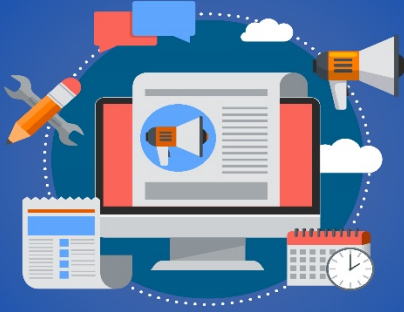


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To Her Belongs All That Is Beautiful

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Abstract:

The article examines the theme of feminine beauty in popular Grimm's fairy tales. Often the female protagonists of most of these tales are young girls who are not just beautiful but also good-natured and 'feminine.' The article gives a brief overview of the development of fairy tales and goes on to explicate how beauty is associated with goodness and suitable rewards, and presented as ideal and desirable. It critically examines the beauty standards propounded in the fairytales that have been read and enjoyed by children across regions and ages. Popular tales thus unknowingly become gendered and sexist scripts that function as literary tools for propagation and consolidation of gender roles, particularly the notion of the feminine beautiful ideal.

Keywords: Beauty, fairy tales, evil, women, rewards, feminine, gender.

To her belongs all that is beautiful, even the very word beauty itself. All that exists to beautify her. The sun shines only to burnish her skin and gild her hair; the wind blows only to whip up the colour in her cheeks; the sea strives to bathe her; flowers die gladly so that her skin may luxuriate in their essence. She is the crown of creation, the masterpiece. The depths of the sea are ransacked for pearl and coral to deck her; the bowels of the earth are laid open that she might wear gold, sapphires, diamonds and rubies. (Germaine Greer)

Who does not enjoy a bed time story or an occasional reading session for the little ones in the house? It might not be wrong to say that at least a handful of the avid readers today had a brief if not a continuing love affair with the tales of Cinderella, Snow White, Rapunzel, Little Red

Riding Hood and so on. Fairy godmothers who can set all things right with the wave of their magical wands, beautiful girls who are made to toil all day by their evil stepmothers, handsome princes who are bold enough to rescue pretty princesses and the happily ever afters linger in our minds long after we have read these tales. How many of us wished that Hansel and Gretel would return home safely or smiled when the prince finally woke up the princess from her years of sleep or danced with joy when Cinderella met her prince charming! Over the years, these stories have carved a stable and secure niche for themselves in the minds of our young ones. Scholars like Jane Yolen and Bruno Bettelheim have approached the fairytales from a functionalist perspective and have elaborated the functions of fairy tales while simultaneously explicating their appeal among children. Bettelheim, in *Uses of Enchantment* (1976), opines, "...of the entire "children's literature" - with rare exceptions - nothing can be as enriching and satisfying to child and adult audiences alike as the folk fairy tale" (qtd. in Edwards 1). Explicating children's interest in fairy tales, A.F Favat identifies animism, belief in magic, morality, causality and egocentricism as the general tendencies in children which create an interest for fairy tales in them (qtd. in Erum 2). Given the immense popularity of fairy tales even in the contemporary times, is it not natural that these tales would have a significant if not a tremendous influence on our tiny tots? If a young girl waits for the fairy godmother or the tooth fairy after having read about it, won't it be just as natural if she wishes to as beautiful as the innocent and charming heroines of our popular tales? Is it just accidental that Rapunzel has long golden hair and flawless white skin or that Snow White is as white as snow? Well these are serious questions to be pondered upon before blindly convincing ourselves that they are mere tales after all. These fairy tales which take place 'once upon a time' in some distant magical land inhabited by rich kings and queens, handsome princes and pretty princesses, kind fairies and evil witches, naughty dwarfs and friendly animals are the dreams of every child. Besides, fairy tales "present a sense of life, a combination of the known and the unknown, the spirit of wonder, a sense of adventure, poetic justice, humour and gratification of a child's craving for sense impression and action" (Erum 2).

