

Film Studies

Critical Analysis Essay

**The Female Figure
in Disney's Fairytale**

Adaptations:

"Snow White" and "Cinderella"

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Disney's fairytale adaptations are often criticized for their negative, stereotypical, portrayal of female characters. The female heroine in all of Disney's "Cinderella," "Snow White," and "Sleeping Beauty," to name but a few, have neither personality nor substance. They are incapable of standing up to evil or defending themselves. Characterized by supposedly unparalleled beauty, all that any of these characters seem capable of is suffering in silence and, it is because of that, that they are finally given the ultimate reward: salvation through a handsome prince. Even though some, such as Pollitt (1995), have assumed that Disney is not to be faulted since all it did was adapt popular fairytales to the screen, this is not true. An analysis of "Cinderella," as an example, indicates a tremendous difference between gender representation in the Disney film versus the fairytale itself, whereby women are portrayed as proactive and strong characters in the latter and weak and passive in the former.

Not all agree with the claim that traditional fairytales such as "Cinderella" positively portray females. Pollitt (1995, p. 479) maintains that it is virtually impossible to come across a fairytale in which women are portrayed as "active, brave and determined." Instead, in the world of fairytales, Pollitt (1995, p. 479) maintains that females "blend seamlessly into the animated cereal commercials." Indeed, these remarks are perfectly applicable to the Disney film versions of "Cinderella," "Snow White," and "Sleeping Beauty," among others. In none of these movies do the female characters commit themselves to any action or even make an attempt at defending themselves. Cinderella's single act of rebellion was to go to the ball without her stepmother's knowledge but with her fairy-godmother's permission and protection. This act is never repeated. In the shoe-fitting scene, she hangs back and does not come forward until she is pressed to by Palace officials. This is the ultimate in passivity since she knew that were she just to step forward, her entire life would change. She does not, however, and this in itself, evidences the

fact that the course and direction of her life are shaped by others and not by herself. Consequently, within the context of Disney's film versions of popular fairytales as "Cinderella," one can safely assert the prevalence of negative gender stereotypes.

The negative gender stereotypes which audiences can detect in Disney's "Cinderella" were not imposed upon the movie by the fairytale itself, since, in none of its versions are females depicted in this weak, passive and inactive manner. In different versions of the "Cinderella" story, the male character does not make any impression at all, and is only reacts to the actions of the female characters. In the Grimm version, the action of the plot is shaped by the step sisters' determination that Cinderella does not go to the ball, and Cinderella's determination to go. She defies her stepsister when she does not perform the tasks they set for her but has the magic pigeons do it for her. Furthermore, all through this story, the events are shaped by Cinderella's dead mother's spirit. She is the one who sends her daughter the pigeons and gives her the chance to go to the ball. Actually, the prince does not choose Cinderella but both she and her dead mother choose him for her as the only one that is good enough for Cinderella. It is all like a magic matchmaking story where the prince walks into the marriage trap that was set out for him by the dead mother. The whole plot is a conflict between women and it is very easy to imagine the Prince's character replaced by another prize symbolizing the victory of the good over the evil, but it is not possible to imagine the story without Cinderella or the evil stepsisters.

The Charles Perrault version of the "Cinderella" story confirms the view that men, not women, are very much on the borders of the story. The prince does not appear until halfway through and the first male character we see, the father, is weak and invisible. All the main characters are female and they form the whole plot. Cinderella goes to the ball through the magical help of her female godmother and not through the help of her father. If the story really

focused on gender stereotyping, Cinderella's father would have had the character to send his own daughter to the ball despite his wife's wishes. But, the male character in the story fails Cinderella. And it is a female character that comes to her help and changes her life. Thus, it is the female who acts and the man who is inactive.

In sum, there is a vast difference between the representation of females in fairytales and their portrayal in the Disney film versions of the same stories. In the Disney version of fairytales such as "Cinderella" females emerge as passive, inactive and totally without personality. This is not, as some have claimed, a result of the content of the fairytales themselves. An analysis of fairytales indicates that the females are stronger than the men and definitely play a much bigger part. Women play a variety of roles in these tales and finally emerge as the true heroines who defeat and survive evil. Thus, fairytales do not use gender stereotype that communicate negative picture of females to children.

Bibliography

Pollitt, K. (1995) 'The Smurfette Principle,' in *Riverside Guide to Writing*. 2nd ed. Ed. Douglas Hunt. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.