

What fairy tales teach

children about

stepmothers and betrayal

Shu Jib 5/15/91



Snow White's wicked stepmother: an acceptable villain.

by Marina Warner

London
In many fairy tales, from the best-loved such as "Cinderella" to lesser known stories such as "Donkeyskin," a corpse lies hidden: the body of the heroine's mother.

Beauty in "Beauty and the Beast," Rapunzel, Snow White and Cinderella are all motherless children.

The disappearance of their mothers seems taken for granted in the stories: The reasons for their death are seldom given, and the women are rarely glimpsed alive.

The mothers in fairy tales were not always absent: Snow White was originally persecuted by her natural mother, Hansel and Gretel were abandoned by both their natural parents and in Charles Perrault's "Sleeping Beauty," written in the 17th century, the prince's mother even wants to eat her grandchildren and then her daughter-in-law.

But romantic editors, such as the Grimm Brothers, rebelled against this desecration of motherhood and changed mothers into wicked stepmothers.

The wicked stepmother was a familiar and more acceptable villain for an audience of children, and since then psychoanalysts, such as Bruno Bettelheim, have emphasized the therapeutic

function of splitting mothers into good and bad.

Women, especially as mothers, are still the guardians of morality.

The literature of Mother's Day, the greetings cards and media advertising, reveals how deeply women are sentimentally idealized.

But adoration almost always leads to disillusionment and punishment for failing to perform correctly.

In the film "The Grifters," Anjelica Huston steps into the tradition and outdoes her predecessors in ruthlessness, greed and sexual predatoriness as the noir anti-mother.

Nancy Reagan's purported avarice and wickedness are currently delighting readers, as her husband's political disasters pale in significance.

Treating fairy tales as repositories of universal psychological truths obscures their relationship to changing social circumstances.

Bad mothers should not be considered archetypes but as figures against a historical background.

The stories of Cinderella and Snow White record rivalries between women of the family and women who married into the households of medieval and early modern Europe.

When women frequently died young,

often in childbirth, the new wife strove on behalf of her own children against her predecessor's offspring.

In England before the Norman conquest there are numerous examples of second wives scheming to oust earlier heirs, even to the point of murdering them.

Women's dependence on men made them compete against one another for the breadwinner's favor. It set sister against sister and the older generation against the younger.

The most vulnerable group in a household were old women, past the immediate usefulness of child-bearing and housework; a crone was also often the storyteller, the Mother Goose of folklore, who is represented at the hearth in children's books, with her spinning wheel, finger raised and a group of rapt children around her...

The old women of a household interpreted traditional story material in the light of their own experiences, and they sought to win the allegiance of their audience, reminding them that old crones such as themselves, however ugly and foolish and useless, might be powerful fairies in disguise, who could work magic.

In fairy tales one can hear the voice of an old woman at risk, accusing the female head of the household of cruelty or doing away with her altogether. She often pleads with the youngest members of the family to be kind to her, claiming that she has secret means to reward them for their support.

The bad mother of the fairy tale often reflects the storyteller's insecurities.

Family structures today have, of course, changed beyond recognition.

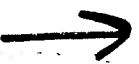
However, many traditional stories have stood still and have come to perpetuate prejudices and hatreds even after the historical conditions from which they grew have faded.

The splitting of mothers into good and bad, as reflected in the popular conventions of the fairy tale, has serious social consequences in a world of divorce, remarriage and single parents.

In fairy tales a proper mother is above reproach, and stepchildren are led to believe they must never betray their own mothers by accepting a stepmother as kind and loving, not wicked.

At present the mother's corpse lies offstage in the fairy tale because the only mother good enough to be a "good mother" is a dead one.

Marina Warner, author of "The Last Father," and "Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary," wrote this article for the New York Times.



Looking Pretty, Waiting for the Prince

By Lila Johnson

As a senior, Lila Johnson uncovered the "secret education" that cartoons, advertising, and the media slipped into her life. She wrote this article to educate others about the inaccurate visions Disney & Co. sell children.