Several scholars have attempted to trace and explicate the rise and growth of fairy tales and their continuing popularity. Jack Zipes makes an extensive analysis of the evolution of fairy tales in his scholarly piece titled "The Evolution of Folk and Fairy Tales in Europe and North America." While the oral tradition of storytelling has existed for a long time, the fairy tale is comparatively young and modern in its emergence and development as a literary genre. According to Zipes,

several factors such as “the standardization and categorization of the vernacular languages which gradually became official nation-state languages; the invention of the printing press; the growth of reading publics throughout Europe that began to develop a taste for short narratives of different kinds for their reading pleasure; the conception of new literary genres in the vernacular and their acceptance by the educated elite classes” (9) created a fertile ground for the flowering of fairy tales. Given these appropriate conditions, the fairy tales took birth at the intersection of the tradition of oral storytelling, textualization of the oral ‘wonder tales’ and the knowledge of the writers who wrote them down. Zipes further points out that the first stage for the literary fairy tale involved a kind of class and also gender appropriation. “The voices of the non-literate tellers were submerged, and since women in most cases were not allowed to be scribes, the tales were scripted according to male dictates or fantasies, even though many were told by women” (8). In short, the literary appropriation of the oral wonder tales catered “to the hegemonic interests of males within the upper classes of particular communities and societies in Europe and North America, and to a great extent, this is still true if we examine carefully who dominates the media networks and the culture industry in America” (8).

The early fairy tales, often written in Latin, Middle English, or in some old high form of French, Italian, German or Spanish were not meant for children.

It was not until the 1690s in France that the fairy tale could establish itself as a “legitimate” genre for educated classes. It was during this time that numerous gifted female writers such as Mme D’Aulnoy, Mme D’Auneuil, Mme de Murat, Mlle L’Héritier, Mme de la Force, Mlle Bernard, and others introduced fairy tales into their literary salons and published their works, and their tales, along with those of Charles Perrault, Eustache Le Noble, and Jean de Mailly, initiated a mode or craze that prepared the grounds for the institution of the literary fairy tale as a genre.... the French female writers “baptized” their tales *contes de fées* or fairy tales, and they were the first to designate the tales as such. The designation is not simply based on the fact that there are fairies in all their tales but also on the fact that the seat of power in all their tales – and also in those of Perrault and other male writers of the time – lies with omnipotent women. (Zipes 13).

By the eighteenth century, the fairy tale came to be institutionalized as a genre and by this time one also comes across the rise of the literary fairy tale for children. With children’s literature

acquiring a new momentum, “the genre of the fairy tale assumed a new dimension which now included concerns about how to socialize children and indoctrinate them through literary products that were appropriate for their age, mentality, and morals” (Zipes 15). The Grimm brothers, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, first published their collection of fairy tales in two volumes as *Children’s and Household Tales* in 1812 and 1815. Explaining the origin of these fairy tales, Ruth Michaelis-Jena points out, “The Brothers Grimm... gathered the stories predominantly from German women, the majority of whom were spinners, as a means of preserving the oral traditions of Germany (qtd. in Neikirk 1). For Robert Godwin-Jones, these tales came from old women who would tell them to their grandchildren (qtd. in McNelll). However Zipes opines that “the tales in the first edition were collected not from peasants, as is commonly believed, but mainly from literate people whom the Grimms came to know quite well. Evidence shows that these people often obtained their tales from illiterate or anonymous informants” (“How the Grimm Brothers Saved the Fairy Tale”). The brothers are also said to have used the writings of Charles Perrault’s tales, who adapted early European peasant tales to suit the upper-class of the seventeenth century French society.

However what is now being read and enjoyed as fairy tales for children were never meant to be children’s literature in the first place, though they did deal with children caught in different situations. The brothers believed that the stories they collected were part of the oral tradition of the German people and they wanted to preserve it before the tales were lost forever. The Romantic period also saw a growing fascination to preserve the culture and the efforts of the brothers were regarded as a unique contribution to folklore which in turn inspired folklorists in Europe and Great Britain to gather tales from their oral traditions and to preserve them as part of their cultural heritage. Moreover “what compelled the Grimms to concentrate on old German epics, tales, and literature was a belief that the most natural and pure forms of culture- those which held the community together- were linguistic and based in history” (Zipes, “How the Grimm Brothers Saved the Fairy Tale”). Initially the brothers considered themselves as chroniclers of these tales and kept their stories faithful to the original ones. However with seven editions of the work being published between 1812 and 1857 and with their rising popularity and use as children’s stories, the bothers revised, enlarged and ‘doctored’ the stories, often erasing the dark elements and making them appear more child-friendly. With the tales continually honed and improved upon “so that they would resonate with a growing literary public”, the Grimm’s fairy tales became “second in popularity only to the Bible in German-speaking lands [and] by the twentieth century, they would

become the most famous collection of folk and fairy tales in the western world” (Zipes, “How the Grimm Brothers Saved the Fairy Tale”).

