

# Women in fairy tales

Sociology, Identity



Women are prominent figures in the narrative of fairy tales. The main characters of fairy tales, perhaps because females originally told them, are mostly women – both protagonists and antagonists. These characters have several recurring characteristics and attributes.

In the Brothers Grimm's fairy tales, the protagonist, usually a young, virtuous, and beautiful girl, in many instances achieves a 'happy ending' by being saved and marrying a handsome and powerful prince. This relates to the time period these stories were written, because in 19th century German culture, when a young woman marries, she is expected to leave her family to be with her husband – this is a lesson taught from the fairy tales. These tales show that marrying and leaving your home for your husband is something all women must do. They then, however, become dependent on a man, thus losing personal power.

Appearance was very important for women in the early 1800s because they had very few career options and were expected to marry. Arranged marriages were quite common, men would choose women as their wives based on their appearance and beauty. A common trait in female protagonists is their beauty, and there is often a clear link between beauty and goodness and between ugliness and evil in Grimm's fairy tales. In the fairy tale, 'Cinderella', Cinderella is described as "always pious and good" while her evil stepsisters "at heart were black and ugly". Beauty, however, even though rewarding, can also be dangerous. There are also instances where beauty can be linked with jealousy among female characters, a clear example in 'Snow-White and the Seven Dwarfs'; where Snow-White's evil stepmother went through multiple attempts in order to murder her own

stepdaughter. This reveals to readers, and teaches young children, the significance of beauty, where people will go to extreme lengths in order to maintain or acquire it.

Due to the commonality of arranged marriages in the time period of the Brothers Grimm, male characters are sometimes portrayed as animals or bestial figures. Expressed by Maria Tatar in her critical essay entitled, “ Beauties vs. Beasts in the Grimms’ Nursery and Household Tales”, men in fairy tales sometimes take the form of “ animal-grooms who make life unpleasant for many a female protagonist... but these beasts invariably turn out to be handsome young princes in disguise and generally prove to be perfect gentlemen”. Due to the fact that arranged marriages were highly common, young women entering into arranged marriages often knew nothing of their future spouse, and thus were usually frightened. By presenting male characters as beast-like figures turning into good princes, the Grimm Brothers are telling young women that their future spouses will eventually turn into a good and chivalrous man.

The fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm tell of marriage being the ultimate goal for young women. Therefore, a common trait that is idealized in female protagonists would be passivity – so young women would develop unquestioning loyalty towards their husbands’ demands. ‘ Snow-White and the Seven Dwarfs’ shows how passivity is idealized. Snow-White fulfills all the duties given to her by the dwarves, to “ cook, and wash, and make the beds, and sew and knit...” and in the end she acquires a happy ending, being saved by and wed to a Prince – not making any of her own decisions

throughout the tale or taking any independent action against her evil stepmother. The only apparent fault that Snow White possessed was the trait of curiosity, warning women of “ the hazards of curiosity, a trait that costs dearly and brings with it regrets”.

Another idealized trait in female protagonists is obedience. Obedience was sought after in both women and children amongst the bourgeois, the middle class, which is the majority of the German society. Thus, the use of this trait in fairy tales reflects the social values of German society. Female disobedience results in undesirable consequences. In the tale, ‘ Little Red Riding Hood’, the female protagonist disobeyed her mother’s orders, and there were severe consequences. The readers of these fairy tales are led to believe that said consequences were appropriate because she had been disobedient, teaching children the dire punishments of disobedience.

However, Little Red Riding Hood’s other traits include bravery, seeing as she was confident and fearless in travelling through the forest alone – seen as a risky trait in women.

Obedience, even though expected in characters both male and female, is gender specific. In fairy tales, men are not expected to be as obedient as women. In Ruth Bottigheimer’s study on male and female obedience, tales are more lenient towards male disobedience – this is due to the fact that when Wilhelm Grimm edited the new editions of Grimm’s fairy tales, in order to appeal more to the German public, he made male disobedience “ into an unwitting act which is rewarded”. Men who disobey good authoritative

figures are portrayed as cunning, and men who disobey bad authoritative figures are then rewarded for their quick thinking.

Silence is also an important trait in female protagonists, where they are portrayed as vulnerable. According to Maria Warner, an acknowledged scholar on fairy tales and its characters, the tales were rewritten in order to make women “ more polite, well-spoken, or even silent”. This could again correlate to the time period these stories were told. Vulnerability may have made women more appealing as candidates for marriage to men because they are easier to control. Men were dominant figures and women were expected to concur, thus being passive, self-sacrificing, and submissive. In the time period of the Brothers Grimm, “ silence could be a stratagem of survival for women”, seeing as if a women spoke out against a male figure, she faced possibilities of danger – such as abuse or abandonment. Fairy tales may portray female protagonists with the trait of silence in order to teach them how to stay safe and survive. The trait of silence is also more present in women than men. Men in fairy tales speak more than females, and can be traced back again to the social norms or conventions during the time period of the Grimm Brothers.

Female antagonists are usually portrayed as the opposite of the ideal female protagonist; therefore ambitious, with strong traits such as determination to change the situation they are in to benefit themselves; however with traits considered negative, such as greed, jealousy, or vanity. Female antagonists in fairy tales outnumber both animal-like villains and male antagonists. They are commonly witches or evil stepmothers, again relating to the Brothers

Grimm's aim of appealing to the German society by editing the tales, such as making them less cruel or unpleasant, because they did not want anyone, especially children, believing that their own mother could do evil things to them. This results in the correlation between empowered female figures and evil in fairy tales, teaching children that female empowerment leads to tragic consequences and misfortune.