

There is a long history of storytelling through puppetry in Germany and Austria, often depicting traditional folktales that provide metaphors for and commentary on the morals of society. My research focused on the female protagonist in these stories—what it means to be female in those tales, and what the genre teaches impressionable adolescents about femininity.

Luckily, my mother, *meine mutter*, studied in Germany and shared the language and culture with me, strengthening ties with my German heritage. I'm so thankful to my mother for showing me my culture. I plan on raising my children with the influence of Germany as well. I hope to read my children the classic Brothers Grimms' fairytales as part of the treasured tradition of oral storytelling.

Eulala



nce upon a time, mythology was born because people needed a way to explain what they could not understand. They came up with fanciful explanations like elves, faeries, and magic to justify phenomenon they could not comprehend. Earthquakes were believed to be the twitches of the great frog that the earth rested on, and thunderstorms were known to be the wrath of the gods. As time progressed and scientific discoveries were made, these stories turned from theory to folklore, and became exaggerated tales, instead of believe. These stories were passed down from generation to generation.

There are many definitions of folklore but the most accurate is: 'Folklore is the traditional art, literature, knowledge, and practice that is disseminated largely through oral communication and behavioral example.' Some say it must be passed on through oral communication, but culture is simply ritual and tradition; the things we learn from our parents and ancestors.

Even though they are not taken literally anymore, fairy tales have been beloved by children and adults alike for centuries and not only serve as an escape from the mundane and distinctly non-magic world but more importantly as a window into the past. Folktales are possibly the most effective way to create a portrait of a time period. Simply ask yourself what the people in that time were teaching their kids and there you have the society's morals. Feminist author Clarissa Estes believes that fairy tales "are embedded with instructions which guide us on the complexities of life. Stories enable us to understand the need for and the ways to raise a submerged archetype." Fairy tales allow us to learn morals in an easy to understand, comprehensive way.

My own roots are in German culture and while I love it and am proud to belong to it, the messages being given to our daughters through German folklore need to be examined before we perpetrate the misogynistic themes they possess. Fairy tales have morphed from an entertaining pastime to a systematic way to maintain gender inequality because the tales do not evolve with the culture to represent renewed feminist morals.

Gutmenschen (Goody two shoes)

The most well known German tales are the Brothers Grimm's 'Kinder-und Hausmarchen' or 'the Household Tales,' a series of old German folklore written by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. The two legendary brothers did not dream up these fantastic tales, however. Instead, they collected the stories from the local women in their hometown of Kassel, Germany and put them on paper. The women had learned these and had been recounting the narratives to generations of children. The women who told these stories had strong influence on the characters, and this is clear in the fact that most of the characters are female. The Brothers Grimm allowed these stories to continue from the mouths of these women to the page, and preserved their tales for centuries. As a child, reading these tales and watching the Disney renditions, the first theme I began to internalize was a standard for young girls to be submissive and meek. The 'good female' is typically obedient and passive, waiting for the prince to come and swoop her out of the gutter. I was constantly watching young curious girls being told they could not go where they wanted, or follow their hearts's desires.

The most pertinent example is in the Little Mermaid: Ariel was never allowed above the surface and when she rebelled and went anyway, hardship followed. Just before she died, Cinderella's mother says to her: "...child. be good and nious. and then the good lord will

Rapunzel too was never allowed out of her tower until adulthood and was eventually rescued...by a prince. Sleeping Beauty was trapped in a state of eternal sleep and was awoken...by a prince.

Young girls are told to deny their heart's desires and stick to the trodden path, never making their own way or being in charge of their own destinies. This is manifested most clearly with Little Red Riding Hood who is told never to stray from the path that leads to her Grandmother's house. She is young, innocent, and curious and when she sees some flowers a little way off the path she goes to collect them. She is then stalked by a wolf who represents a sexual predator who eats her. (The wolf is said to represent unrestrained sexual desire and experimentation.) Later, after being rescued by another male figure, the woodcutter, she realizes she was being 'silly and childlike' and kills the wolf by filling his stomach with stones, filling the place that she once resided, perhaps representing the guilt he now must bear while symbolically killing the animal like curiosity and desire within herself. She then adheres to the instructions given by her elders which is the way of safety and salvation. To suggest to a child that stopping to smell the flowers may mean they come to harm or die is grotesque! We cannot make the young reader feel Little Red is responsible for the wolf's actions, or that they



wouldn't have happened if she had just listened to her mother and stayed on the path. This is perpetrating rape culture and is victim blaming. This is not responsible or smart parenting! This also further reinforces the message that prescribing to the standard gender roles will lead to reward and happy endings. Contrasting this, is the necessity to have male protagonists go on long outlandish adventures, like Jack climbing the beanstalk into the sky to battle giants or Pinocchio going into the belly of a whale in a struggle for survival. A common theme is that the girls never go anywhere new unless a boy is involved and the boy is usually involved because he is sexually intrigued by her which alludes to two opinions: sexuality and exploration are going to lead to hardship, and a woman's appropriately docile and cooperative demeanor, especially when complemented with her physical beauty, is her most important asset.