The world of Grimm’s fairy tales abounds in beautiful maidens, wicked stepmothers, evil witches and kind fairies. Women, be it jealous stepmothers, evil witches, kind queens or pretty maidens, occupy a distinct position in these tales and they are also perhaps the first characters who come to our mind when we think of fairy tales. The presence of a beautiful girl, mostly a damsel-in-distress, seems to be an integral part of several popular fairy tales and the concept of feminine beauty is an aspect that cannot be overlooked in most of these tales. The beautiful and innocent protagonists of “Ashputtel”, “Jorinda and Jorindel”, “Briar Rose” and “Rapunzel” are some of the memorable characters of our dearest fairy tales. Descriptions of beauty in most of these fairy tales are rather interesting in the sense that they most often rely on superlatives. The socially and culturally constructed notion of feminine beauty and attractiveness as an asset to women, a quality to be desired which all women should strive to attain is unknowingly emanated from these tales. Erum opines that fairy tales were probably the first recorded documents to propound the idea that beautiful ladies have a higher chance to attain happiness in life (4). One definitely cannot miss the fact that most of Grimm brothers’ heroines are exceptionally beautiful young girls, and kings and princes are left spellbound by their looks. The link between beauty and the rewards these girls receive in their life is another factor to be considered in this context.

Beauty seems to be one of most, if not the defining common trait, of most primary female characters who represent goodness in the Grimm’s fairy tales. Jorinda in “Jorinda and Jorindel” is described as “prettier than all the pretty girls that ever were seen before” (Grimm 29). In “Briar Rose”, the king and the queen are blessed with a baby girl who is “so very beautiful that the king could not cease looking on it for joy” (41). The twelve princesses of the king and queen in “The Twelve Dancing Princesses” are all beautiful and so is the princess in “The Goose-girl”. Rapunzel is described as “the most beautiful child under the sun” (84) with “magnificent long hair, fine as spun gold” (84) and a charming and sweet voice. The miller’s daughter in “The Robber Bridegroom” is not just clever but also beautiful. When she visits her bridegroom’s house, a bird in a cage describes her as “young maiden fair” (118). The maiden who is the prince’s companion (and later wife) in “The Pink” is described as “more beautiful than any painter could have painted her” (158). And of course who can forget the beautiful Ashputtel who astonishes everyone and enchants the prince with her stunning looks. Her beauty, rich clothes and jewels make the people

at the party speechless and the prince dances with none but her. Ashputtel leaves behind a golden slipper after rushing home on the third day of the ball and the prince declares that he will marry the girl whose foot fits the slipper. When Ashputtel's elder sister tries it on, it turns out to be too small for her and as per the advice of her mother, she cuts off her toe, squeezes herself into the slipper and marries the prince. When the prince realizes that he has been fooled, he brings her back home. When the younger one attempts wearing the shoe, her heels prove to be too big for it and her foot bleeds as her mother squeezes her foot into it. According to Bettelheim, "to have such big feet that they don't fit the slipper makes the stepsisters more masculine than Cinderella - therefore less desirable" (qtd. in Erum 5) and by one cutting off her toe and the other by squeezing her big heel into the small shoe, both attempt to match the social codes of feminine beauty, characterized by small feet in this context.

The obsession with feminine beauty in the Grimm's fairy tales does not stop with the mere presence of pretty girls whose beauty dazzles and entralls all. Beauty, in most cases, is also associated with goodness, intelligence and an industrious nature. "Beauty is highly revered in fairy tales being associated with intelligence, ability, kindness, worthiness and morality and this can be well perceived from the Grimms fairy tales" (Nanda 248). For instance, Ashputtel in the eponymous tale is good and kind to all. Similarly Lily, who is the prettiest of the merchant's three daughters in "Lily and the Lion" is not just pretty and loving, but also fearless and strong-willed. She boldly goes to visit the lion in order to keep her father's word and honour (without knowing the lion's identity as an enchanted prince). Finally after years of ordeals and trials, when Lily and the prince return home, they find their child grown up "comely and fair" (Grimm 219). While beauty is accompanied by other qualities such as strength, goodness of heart, kindness etc, a lack of beauty is similarly associated with a lack of desirable qualities or with the presence of negative qualities. Beauty or the lack of it is therefore used a symbol of each character's capacity (Hanafy 1), though there are exceptions to it. For instance, the enchanted and cunning princess who tries to separate the prince (who becomes a lion during the day time) from his beautiful wife in "Lily and the Lion" initially appears in the form of a dragon. Lori Baker-Sperry and Liz Grauerholz in their article titled "The Pervasiveness and Persistence of the Feminine Beauty Ideal in Children's Fairy Tales" point out, "31 percent of all stories associate beauty with goodness and 17 percent associate ugliness with evil personified in the semblance of witches, wicked stepmothers and conniving queens. At the end, while beauty is always rewarded, lack of beauty is punished" (qtd. in Adak).

