Femininity in fairy tales

Literature

Femininity in Fairy Tales Women in the 21st century are seeking cultural images, which could define their identity. Partly it is the reason of disorientation and deep insecurity in modern women caused by the centuries of men oriented culture. It starts from such global issue as religion—a Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung, for example, argued that women have no representation in the Christian image of God—and continues into fairy tales, where images of women were mostly created my men. Feminine images in fairy tales in some manner complement the lack of these images in the Christianity. They are the product of creative fantasies of the rural and less educated layers of the society, even written down by the researchers, like the Brothers Grimm or writers like Charles Perrault. Their particular characteristic is being naive and being the product of collective creativity. That is why they contain an important archetypal material. It should be noted as well, that until about the seventeenth century, the audience for fairy tales was mostly the adult population. Taking a more thorough look at the feminine archetypal models of behavior in fairy tales will discover the problem that the feminine images in fairy tales were formed and designed by men, and in most of the fairy tales they do not embody a woman's idea of femininity. It can be definitely seen in such fairy tales as The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood and Rapunzel. But there are also fairy tales that have another point of view, like Blue Beard. However, the majority of the narratives in the fairy tales emphasize how women's desires must be controlled, and teach the little girls how to behave themselves in conformity with prevailing representations of an " ideal" femininity. For example, most of fairy tales that survived into the 21st century deal with the plot about a young, beautiful princess. As a matter of fact such idea supports the

message to children that physical attractiveness is an imperative asset women should aim to achieve a decent existence. In these fairy tales marriage is associated with becoming rich. Good, poor, and attractive girls always become rich by getting married with some " Prince Charming", but not simply handsome, good and poor men. According to this message, the social status of the girl means practically nothing, what really matters is that she should be a good girl but also beautiful. Physical appearance is above other merits. In her article " Some Day My Prince Will Come": Female Acculturation Through the Fairy Tale, Professor Marcia R. Lieberman described how fairy tales have an effect on gender. According to her, attractive women get rewarded just for being attractive: " good, poor, and pretty girls always win rich and handsome princes" (Lieberman 325). In most of the tales women are chosen exclusively on their appearance. In the tale Sleeping Beauty it is expressed even in the name. A common expression spoken by parents in modern world to their daughters is something like " you are a little princess". Therefore, children today grow up with such metaphors that implicitly motivate them to follow a particular ideal – to grow up as a beautiful, open-minded, youthful, innocent, etc. princess. It is also interesting, how a woman's role was perceived in the fairy tales. As a matter of fact, historically princesses had a lot of responsibilities in foreign and domestic politics for their countries. But in the fairytales like the Sleeping Beauty and Rapunzel this princesses are never given the merit of, for example, learning other languages easily, or erudition, or some weight in the political life. They don't even possess a sense of humor. Women who demonstrate " unwomanly" characteristics, such as decisiveness, determination, and boldness, are described often as weak and tentative,

because their endeavors are often insignificant in comparison to what the male protagonist did. Moreover, sometimes such women become a representation of evil. An intelligent woman possessing great power is the most evil character in Sleeping Beauty. She has all " male" characteristics: cruelness and cunning. And what is important – she is active. If we consider the above mentioned ideas, the Brothers Grimm versions of folk tales are mostly sexist, created for the patriarchal society of the 19th century. For example, Rapunzel is exiled to the desert by a witch until she is found by the prince. Unlike the evil witch, who is an active character, Rapunzel never does anything to change her position. She is just sitting and waiting for the prince, who will do the entire job. It isn't her story, but the story of the prince struggling to get her. Or, in other words, it's her story to the degree that she is the center of the prince's universe, up in a tower, a focus of affection and his main goal is to rescue her. On this background Bluebeard may seem a more feminist tale. The princess here is free to do whatever she wants, except opening one door. In the tale her curiosity wins and inspired by her sisters, she opens the prohibited door and finds the blood and dissected corpses of Bluebeard's previous wives. Besides a sadistic, wife-beating husband, who manifests the man, who is emotionally abusive, this tale has another important message. The woman in it may be a naive type, but she is not passive and obedient. Her desire is to know. And by her disobedience she survives later. She starts to behave like men do. She passes some turning point: when she sees, she knows. And again: by such particular " male" characteristic as bluffing she is saved. Still, the Bluebeard is one of rare examples of " active" female characters. Other tales remain male-oriented and sexist. References Lieberman, M. R. " Some Day My Prince Will

Come": Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale, College English, vol. 34, No. 3 (Dec., 1972), pp. 383-395.