

CINDERELLA'S ASHES - NEW WOMEN, OLD FAIRYTALES

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Abstract: This paper brings into focus the feminine qualities that heroines in Western fairy tales possess, as well as the roles they traditionally perform. The heroines are either rewarded or punished in accordance to how well they fit the feminine pattern, while the association of femininity with the female clearly indicates the social impact of gender ideology. Two variations on the *Cinderella* story will illustrate how feminist revisions of fairytales upset this rigid division.

Key words: Cinderella, fairytale, femininity, feminism, gender roles

Fairy tales are fictional stories, and their common beginning "once upon a time" implying a timeless situation has become a special feature of the genre. In many popular fairy tales, recurring plots can be identified, such as: good people will get rewarded one day; a beautiful princess will marry a handsome prince; the community returns to the peaceful situation after the wicked witch is eradicated by the hero. Although these tales were written a long time ago, the values and morals mentioned are still applicable to the modern environment nowadays.

The present paper explores the close connection between femininity and the dreams of the main heroines in fairytales. The myth of "living happily ever after", constantly advanced in fairytales, implies, through fixed gender-related patterns, that only good girls who perform feminine roles properly can be rewarded with a happy life. In *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*, Maria Tatar explains that the heroine can get her man through a 'combination of labor and good looks' (1987:118).

From a feminist point of view, however, this is the most traditional outlook on sex, implying blind acceptance of cultural norms governing the patriarchal order. Indeed, since gender roles are culturally determined, as Beauvoir (1997) suggests, most feminists think that 'the traditional fairy tales spread false notions about sex roles' and the traditional role models in the fairy tales 'manipulate our notions about sex roles' (Zipes 1986:5). As a result, the feminist fairy tales are written to free the females from the rigid sex roles that have been "arranged" for them. Maria

Tatar sees the emergence of the feminist fairy tales as a challenge to the ideological male-female relationship:

Rather than giving us heroines who are passive, submissive, and self-sacrificing, tales with a feminist bent feature a heroine who is bold, resourceful, and sassy. She is more likely to rescue the prince than the other way around. Indeed, in some contemporary fairy tales, there isn't even a prince. (1987:240)

Whatever the explanations for the correlation of "passivity" and "femininity" are, male and female are always in an antagonistic position, a binary opposition as Helene Cixous proposes:

Organization by hierarchy makes all conceptual organizations subject to man. Male privilege, shown in the opposition between activity and passivity, which he uses to sustain himself. Traditionally, the question of sexual difference is treated by coupling it with the opposition: activity/passivity [... and] woman is always associated with passivity in philosophy. (1994:38)

Thus, under the patriarchal system, a "proper" female should be passive, inferior and without much initiative. Therefore, "waiting" is the privilege of female and we are taught that a "good" female should take no action to get what she wants but wait quietly for the chances to come to her.

Cinderella's tale clearly illustrates the idea of female passivity. When Cinderella leaves the ball, the prince chases after her, and, obviously, this symbolizes the "active-ness" of the male and "passive-ness" of the female. To Marcia Lieberman 'Cinderella plays as passive a role in her story. After leaving her slipper at the ball she has nothing more to do but stay home and wait.' (1986:191). When the prince is actively looking for Cinderella, Cinderella only waits patiently at home. 'The active attempts of the two stepsisters to win the prince are treated as negative, whereas the passive and shy Cinderella is rewarded' (Pace 1982:256).

Even when a good girl encounters difficulties, she will usually get assistance from the magic agent because she performs well in her gender role. Cinderella's mother says to her in the Grimm's version, 'Dear child, be good and pious, and then the good God will always protect you, and I will look down on you from heaven and be near you' (1972:121).

In Perrault's version of the tale, the fairy godmother also makes a deal with Cinderella: 'promise to be a good girl and I will arrange for you to go [to the ball]' (1969:69). Therefore, good girls are to be protected and helped by supernatural agents.

Cinderella, in Grimm's version, listens to her mother's instructions, and prays to God every day and obeys all her stepmother's and stepsisters' orders. She never complains about the harsh jobs she needs to perform, but tolerates all the hardships. Her virtue is, firstly, rewarded with the "gift" from the supernatural power, her fairy godmother, which is a nice beautiful gown.

