BA-Essay

BA-degree in English

“Mirror, Mirror on the Wall”: The Representation and Objectification of Women in Fairy Tales by the Brothers Grimm

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Abstract

This essay explores a few fairy tales by the brothers Grimm from a feminist viewpoint: namely “Little Snow-White”, “Cinderella”, “Little Red-Cap”, “Hansel and Gretel”, and “Briar-Rose”. It examines how women are represented and objectified in these tales, and how they are victims of a patriarchal society.

While men are generally cast in the roles of saviors, women are cast in stereotypical roles of the angel and the monster: or, the beautiful, good girl and the evil witch. In addition, feminine socialization is evident in the fairy tales, since they were published during the nineteenth century when it was considered to be normal for women to work at home. The stories provide appropriate female role models who have “feminine” qualities, such as virtue, docility, and selflessness, in order to teach young readers the right way to behave. Their only goal in life is to marry and become a housewife. Interestingly, the antagonist is commonly a female, whose characteristics are the opposite to those of the protagonist: she is independent, aggressive, and narcissistic. Her character traits are considered to be “unfeminine”.

Women in the fairy tales lack power and are unable to help themselves, and must therefore rely on men. The huntsman is a typical male savior, who tends to be an unconscious representation of the heroine’s father. He protects the heroine and teaches her some morals. The prince is also a savior, who offers the passive and obedient heroine rescue through marriage. The prince wants the heroine as a possession because of her imminent beauty, while it can only be assumed that the heroine feels friendly towards the prince.

This essay uses Margaret Hunt’s original translation of the Grimm fairy tales from 1884, and works by literary critics and folk tale specialists are consulted to add more depth to the analysis.
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