Schönheit. (Beauty)

Beauty is another ridiculous standard to which young girls are held. In almost every story, the beauty of the female protagonist is an essential part of her 'happily ever after.' It is not too hard to conclude what a character's personality based on the description of their appearance. The ideal beauty in most tales is straight, skinny, white, and often blonde. If the protagonist is attractive then she is probably obedient, respectful, and passive. This is seen in Cinderella, Snow White, Briar Rose, and many more.



The only exception is the rare, beautiful girl that is proud and arrogant, though her story is her journey to humility so that she may achieve the ultimate accumulation, marriage. Beauty is not only crucial to her success but also to the success of the story. A study from 1857 found a concerning correlation between the amount of times a book was reproduced and the amount of times the physical beauty of the female lead was mentioned (Baker, 2003). This shows that as wrong as it may be, a beautiful protagonist is what the people want. In contrast, women that are ugly are usually a source of suspicion and often exhibit traits that threaten the 'feminine ideal.' They are strong, determined, and hardly ever need a man. If the good heroine is beautiful, then the evil character nearly always displays the opposite physical attributes. The ugly stepsisters in Cinderella are a pertinent

example of how unattractive women are typically evil and cruel and how they treat their attractive counterparts. In the world of Grimm's then, physical beauty places the protagonist in danger, with their appearance becoming yet another path to victimhood. The other ridiculous and harmful message perpetrated by these themes is that beauty is a hierarchy and that in the struggle to get to the top women would turn against one another. The stepsisters mutilate Cinderella's dress that she made for the festival and later mutilate their feet in an attempt to fit the slipper. These actions suggest that women will stop at nothing to undermine one another in order to gain social and romantic status. In Snow White, the evil stepmother spends the entire span of her existence trying to kill her stepdaughter because the younger girl is more beautiful than her... according to a magical mirror. She is the second fairest in the land and she can think of nothing else but murdering to regain her place at the top of the list. These occurrences send the message to young girls that they cannot trust each other, and destroys inter-female empowerment.

Sexualität und Kraft. (Sexuality and Power.)

The Grimms addressed sex through a very christian-influenced lens. Nearly every story with a female protagonist begins with her lonely and distraught, who is then swept off by a prince to get married. She is always a virgin when she is married and there is a lot of importance put on this particular social construct. This is the basic cookie-cutter format with slight variations on the way it happens. It is unclear if the prince is sexually experienced, though he is usually a great deal older than she is and likely more knowledgeable on such subjects. In Snow White, a harmonious sexual relationship is attained through escaping her own childlike ways. (Though keep in mind she is fourteen!) Meaning her original conflict is with her stepmother, and her father was apparently never present. She achieves emotional maturity from the seven male figures around her, who she must take care of almost like children. This leads to her sexual maturing with the Prince (another male figure). The harmony in Grimm's Sleeping Beauty happens a little differently. Briar Rose is fifteen, not

endure a long period of comatose and inactivity before she can achieve marriage or sex. The comatose state is induced by her inability to control her self and once again is saved by a prince.



Little red riding hood is a peculiar example because she breaks the mold by being excited by danger and taking risks. She was never afraid of the wolf, and immediately upon meeting him, she tells him her grandmothers exact address. Some suggest that this is Little Red's subconscious desire to sleep with the wolf, and let go of the tight-laced rules that surround her in society. She learns her lesson in the end and says "As long as I live, I will never by myself leave the path, to run into the wood, when my mother has forbidden me to do so." There is an odd correlation between sexuality and power that is prevalent in many, many fairytales. Cinderella's Fairy Godmother and Briar Rose's three fairies, are examples of this: they seem to take great care of the young motherless girls for no apparent reason other than the girls earned it by being good. These mother-types, (who are filling in for all the biological mothers who never seem to be alive) are typically short, older, maternal, and asexual. The other type of powerful woman is the evil sorceress: tall, pointy-nosed, arched-eyebrowed, single women. They are typically glamorous, perhaps even beautiful, but always evil looking, never kind. Their eyes are cold and their jaws set and they often barely look human. They are the only example of a body confident female the young protagonists have yet the evil women never have relationships with men (or women). This suggests to the young reader that there is a connection between empowered female sexuality and evil.