Then, she is able to go to the ball she has longed for and meets her soul mate there, mostly due to another established feature in Western fairy tales, namely the exquisite beauty of the heroine:

‘the immediate and predictable result of being beautiful is being chosen [...]. The beautiful girl does not have to do anything to merit being chosen [...] she is chosen because she is beautiful.’ (Lieberman 1986:188)

Her charm shocks the guests in the ball, and even her stepsisters or stepmother cannot recognize her

‘At once there fell a great silence. The dancers stopped, the violins played no more, so rapt was the attention which everybody bestowed upon the superb beauty of the unknown guest. Everywhere could be heard in confused whispers: * Oh, how beautiful she is!* The king, old man as he was, could not take his eyes off her, and whispered to the queen that it was many a long day since he had seen anyone so beautiful and charming. All the ladies were eager to scrutinize her clothes and the dressing of her hair, being determined to copy them on the morrow, provided they could find materials so fine, and tailors so clever.’ (Perrault, 1969:71)

It is because ‘supernatural beauty and down-to-earth hard work are linked to create the fairy-tale heroine's passport to success’ (Tatar 1987:118).

**1. *And then the prince knelt down and tried to put the glass slipper on Cinderella's foot*
- no blind choices.**

The predictable fairytale patterns mentioned above are altered by feminist authors in order to achieve a certain desired effect. An example in point is a poem written by Judith Viorst entitled. *And then the prince knelt down and tried to put the glass slipper on Cinderella's foot*. The tale only contains a few sentences and these lines are the continuation of the title line. Viorst is re-writing the ending of the traditional Cinderella. fairy tale, as follows:

I really didn't notice that he had a funny nose.
And he certainly looked better all dressed up in fancy clothes.
He's not really as attractive as he seemed the other night.
So I think I'll pretend that this glass slipper feels too tight. (1982:73)

The chief difference from the source text is the assertiveness of Cinderella in making her own choice of not marrying the prince. Symbolically, this represents the rejection of the marriage system under the patriarchal order. Instead of being chosen by the prince, Cinderella chooses not to be the wife of the prince and she gives up the chance of being wealthy. The four lines are not merely a matter of choice made by female. The readers are brought to understand the inner psyche of a female, usually overlooked in traditional fairy tales. Feminist fairy tales, as Jack Zipes suggests (1986:xi), ‘conceive a different view of the world and speaks in a voice that has been customarily silenced’ (1986:xi).

The idea of beauty is given an inverted perspective, as the scrutinizing mirror is turned onto the figure of the prince. Stripped of his shiny clothes and ball glamour, the prince is presented as an ordinary man whose physical features hardly impress Cinderella, and shortly lead her to tell a lie in order to justify her decision to reject him. The prospects of courtship, marriage and living wealthily ever after are instantly dismissed

In sum, the princess portrayed in Viorst's poem is depicted in a radically different way from the usual representation female characters have in traditional fairytales. This subversion of the genre carried out by the poem's author may be addressed as a critique to the acculturation of women into the traditionally expected social roles thought to occur as a result of the influence of the reading of fairy tales.

2. *The Moon Ribbon* – the path to freedom.

The second example I have chosen as illustration of the idea of pattern-breaking is *The Moon Ribbon*, written by Jane Yolen, also a revision of Cinderella's story. The heroine is called Sylva and mirrors Cinderella, as she is a motherless girl who lives with her father and his new wife who has two daughters of her own. However, Sylva is not a pretty girl. This is a chief ideological break from traditional fairy tales and folktales that have taught us to assume that the lovable face must be linked with lovable character (Lieberman 1986:188). Sylva is 'plain' but 'good-hearted' while her stepmother and stepsisters are beautiful but 'mean in spirit and meaner in tongue' (1986:81).

The first half of the story is similar to that of Cinderella, since the stepmother orders Sylva to do all the household work after her father's death, with the notable difference that Sylva does not get assistance from the fairy godmother. Instead, she has a ribbon that her mother has left her,

'a strange ribbon, the color of moonlight, for it had been woven from the gray hairs of her mother and her mother's mother and her mother's mother's mother before her' (1982:81).

