6. Millais, J.E (1851-52) *Ophelia*, Oil on canvas,

“Beauty” is not universal or changeless, though the West pretends that all ideals of female beauty stem from one Platonic Ideal Woman; the Maori admire a fat vulva, and the Padung, droopy breasts. (Wolf, 2002, pg. 12)

The representation of beauty is incredibly subjective, both in art and in life. It brings forth the question, what is beauty? Can beauty be created or represented?

Here in figure six, *Ophelia*, painted by John Everett Millais, is depicted in the last moments of her life before tragically drowning in the stream. Upon first inspection of the image, it seems to represent a peaceful moment, ‘beautiful’ and serene. As a Pre-Raphaelite, Millais “Painted directly from nature itself, as

truthfully as possible and with incredible attention to detail” (Tate, 2017) being incredibly fastidious about it. This representation of nature's beauty is mirrored in the representation of female beauty.

With more contextual knowledge of this painting, it also represents Elizabeth Siddell as a person other than the subject. It's a testament to her struggle and the suffering she endured to help create this piece of art. Recreating the pose in a bathtub of freezing water for days on end even when she became ill from it so Millais could paint his perfect image.

This brings up the question of equality between the genders both in the past and present and the expectations women have placed upon them, especially in reference to men. What they are expected to do for men to the detriment of their own wellbeing.

Representation of women in art is also heavily skewed towards the male gaze. They were for a very long time the only ones allowed to be artists and therefore their work and their views of the world proliferated, being shared, and admired as the only way of being as it was the only viewpoint available. Even now the male gaze is heavily ingrained in society. Female representation in the story telling is often seen through the distorted lens of the male gaze.

How women are represented in media, stories? what we see effects how we think. Going off of female representation in media, how are other genders, ages, ethnicities, backgrounds, and sexualities depicted and how can we be more inclusive to reflect contemporary society.

Whilst exploring these three words, they have joined together through my research leading me to sub sectioned words and possible avenues of questions to take my continued research. My current proposed question is 'Do traditional fairy tales need to be completely transformed to fit into the contemporary idea of gender and gender roles?' Various sub-categorised questions are also now available to explore further. For example, 'Is updating fairy tales to be relevant in contemporary society more important than maintaining outdated gender role narratives?' and 'If updating fairy tales to show women as they are and not as a male idealised fantasy, shouldn't they also be updated to include the diversity of contemporary western culture e.g., a broad range of ethnicities, backgrounds, sexualities, and genders?'

Traditional gender roles are easy to spot in fairy tales. The man is often the rescuer and hero. The woman is weak often placed in danger where she

cannot save herself. Cooking and cleaning are central aspects of stories involving young women such as Cinderella, snow white, Rapunzel and sleeping beauty. They are also described as being young and beautiful, emphasising their chasteness and purity. This representation of young women can then be internalised from a young age by both boys and girls, perpetuating the gender roles.

...when boys and girls hear the Cinderella narrative, they hear it in slightly different ways, with different listening frames. Maybe it means the Cinderella bonds to others and that prince charming dominates – that both boys and girls hear this, and that the Cinderella narrative is really dialectical tension in which males and females are simultaneously brought together and set apart.

(Maines, 2001, pg. 102)

Within my research I have come across multiple sources that will be invaluable for my essay next year, a couple more I will consider as they link greatly with my chosen question and subject areas are, Ruth B. Bottingheimer's 'Fairy tales and society' which is a compilation of essays, and Christina Bacchilega's postmodern fairy tales and narrative strategies.

The concepts of feminism, femininity, masculinity, visibility, diversity, expressionism, ethnicity, multi culturalism, racism, classism, sexism, semiology, iconography, storytelling, folklore, stereotypes, heroism, modern society, binary ideals, are all aspects to consider exploring further under the umbrella of my question for next year, do traditional fairy tales need to be completely transformed to fit into the contemporary idea of gender and gender roles?

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Figure 1. Cruikshank, G. (circa 1830) *Cinderella, having tried on the glass slipper, produces its fellow* [illustration]. Available at <https://www.vox.com/2015/3/15/8214405/cinderella-fairy-tale-history> (Accessed 12 May 2021)

Figure 2. Offterdinger, C. (late 19th century) *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* [Illustration]. Available at: [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Offterdinger_Schneewitchen_\(2\).jpg](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Offterdinger_Schneewitchen_(2).jpg) (Accessed 11 May 2021)

Figure 3. Hale, V. (2017). *Traditional Depictions of Mothers to be Banned in Adverts from Next Year Amid Ongoing War On “Gender Stereotypes.”* [online] Available at: <https://www.breitbart.com/europe/2017/12/14/mothers-banned-adverts-war-gender/> (Accessed 11 May 2021).

Figure 4. Miller, H.J. (1942) *Rosie Riveter* [poster] Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Rosie-the-Riveter> (Accessed 11 May 2021).

Figure 5. Millais, J.E. (1851-52) *Ophelia*, [oil on canvas], Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/millais-ophelia-n01506/story-ophelia> (Accessed 11 May 2021)

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