

---

# The Role Of Woman In Fairy Tales And Its Impact On The Child Development

Fairy tales are crucial in the development of a child's imagination for it is through stories that they learn appropriate behaviors and morals accepted in our society. Fairy tales make up the foundation of most books in children's literature, making it almost impossible for any child to grow up without reading at least one fairytale. But after re-analyzing these stories in this course, I've found that there is a distinct trend being fed to young, malleable minds: to silence women in order to make them passive. Rather than merely telling an innocent tale, these fairytales are effectively exercising power over women and reinforcing the idea that women are meant to be wives and mothers, submissive, and beautiful. If they decide to stray from this ideal, they are then deemed evil. It very much feels as if there are only two categories in which women can fall under (neither that great) which leads me to believe that fairy tales maintain gender inequality.

Women are predominant in the narrative of fairy tales. Characters such as Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Red Riding Hood as well as their evil counterparts are all women (except for Red Riding Hood). While these women are the stars of their tales, they represent two extremes with two completely different outcomes. The witches or evil stepmothers customarily end up if not dead with nothing, while the beautiful virtuous women are then saved by her handsome prince. It is through the descriptions of their physical appearance that children can deduce who is who: beauty and goodness vs. ugliness and evil. This exemplifies that attractiveness is one of the most important attributes a woman can possess leading to young girls to then grow up caring most about their physical appearance in favor of anything else. The best example of this ideal is in the fairy tale of Cinderella where she symbolizes all that is good and for that reason attracts the prince unlike her evil step sisters (citation). Another example is in Sleeping Beauty, where Rose is literally gifted with these attributes, "She will be the most beautiful person in the world...she will have the disposition of an angel... her every movement will be marked by gracefulness..." (Tatar 123). It is with these specific qualities that she then attracts the handsome prince and stands out amongst the rest. Overall it is goodness and beauty that is ultimately rewarded and seen as the ticket to a happily ever after.

While beauty plays a large role, I would say that in fairy tales, passivity is the most valued and honored attribute associated to women. For it is never a female who has the strength or smarts to save herself aka have agency; it is up to her knight in shining armor to save the day. In the tale of Sleeping Beauty she is awakened by a kiss from her one true love, Cinderella is whisked away from her miserable home life thanks to Prince Charming (citation). Neither of these women are able to accomplish anything on their own. Now you may be reading this and think that princes are a dated phenomenon but finding your "perfect" man is just a modern retelling of this. So the fact that young girls are understanding that a man equals a lifelong promise of happiness, leads to them believing marriage is the only acceptable answer. This may be the reason why for example STEM careers are lacking women, for if a girl is labeled as smart and possibly more intelligent than a man, she may be seen as less attractive. So in the years of middle school in which we are most critical of ourselves, why would young girls want to sabotage themselves when they are already so self conscious about their physical appearance? This may just be me analyzing my own experience through fairy tales but I believe that it is one that parallels many other young girls.

---

Not only do fairy tales present the values in which girls must try to possess, but these tales are equally embedded with warnings of the possible perils that will infringe upon those who choose to stray from this path. For example in Red Riding Hood an innocent young girl becomes the victim of a wolf once she leaves her home (citation). She exudes confidence as she travels through the forest alone in order to get to grandmother's. Fearlessly she confides in the wolf and in the end painfully learns from this mistake when she joins her grandmother in the depths of the wolf's stomach. This tale teaches readers to avoid talking to strangers but underlyingly shows young girls that venturing alone is a dangerous, dark path to walk down. While this could refer to the dangers of sexual predators it still dissuades women from having agency (citation). Red Riding Hood is just another example of society's push to silence and oppress women by making them passive because it does not support female independence.

When a female character chooses to be ambitious she is almost always portrayed as wicked, ugly, and scheming to bring mayhem over another woman. The tale of Cinderella with her evil stepmother is an example where the stepmother bears negative personality characteristics such as jealousy, pride, and cruelty (citation). While I don't see Cinderella's stepmother as a misunderstood character, is it so wrong that she simply wanted her daughters to marry the prince? She probably did not need to harass Cinderella but as a mother, don't you want the best for your child?

Fairy tales have portrayed women as either attractive or atrocious never anything that could possibly fall in between. This constraint has been conveyed in countless fairytales as part of characters' external and internal attributes. However, with fairy tales now being made into major Hollywood film productions it is crucial that we update these stories for the modern audience. It is important that young girls grow up with icons that will inspire them to choose from a variety of paths instead of a singular one. If film is meant to reflect what is currently happening in society so should our fairy tales.