The development of the story is strange afterwards. The "magic" ribbon leads Sylva to a house where there is a woman. Sylva goes there twice and she gets jewels in both trips. Her stepmother and stepsisters also want to get the jewels and so they rob Sylva of her "magic" ribbon. However, instead of going to the same house, they are led to a staircase that goes down to the ground. The ribbon is left on the grass and the stepmother and her daughters never come back.

At the beginning, Sylva is a copy of Cinderella, a good, obedient girl, never complaining about her stepmother's attitude and the difficult tasks she sets to her.. For instance, when her stepmother asks her to take out the ribbon, Sylva 'obediently' shows it to her stepmother. She is a good girl, from a patriarchal point of view, because she possesses the feminine qualities. From a feminist perspective, on the other hand, Sylva is a tragic figure who is being oppressed. There

is no fairy coming out to help her, and the silver ribbon is hardly a match to supernatural forces. The magic ribbon leads her on a journey of significant change that teaches her to be 'active'. In her first journey, the woman she meets in the house asks Sylva for her hand. However, the floor suddenly cracks apart and they are separated. Sylva then cannot reach the woman:

"I cannot reach," said Sylva.

"You must try," the woman replied.

So Sylva clutched the crystal knob to her breast and leaped, but it was too far. As she fell, she heard a woman's voice speaking from behind her and before her and all about, warm with praise.

"Well done, my daughter. You are halfway home." (1982:84)

The word 'try' implies an effort in order to achieve a goal, with motivation as leading factor. Though Sylva has failed to reach the woman by falling into the chasm, she has tried her best. Therefore, her effort is appreciated.

On her second journey, however, the road no longer moves to carry Sylva to the destination:

'Sylva stood on the road and waited a moment more, then tentatively set one foot in front of the other. As soon as she had set off on her own, the road set off, too.' (1982:84)

This also symbolizes that Sylva rejects the oppression prevalent in patriarchal society and chooses the feminist way. Sylva's change is also figured by the different descriptions of the grassland. In Sylva's first trip, though she passes 'larkspur and meadowsweet, clover and rye, they did not seem like real flowers, for they had no smell at all. (1982:83)

The second time,

'Sylva strode purposefully through the grass, and this time the meadow was filled with the song of birds, the meadowlark and the bunting and the sweet jug-jug-jug of the nightingale. She could smell fresh-mown hay and the pungent pine.' (1982:85)

When Sylva starts to be "active" rather than "passive", the surrounding nature is full of life and vitality, metaphorically suggesting that Sylva is "alive" again.

Sylva's endeavors are in fact a process of finding her own identity that is not labeled by the male dominated culture. The jewel that the woman gives Sylva has melted and then Sylva feels 'a burning in her heart [...] and she [feels] her heart beating strongly beneath' (1982:87). Other than recognizing her "self", Sylva learns to be independent and, as Cinderella in Judith Viorst's version, makes her own choice. When the woman asks Sylva to give her back the jewel, Sylva claims that the jewel has been taken by her stepmother. However, the woman says, 'No one can take unless you give.' (1982:86). It is a matter of choice. From then on, Sylva learns how to reject her stepmother's request for the jewel by saying "I cannot" and "I will not".

According to Maria Tatar, Sylva's transformation is a positive one:

‘The change from "I can not" to "I will not" signifies Sylva's transformation from a passive, subservient child to an active, self-assertive young woman. Her transformation, significantly, takes place without the help of a prince but rather from her experiences with a nurturant adult female. In Yolen's tale, there is no fancy ball, no magic slipper, and no male presence to save Sylva from a malevolent stepmother. Left to her own devices, the heroine asserts her independence and carves out a new identity for herself.’ (1987:241)

Traditional gender ideology is always in an antagonistic opposition to the idea of feminism. Older fairy and folk tales re-enforce the binary opposition of male and female while the feminist fairy tales protest against the conventional ideas on female representations. The system of rewards in fairy tales, according to Marcia Lieberman equates three factors: ‘being beautiful, being chosen, and getting rich’ (1986:190).

Gender relations, I have argued, are complex and unstable in the fairytale arena of ongoing conflicts and contingent negotiations between male and female.

In the two literary examples above, the relationship between female and femininity breaks down. The heroines’ personality is different from the traditional fairy tales and folktales portrayal, advocating the idea that femaleness and femininity are culturally related and not biologically determined.

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