

# The Case Against Fairy Tales

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Let's face it, fairytales have become quite the staple in our society. Not only do the Disney Princesses continue to reign supreme in the preschool to elementary school crowd, but we have currently seen quite the boost in fairytale inspired cinema – whether it be live action remakes of classics such as *Snow White and the Huntsman*, *Red Riding Hood*, *Hansel and Gretel*, *Jack the Giant Slayer*, ABC's *Once Upon A Time*, and NBC's *Grimm*... just to name a few. To be perfectly honest, it seems like none of us can withstand the nostalgic allure of fairytales. But perhaps that is due to a misrepresentation in the rose-tinted hues of these beloved classics, as upon further examination, these stories darken considerably. The question we arrive at is this, should we continue exposing our children (and ourselves) to these tales? To a certain extent, given fairytales' explicit themes, absolutist nature, and use of scare tactics... I would argue no.



"Grandma! What big...errr...thing you have...Grandma, what is that?"

Truth be told, fairytales are somewhat infamous for their explicit sexual and violent subject matters. As Maria Tatar, a Professor of German Literature at Harvard University, states in her book *The Hard Facts of the Grimm's Fairy Tales*, "sex and violence: these are major thematic concerns of tales in the Grimm's collection... [they] frequently take the perverse form of incest and child abuse..." Still don't remember anything too disturbing? How about in *Little Red Riding Hood* when a very naked Little Red gets into bed with the wolf? Or in the end of *Cinderella*, when two doves peck out the eyes of the evil step-sisters during the wedding? Chances are that you have never heard of any of these candid details due to the extensive censorship fairytales had to go through in order to join the Disney oeuvre. This is not to say that Disney completely cleaned up all of the creepiness. Remember in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* when the evil queen wants Snow White's heart? True, it may not be as bad as the original where the queen wants the heart so she could devour it, but this does not take away the frightening idea that someone wants the heart of a little girl in a box. Truth be told, that movie frightened me so profoundly as a child, I had to ask my mother to hide the VHS case to avoid seeing the frightening witch posed on the cover.



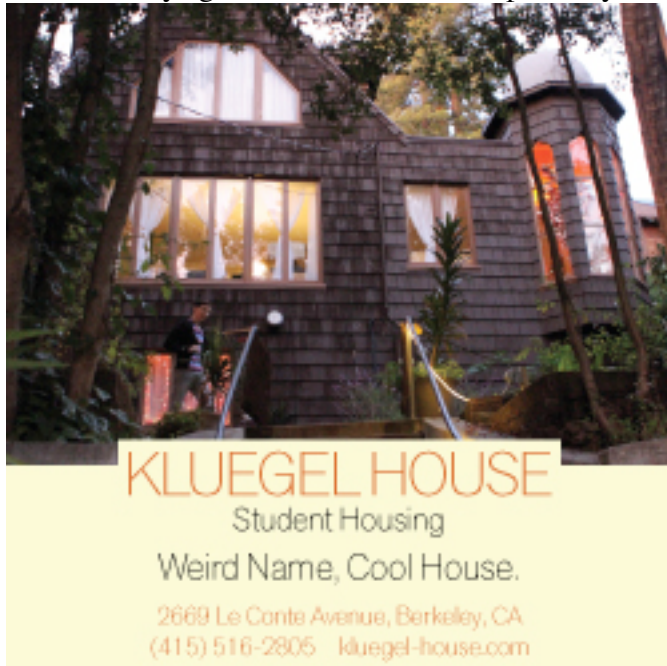
*I wonder who could possibly be the bad guy in this scenario. Cute kids or that ugly creepy looking thing..*

Another major issue with reading fairytales to children is the fairytales' tendency towards an absolutist view of good and evil. You flip open a fairytale and you can pretty much figure out who is the "good guy" and who is the "bad guy". In *Hansel and Gretel*, the good guys are the children and the bad guys are the step-mother and the witch. In *Jack and the Beanstalk*, good guy is Jack, bad guy is the giant. So what is the harm in black

and white labels of good and evil? Why does it make fairytales undesirable to read, especially to children?

To put it quite frankly, it can hinder the development of empathy. How can a child feel empathy towards an antagonist when all the child is exposed to is the side of the protagonist? There are no redeemable qualities in any of these fairytale villains, no indication of their humanity, which in turn makes it very difficult for the child to put him or herself in the villains' shoes... especially when villains are characterized as "ugly."

This inability to be empathetic towards other characters besides the protagonist can crossover to a child's life, where instead of an evil witch, there is an evil bully or an evil teacher. These absolutes of "evil" are promoted by the structures of fairytales, where there is always good and evil, and are upheld by the child's own one point perspective.



Additionally, these absolutes of good and evil can promote a form of victim mentality. Instead of seeking to understand what the child did to cause the teacher to be disciplinary or what he or she did to trigger the bully's response, the child would see these individuals as "out to get them" and the child as an innocent victim of circumstance. Now although this may be the case sometimes, there are also other times when the teacher may punish a student due to his or her talkative nature and the "bully" may be angered by not being invited to some social event. The point is that not only do fairytales appeal to a child's self-serving and biased perspectives through creating single layered heroes and villains, but they also promote self-serving and biased perspectives outside of the storybook. And what kind of people do these children become when they grow older? I rest my case.