Why is it that in order to have power and sexuality you must be evil? This is dreadfully confusing to young girls, as they are told to repress sexual desire, yet maintain their beauty as it is their most crucial feature, but certainly once they attract a man with their beauty that is where it ends. Once a character becomes a mother, that is where their sensuality dies... that is assuming they aren't already dead.

Perhaps the most interesting character of the older women category is that of Ursula, the Sea Witch from The Little Mermaid. Because Ariel's father is the one restricting her, caught up in old fashion ideas, Ursula acts as the fairy godmother, who is willing to grant the young girl what she wants: a chance to roam out of water for a day. Ursula fulfills both of the physical archetypes: She is not attractive, but she is very glamorous, her makeup and facial features align with the pointy evil queen aesthetic, yet her body type is that of a kindly old mother... at least until her tentacles. In many other stories, particularly Snow White and Sleeping Beauty, the witch uses her power to transform hers beauty to ugliness to influence



If these young girls' mothers were alive, they could guide them and set an example for healthy relationships, productive questioning, and safe sexuality. The mothers are absent so that the girls don't know right from wrong yet and can then learn the lessons in the story, thus teaching the young reader the same lesson along the way.

Feminismus und Hausmärchen (Feminism and Household Tales.)

In the 1980's, many women raised awareness regarding issues of gender equality, and thus successfully gained many rights. Women gained many more educational opportunities leading to increased employment options. Women also secured more control on their reproductive health (though this battle continues), and thus are much more prominent in the workplace.

Oddly, during this time, female protagonists if anything became more appearance oriented and the perceived importance of the female allure had increased greatly. New fairy tales were written or popularized that involved a strong willed independent woman, however the pretty, straight, skinny, white ideal was still very much intact. The new 'empowering' message is that women can do anything they set their minds to!... As long as they are attractive.

Gender roles are less prominent now, and sexuality is much more outwardly embraced, but the beauty standard won't budge, keeping women stuck in an artificial value system. Physical allure remains a powerful hierarchy system and hence undermines the non-aesthetic based achievements of other women. Even today with movies like Frozen, while Elsa didn't need a man, she was not the shining beacon of a stable independent single woman I had hoped she would be. The Disney movie Brave was a superb example of an independent, capable girl who truly did not need a boy to save her in any way. She had a powerful relationship with her mother, and the movie focused more on family bonds than romantic ones. I would like to see in our next generation many more stories of powerful, not conventionally attractive women in fantasy.

Und sie lebten glücklich miteinander bis ans Ende ihrer Tage... Recht? (And they lived happily together until the end of their days...right?)

'Happily Ever After' is unfortunately a complete and total myth that is no more real than magic spells or dragons. From a very young age, girls are programmed to think of their wedding day as their finest moment, complete with her own white princess gown. There's nothing wrong with having this dream, the problem is that it is being presented as a goal to be achieved rather than one option out of many. To suggest that marriage is of paramount importance in being happy is not only silly, but unrealistic. With marriage rates down and nearly half of all marriages ending in divorce, it's hard to imagine that we are still teaching our kids that this lifelong partner dream is feasible.

Further, these stories portray marriages as a magical remedy for all relationship problems, as if the whole thing is one big honeymoon. No marriage is perfect and a relationship without

**Abschluss.
(Conclusion.)**

So what can we write into the next generation of stories that will give our children a realistic idea of what to expect on their journey through life? It probably doesn't involve handsome prince or a diamond ring.

We can encourage them to explore and that while it would behoove them to take advice, rebellion is not an intrinsically evil thing, they don't need to be good all the time. We need to teach our daughters that she does not need to conform to silly standards of beauty and that her appearance does not affect what she is capable of. She does not need to be attractive to be taken seriously and success will not come from her face but from her mind and certainly will not come from a prince. They must know that women can be trusted! The



bonds between women are priceless and they will come to her aid if need be. Marriage is not the most important thing in the world, and it is not a magical spell to make your relationship perfect. Most importantly, they didn't fail anything if marriage turns out it is not for them. Lets turn the conversation from the dream wedding to how rewarding it is to maintain fulfilling relationships with others. Let them know that the best predictor of satisfaction is not the band around their finger but the amount of time spent with friends and family.

We must show women that they are more than this corrupted way these tales portray them. Their worth does not lie in purity, their beauty, partners, or marriage, much less royal status, it lies within them - and their own values and decisions. I want to see stories that will teach our daughters that.

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