My two brothers and I lived for our daily cartoon fix. We hungered for the vibrant reds, blues, and yellows that raced around our screen for an insane hour or two.

When we were away from the tube, we assumed the roles of our favorite characters: Bugs Bunny, that wise-cracking, carrot-munching rabbit; Yosemite Sam, rough and tough shoot-'em-down cowboy; and Popeye, the all-American spinach-guzzling sailor. We took our adopted identities outside and to school where our neighbors and friends did the same.

Now, as a senior in high school, I see that cartoons are not just lighthearted, wacky fun. Animated material touches on such sensitive issues as roles of men and women in society, and people of color.

Cartoons are often the birthplace of the cultural stereotypes we learn and remember, as I do today: the idea that Indians are savages — tomahawks and moccasins, teepees and war paint — the bad guys who pursued my favorite cowboys, or the belief that Arabs have nothing better to do than to tear across deserts in robes while swinging fierce swords and yelping like alien creatures.

These notions didn't just occur to my brothers and me magically. We saw Indians in our afternoon cartoons and on some of our favorite Disney movies like *Peter Pan*. We witnessed villainous Arabs thieve their way through violent episodes of *Popeye*.

What is not seen in relation to people of different cultures can be as harmful as some of the things that are seen. People of color are rarely seen as the heroes of animated presentations. I can think of only one Disney classic where

Cartoons are often the birthplace of cultural stereotypes.

a person of color is the principal and heroic character — *The Jungle Book*. Not an impressive list.

Children search for personal identity. In first grade I adored Bonnie Bondell, a girl in my class. She wasn't a cartoon character, but she could have been. She had glossy blonde hair and blue eyes. She had a sparkly smile and a sweet voice. She could have been Cinderella's younger sister or Sleeping Beauty's long lost cousin. For those reasons, I longed to be just like her.

I look at old photos of myself now, and have decided that I was pretty cute. I wasn't a traditional cutie, and that's exactly what bothered me then. My father is African American and my mother is German and Irish. Put the two together and I'm the result. Olive complexion, dark curly hair, brown and green eyes. All wrong. At least according to the "Fairy Tale Book of Standards."

The pride that I had in myself as a person with a colorful heritage did not blossom before it was crushed. The pride that I had in myself as a female was following the same path.

Women's roles in cartoons lack the cleverness and depth of their male counterparts. Instead, they are laced with helplessness and ignorance. The women are often in need of rescue — they seem incapable of defending or helping themselves. When they aren't

busy being rescued, they spend their time looking pretty, waiting for a prince.

In first grade, these illustrations moved me to action. They influenced me to push aside my slacks and rustic bike and turn to dresses and dolls. I had to start practicing perfection if I was going to be happy. Weak, helpless, boring, I struggled to be all of those, then I could call myself a princess, an awkward one, but a princess nonetheless.

At the same time, my brothers swung guns and swords like they were attached to their hands. They tossed aside their piles of books and tubs of clay — heroes didn't read or create — they fought! So they flexed their wiry muscles and wrestled invisible villains. They dressed, ate, talked, became miniature models of their violent heroes.

Sometimes it was fun, like a game, playing our parts. But we began to feel unhappy when we saw that some things weren't quite right. As I said — I wasn't Bonnie Bondell or Cinderella. My brothers, never destined to be hulks, went to great lengths to grow big, but gallons of milk and daily measurements didn't help. It wasn't a game anymore.

I have some fond memories of those afternoons with my brothers, yet I know that I will also remember them for the messages I swallowed as easily as gum drops. My newfound awareness has enabled me to better understand those messages I absorbed and the ones I observe daily, whether on billboards, in movies, or in magazines. I see them in a new light. A critical one. I don't have to be a princess to be happy or pretty. I don't need to rely on characters to learn about real people.

I proudly perceive myself as an exuberant, creative, responsible, open-minded individual who will never be reduced to a carbon copy of a fictional being. □

Lila Johnson wrote this while a senior at Jefferson High School, in Portland, Ore.