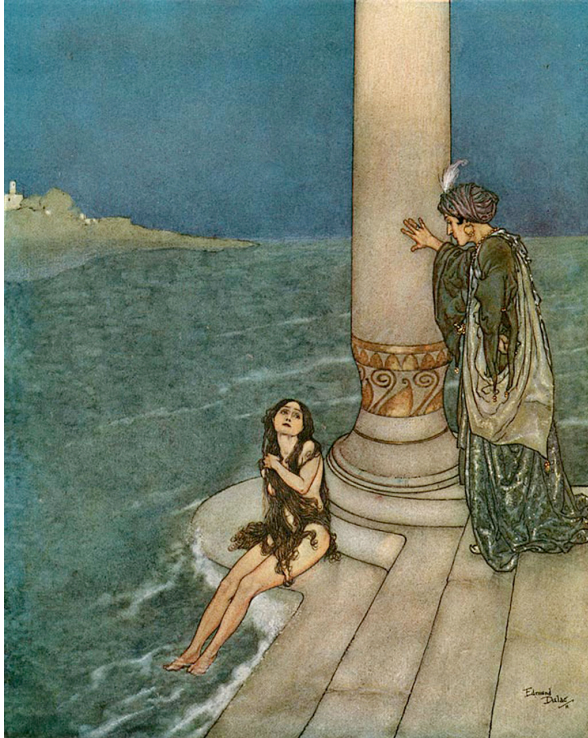
*\*If I ever get over this whole “death” thing... I promise never to accept food from strangers ever again... unless there is a strong man around to save me!\**

The use of scare tactics in fairytales also renders them undesirable as literature. One of the most prominent arguments in favor of fairytales is that they teach children morals. However, fairytales are not really seen tales of morality, but rather, as Maria Tatar explains in her other book, *Off with Their Heads! Fairytales and the Culture of Childhood*, “cautionary tales.” She describes cautionary tales as “usually aiming to deter children from being too inquisitive about the world they inhabit and deviating in any way from behavioral norms” and furthermore, by “using intimidation, cautionary tales persuade children to obey laws set down by parental authority, celebrating docility and conformity while discouraging curiosity and willfulness.” For instance, in *Little Red Riding Hood*, Little Red reflects on her terrifying experience with the wolf and thinks to herself, “as long as I live, I will never by myself leave the path, to run into the woods, when my mother has forbidden me to do so.” So basically, Little Red attributes her encounter with the wolf as punishment for disobeying her mother. Getting eaten alive was punishment for disobeying her mother.

Stories like *Little Red Riding Hood* do not teach children morals. Instead, they scare them into behaving. Like Tatar explains, cautionary tales “masquerade as educational tales but are in reality sadistic stories aimed at controlling behavior.” There is usually an element of punishment in each fairytale to deter the reader from engaging in unfavorable activities. *Snow White* falls victim to a rib crushing corset and a poison comb when she exhibits qualities of vanity. *The Little Mermaid* loses her voice and tail as she lusts after the prince. The use of scare tactics in order to control the behavior of children is not necessarily the best way to teach a child morality. Personally, I believe that morality is acquired through understanding why something is right or wrong to do, not by scaring someone into doing “the right thing.” The essence of morality relies on its choice,

whether one decides to do right or wrong. Someone is not particularly morally sound if he or she is doing the right thing for the wrong reason, or solely on the idea of self-preservation. Therefore, conditioning children to respond to situations favorably through implementation of fear is not the greatest way to teach children morality. All it really teaches children is how to be afraid.

One main argument in favor of fairytales is that they psychologically allow a child to resolve inner conflicts between the positive and negative



“So the prince doesn’t love you. Just promise me you won’t do anything stupid like kill yourself and then have your creepy ghost-self stalk him.”

forces of the self. As Sheldon Cashdan, a Professor of Psychology at University of Massachusetts at Amherst writes in his book *The Witch Must Die – The Hidden Meaning of Fairytales*, “children, in listening to a fairytale, project parts of themselves into various characters in the story, using them as psychological repositories for competing elements in the self.” He gives the example of *Snow White*, where the evil queen represents vanity, Snow White represents the part of the child trying to overcome this unwanted attribute, and the defeat of the evil queen represents the victory of the positive forces of the self over the negative ones. Without a doubt, this idea sounds impressive but is probably not very plausible. For the most part, when a child hears *Snow White*, he is probably not thinking about how the conflicts in the story accurately depict his inner turmoil due to his dissociation with certain qualities of his self. He is more likely to think “ow, ow, ow, those heated iron slippers must really hurt!” or something to that effect.

As mentioned earlier, another argument that supports the reading of fairytales to children is that they contain morals. Morals like obey your elders (*Little Red Riding Hood*) and do not talk to strangers (*Snow White*). Although the teaching of morals to children in a way that would be of interest to them seems like an effective method, scaring children into it is not the way to go about things. In other words, the idea of including morals is well-

meaning and appropriate for children but the way that they are presented through scare tactics makes fairytales an inappropriate medium for teaching children morality.

While I have outlined what I take to be a pretty convincing case against fairytales, this is not to say that I am immune to their charms. I tune in every Sunday night to watch *Once Upon A Time* and Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* remains one of my favorite movies. But if I had to make suggestions for (Grimm) fairytale alternatives, these would be on my list: *The Phantom Tollbooth* by Norton Juster, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum, *The Velveteen Rabbit* by Margery Williams, *Winnie the Pooh* stories by A.A. Milne, and in terms of cinema, anything Hayao Miyazaki just for the empowered female main characters. But that is another blog post.