Further, by examining 168 Grimm's fairy tales, Grauerholz and Baker-Sperry also argue that "beauty or ugliness is referred to in 94 percent of the Grimm's fairy tales, with evil characters often being described as ugly (qtd. in Hanafy 1).

The link between beauty and other desirable qualities and ugliness and non-desirable qualities is best reflected in "Mother Hollie." Among the two daughters of the old widow, the beautiful (step) daughter is hardworking while the other one is not only lazy but also ugly. Perhaps making the less beautiful one more industrious than the pretty stepdaughter would have been a welcome change in the typical pattern and it might also have done some justice to her. Moreover the tale might then have inspired kids by teaching them that it is not just the external appearance that matters. Although the stepdaughter is indeed rewarded for hard work, the fact that she is beautiful also lingers in the readers' mind. Hence by making a dichotomy between beauty and ugliness, beauty seems to be accompanied by all the other favorable and desirable qualities. One also cannot forget that wicked stepmothers, witches and other such characters are not usually associated with extreme beauty.

Another factor to be considered while analyzing the theme of female beauty in Grimm's fairy tales is that the beautiful protagonists in most of these tales are not just pretty good-at-heart damsels with a hardworking nature, they also carry out their feminine gender roles well. Beauty thus goes hand-in-hand with 'feminine' qualities and a fulfilment of 'feminine' roles. Tazeen Erum in her article titled "The History of Gender Ideology in Brothers Grimm's Fairy Tales" explains, "the performance of one's role according to the gender ideology promises fulfillment of hope and dreams in the form of rewards for the heroines. The fabric of society at the time when Brothers Grimm wrote their tales demanded reinforcement of patriarchal concepts. Therefore, a good female in the fairy tales is one who possesses "feminine" qualities (3). She further points out that the popular female protagonists in these stories fulfill all the expected feminine roles - of being a good girl, good wife and a good mother. They are submissive, sacrificing, obedient and adept in carrying out the domestic chores. In a society which has set down well-defined gender roles for men and women, the pretty heroines of the Grimm brothers perform their gender roles extremely well and without complaints. They seem to be content and choose to remain passive and silent till a handsome prince comes by to rescue them. While Briar Rose waits literally to be woken up by the prince's kiss, others like Ashputtel and Rapunzel wait to be 'discovered' by their saviour- male

figure. Even when Ashputtel is forced to do all the household chores by her stepmother and sisters, she never complains to her father or nurses any evil thoughts against them. “She was forced to do hard work; to rise early before daylight, to bring the water, to make the fire, to cook, and to wash” (169) and she duly carries out all the duties assigned to her. Hence “Brother Grimm’s females are “passive, silent, industrious, and rewarded with riches and a man to support them, while male models [are] destined to seek out adventure and take as their reward passive, silent, industrious females” (Jarvis). Ultimately, the patient, pretty and hardworking girls are rewarded, most often in the form of love or marriage.

