

The Politics of Children's Literature: Constructing Gender Identities through Fairytales

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Abstract

Jack Zipes, in *The Trials and Tribulations* (1994) wrote, "We all pass through fairy tales, which inscribe indelible marks on our imagination and affect our behavior and role playing" (xi). Perhaps the first literature that children encounter is fairytales. The aim of children's literature is to engage and amuse the young minds. But coupled with this it initiates children into accepting the social values and customs. The subtle orientation provided through literature is far more effective than other forms of tutoring.

This paper analyses how gender roles are emphasized through seemingly neutral stories of chivalry, adventure and wonder. The focus is to show how boys and girls are initiated into adult gender roles by reading fairy tales and how they act out the sexual roles that patriarchy has laid down. Tales like 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs', 'Cinderella', 'Sleeping Beauty' and 'Beauty and the Beast' all prepare girls for submissive roles and boys are cautioned that they are to display courage and reason at all times. Also the female characters in fairytales are either stereotyped as being in distress or are cast as witches or evil women. Often the plot of fairy tales is how a girl is rescued from misery by prince charming, the implication being that marriage is the key to happiness and assures the 'they lived happily ever after' ending to the story of a girl. Through the analysis of select fairy tales this paper showcases how children's literature in general and fairytales in particular advance the patriarchal sexual politics of carving men as physically and mentally strong and women as submissive, passive and emotional. Feminism distinguishes between the biological determinants 'sex' and questions the politics behind the gender based social categorization as men and women. Feminists assert that the social construct gender is often used to justify the inequities in different cultures in order to maintain the patriarchal hegemony. The gender roles propagated through innocent fairytales has far reaching implications.

Keywords: Children's literature, Gender, fairytales, feminism, patriarchy

Introduction

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