

Spring 2003

The Complexity of Fairy Tales

Andrew Morris
College of DuPage

Follow this and additional works at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai>

Recommended Citation

Morris, Andrew (2003) "The Complexity of Fairy Tales," *ESSAI*: Vol. 1, Article 27.
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol1/iss1/27>

This Selection is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at DigitalCommons@COD. It has been accepted for inclusion in *ESSAI* by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@COD. For more information, please contact koteles@cod.edu.

The Complexity of Fairy Tales

by Andrew Morris

(Honors English 102)

The Assignment: Compare and contrast two or more variants of the “Cinderella” story, focusing on a special elements or on theme, plot, characterization, symbolism, archetype, or psychology.

The story of Cinderella appears basically simple, “[b]ut under this overt content is concealed a welter of complex and largely unconscious material, which details of the story allude to just enough to set our unconscious associations going” (Bettelheim 570). The complexity of the Cinderella tale appears in Charles Perrault’s story, “Cinderella,” and the similar story, “Ashputtle,” by Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm. The stories by Charles Perrault and Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm reveal the complexity of the Cinderella tale through their use of “magical” elements, and Bruno Bettelheim’s article can explain the role that these elements play in their tales.

Charles Perrault and the Grimms both depict individual versions of the classic tale of Cinderella. In his story, Perrault describes the fairy tale version of Cinderella and her journey from oppression to liberation. Perrault tells of Cinderella’s escape from a life of servitude and cruelty as a result of her stepmother’s ill nature and jealousy. She is placed into a subservient role within her own family and forced to suffer a life of poverty and mistreatment. Cinderella continues to desire a better life; however, she requires the assistance of an outside force to help her escape her situation. Cinderella’s fairy godmother provides the necessary encouragement and force to give Cinderella the opportunity to seek a new life. Through the use of her godmother and her magical assistance, Cinderella acquires the ability to rise above her misfortune and find happiness.

In a similar story, the Grimms address the tale of Cinderella through Ashputtle’s struggle to overcome her miserable and degraded state. Ashputtle endures strong oppression as her stepmother forces her into the role of a low-class servant within the family. Placed into this role, Ashputtle is broken into a deteriorated and neglected state. She accepts her situation and the harsh treatment from her stepfamily as she cannot find the strength to escape her circumstances. Ashputtle gains the power to reject her oppressed state through the help of a hazel tree over her mother’s grave and its white turtledoves, which magically assist her in her struggles. The magical assistance that Ashputtle receives from these sources allows her to directly face many of her obstacles.

In their individual versions of the Cinderella tale, Perrault and the Grimms show similar characteristics in their use of magic. Each story reveals a specific source of magic that surrounds the main character’s struggle to overcome her tragic situation, and these aspects demonstrate several similarities. The sources of magic present in the stories play the similar role of a guiding force that helps the main character confront and rise above the obstacles in her life. Cinderella and Ashputtle rely on the support of magical forces to help them escape the hardships of their lives. The magical forces share similar roles in each story; consequently, the means at which they assist the characters also show similar characteristics. Magic helps Cinderella and Ashputtle reach their goals by providing them with the resources they need to face their problems. Whether fine clothing or a mode of transportation, magic delivers the agents necessary to aid Cinderella and Ashputtle’s escape from hardship.

The use of magic in Perrault and the Grimm’s stories also reveals several differences. Both Perrault and the Grimm brothers include similar forms of magical instruction in their tales; however, their individual versions of Cinderella show differences in their selection of a magical force. A main difference that appears in the stories is the source of magic on which the characters rely. Perrault presents a source of magic through the use of Cinderella’s fairy godmother. Cinderella finds the strength to leave her oppressed life and find her prince as her godmother uses magic to grant her wishes. Cinderella’s godmother provides her a base to begin searching for a new life and allows her to take action on her own

Unlike Perrault's use of a fairy godmother, the Grimms use nature to introduce magic into their story. Ashputtle receives direct magical help from her hazel tree and white turtledoves. Through these elements, Ashputtle is able to acquire the fine clothes and other accessories she needs to change her life. Ashputtle's source of magic continues to differ from Cinderella's as she repeatedly depends on it to help her overcome the obstacles in her journey. Ashputtle turns to magical aids, such as the doves' warnings, at various moments in her journey and, consequently, does not take direct control of her actions and circumstances.

The role that magic plays in each of the stories is an important aspect of the "Cinderella" tale. Magic performs a basic function, which remains to ease Cinderella's suffering and rescue her from her state of degradation. Cinderella lacks the ability to confront the oppressive forces of her stepfamily on her own; therefore, the appearance of magical guidance is necessary to provide her the basic elements to rebel against the injustices in her life. Magic presents both Cinderella and Ashputtle with the confidence and means to defy their oppressors and build the lives they deserve. In both of the stories, Cinderella and Ashputtle also lack the presence of a true mother figure; accordingly, magic helps in this area by offering her the support and guidance she needs to help herself. Magic ultimately functions as the source of Cinderella and Ashputtle's confidence and strength to break free from their oppressed states.

The magical characteristics in each story play a significant role in the basic plot of Cinderella; however, magic is also an important component in the interpretation of the tale. The Cinderella tale demonstrates several universal qualities that reflect and appeal to basic human needs. The magical events of Cinderella and Ashputtle display some of the underlying issues that connect with human nature.

Bruno Bettelheim's article explores the important, universal elements of the Cinderella story and its sub-conscious appeal to all people. Bettelheim explains how Cinderella's journey from poverty to salvation directly relates to a basic human need, and this analysis can clarify the role that magic holds in the Cinderella stories. The magical occurrences in the stories are responsible for the final liberation of Cinderella and Ashputtle from their unhappy situations. Bettelheim's interpretation of Cinderella shows that this magical guidance appeals to people's desire to be rescued. Cinderella and Ashputtle's magical escape from oppression displays the basic human desire and "need to believe that even if he were thus degraded, eventually he would be rescued from such degradation and experience the most wonderful exaltation"(573).

The Cinderella tale demonstrates the ability for people to improve their lives and rise above adversity. Magic allows Cinderella and Ashputtle to face the overwhelming oppression of their families and other obstacles that threaten their growth. The role of magic supports the main theme of the tales by showing that people are capable of overcoming obstacles in life. The elements of magic connect with people's basic needs, and this association adds to the general appeal of the stories to varying cultures.

All in all, the presence of magic is an important feature in the Cinderella tale and its many variations. Magic plays a main role in the basic plot of the Cinderella stories and also contributes to the tales' sub-conscious connection with human nature. In both "Cinderella" and "Ashputtle," the magical aspects connect with people's natural desire to be rescued from and to challenge their dilemmas. Bettelheim shows that Cinderella's underlying connection with human behavior leads to its wide spread appeal and popularity throughout various cultures.

Works Cited

- Behrens, Laurence, and Leonard J. Rosen, eds. Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum. 8th edition. New York: Longman, 2003.
- Bettelheim, Bruno. "'Cinderella': A Story of Sibling Rivalry and Oedipal Conflicts." Behrens and Rosen, 567-74.
- Grimm, Jakob and Wilhelm. "Ashputtle." Behrens and Rosen, 531-36.
- Perrault, Charles. "Cinderella." Behrens and Rosen, 527-31.