Since beauty is often associated with goodness and other desirable qualities, it is no wonder that the beautiful ones in these tales are rewarded well. Consequently, the rewards associated with beauty make the women in the fairy tales yearn for good looks. Physical attractiveness, in a way, becomes one of the most desirable qualities that women must strive to achieve. According to Marcia Lieberman, the system of rewards in fairy tales equates to three factors – “being beautiful, being chosen, and getting rich” (qtd. in Erum 6). Karen Rowe adopts a similar stand when she explains that fairy tales “prescribe restrictive social roles for women and perpetuate ‘alluring fantasies’ of punishment and reward: passivity, beauty, and helplessness lead to marriage, conferring wealth and status, whereas self-aware, ‘aggressive’, and powerful women experience social censure and are either ostracized or killed” (qtd. in Erum 12). Most often the reward for the beautiful ladies comes in the form of their marriage with wealthy and handsome men, often princes. For instance, Briar Rose who sleeps for a hundred years is rescued by a prince who is so mesmerized by her beauty that “he could not take his eyes off her” (Grimm 43). In “The Queen Bee” the third son of the king marries the “youngest and the best of the princesses” (Grimm 184). Similarly Ashputtel and Rapunzel are all married by princes who are immediately attracted to their beauty. As Wolf remarks, “the quality called “beauty” objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it” (12).

Fairy tales, which have over the years become an integral part of our literary treasures, offer us a magical wonderland where evil curses are delivered by kisses and princes come on horsebacks searching for their brides and where the sun and the moon and animals help the good-hearted girls. Far from being only a literary genre, fairy tales have almost become a “cultural institution” (Zipes, “Changing Function of Fairy Tale”). With beautifully illustrated texts, ‘revised’ and rewritten tales which offer multiple perspectives, animation series, films etc, fairy

tales have constantly been revised, adapted and transformed to suit changing literary tastes. However some of the dominant themes such as the pretty damsel- in- distress waiting for her prince charming continue to remain popular and still fascinate and enchant many. While some of the tales like “Lily and the Lion” contain strong women protagonists who are not just pretty but also fearless, the most popular ones such as “Rapunzel”, “Ashputtel” and “Briar Rose” all stress on female beauty. “I think the message that’s given to girls is that beauty is one of the most important traits for females in our society,” says sociologist Liz Grauerholz, “Boys don’t get the message as much that it’s so important to be handsome” (qtd. in Hanafy 1). Even in day-to-day life, despite advancements in feminism and the female race having made their mark in almost every field of life, women still strive not just to be beautiful but to match the social image of the ideal feminine beauty. Of course it depends on the individual choice of a girl, but the social and cultural pressures to attain unrealistic beauty standards cannot be ignored. Naomi Wolf in her highly acclaimed feminist treatise *The Beauty Myth* (1990) argues that we “are in the midst of a violent backlash against feminism that uses images of female beauty as a political weapon against women’s advancement: the beauty myth.... As women released themselves from the feminine mystique of domesticity, the beauty myth took over its lost ground....” (10). She further explains:

There is no legitimate historical or biological justification for the beauty myth; what it is doing to women today is a result of nothing more exalted than the need of today’s power structure, economy, and culture to mount a counteroffensive against women. If the beauty myth is not based on evolution, sex, gender, aesthetics, or God, on what is it based? It claims to be about intimacy and sex and life, a celebration of women....The beauty myth is not about women at all. It is about men’s institutions and institutional power. (13)

When viewed through this lens, the fairy tales may appear all innocent but they seem to operate on the policy of ‘catch them young’. This reminds one of Mary Wollstonecraft who in her *A Vindication Of the Rights Of Women* (1792) remarked, “Taught from infancy that beauty is woman’s sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison” (qtd. in Greer 63). When we stress on the beauty of Rapunzels and Briar Roses, the beauty myth unconsciously makes its way into the minds of young girls. But this does not mean that fairy tales ought to be dismissed as patriarchal or be taken away from our kids’ bookshelves. Let’s relish the beauty of the tales and savour their magic, but let’s not forget to make our kids see

the other side of it. Let's not give them the wrong notion that passivity makes a girl desirable or beauty makes her complete. Perhaps we can remind the kids that the female protagonists of Grimm's fairy tales are not just obedient damsels-in-distress but also bold and strong such as Lily ("Lily and the Lion") and the bride in "The Twelve Huntsmen". The wise women of folktales or the fairy godmothers of fairytales or the clever animals in Aesop's fables all occupy a special place in the hearts of our little ones. However let's not poison their minds with beauty queens and tender princesses who win by their beauty, wait to be kissed by the stranger prince and remain passive throughout. On the other hand, as Nikita Gill puts it rightly,

The fairytales we should tell
our daughters should be about strong women with real flaws
and incredible qualities.

Let's raise girls who don't just wait to be rescued,
but take destiny in their own hands
and charge to battle dragons and their enemies.

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