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Feminism Seminar

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Lessons in Fiction

Ever thought about whether or not fairy tales were just meant to be fun and entertaining stories to read that ended happily after some adventure? The focus of this paper will be on the messages that are taught to children who are reading the fantasy stories, and what they are learning from the lessons and themes within the fairy tales, whether or not they realize it. As someone who read several different versions of various fairy tales when younger, I was curious about how they may have shaped and influenced my view of or thoughts on feminism and the roles that women are meant to play, as well as how they are meant to act. There is a lot that could have influenced me in how I view the world, people, and the expectations of others and culture based on tradition or social norms.

After all, the genre of fairy tales is incredibly important since they are meant for a younger generation who are still developing their sense of self, as well as how they see and interact with the world. What they read will shape them from a young age, and this makes me believe that texts like fairy tales that are meant for younger children should be taken more seriously and are worthy of analysis, to see what is being taught and shown to the next generation. Given that traditional fairy tales were typically cautionary tales that often ended poorly for a number of the characters for specific reasons, this means that there was always some message or lesson that was meant to be taught with the fairy tale. There was a purpose behind the

story, and since the story was often meant for younger children, it was a purpose specifically intended for them to influence them in some way, to have an impact on their behavior or attitude towards others.

In my opinion, the Disney versions of some fairy tales might do more harm than good in certain cases, because it sets a very specific example for young girls who are more susceptible to their influence. Everything that you read or watch will have an impact whether you realize it or not, and what influences you is not limited to forms of media or literature that are considered to be more factual or realistic. There is no way to control what we are influenced by, and I believe it is easier to be influenced by something you are enjoying or find entertaining. This is because you are paying more attention to what you are reading or watching when enjoying it, and are able to remember and process it better, no matter how old you are at the time. Just because you are younger and can't fully understand what is happening or analyze it in the same way you would as an adult, doesn't mean it isn't still creating a lasting impression that will shape the way things are interpreted and the expectations you have or follow. Simply because it is a fairy tale and not a more factual story or one that is meant to be educational for children, does not mean that what is being taught in them are less important or less impactful.

The primary texts are two of female author Gail Carson Levine's novels *Fairest*, and *Ella Enchanted*, which was turned into a fairly well known film starring Anne Hathaway, and some of Levine's collection of shorter stories in *The Fairy's Return and Other Princess Tales* will be used when going into the analysis of the longer novels to have more examples. Critical questions I aim to address are as follows: Can a fairy tale be more than entertainment? Are there important lessons for young girls to learn hidden within the fun fantasy tales? Is this a more effective way

for young girls to learn about self confidence, bravery, working for what they want instead of settling for what they are told to be happy for, positive self image and more?

Fairest

For the story *Fairest*, the focus will be on the theme of beauty and beauty standards throughout the story, how labels can be detrimental to a young girl while still growing up and discovering themselves, as well as the lengths that some might go to in order to be seen as conventionally beautiful. This is a very important topic to be addressed and explored within a story meant for young girls, since it could have a big impact on how the young readers see themselves and see beauty, as well as what beauty is or can look like. In the story, the main character Aza may have a truly beautiful singing voice which is very important in Ayortha, a kingdom of singers, but she is not considered to be physically attractive which impacts her daily life at the Inn her family owns, as well as her self confidence. The story, to some degree, explores the impact labels and the judgement of others can have on a young girl growing up as well as how far some people are willing to go for physical beauty.

Connections can be made to *Bridget Jones's Diary* with the emphasis Bridget puts on her physical appearance and her desire to be lighter in order to be more beautiful, based on standards that I have trouble understanding or agreeing with. Bridget is very focused on how she looks, on losing weight since she believes that once she makes it to under 120 pounds, she will be beautiful and might be seen by others as beautiful. This causes Bridget to obsessively count her calories and track the amount she drinks and smokes over the course of a year, and no matter how hard she seems to be trying, Bridget struggles to drink and smoke less, as well as lose the weight she

so desperately hopes to shed. And then once Bridget is able to get below 120 pounds, things do not go as she thought they would due to the stressful and emotional events that led to her losing the last few pounds. Instead of being told how beautiful she looks and being praised for her body, she is asked if she is okay and told that she doesn't look so good.

Like Bridget, Aza is very focused on her physical appearance and believes she is much too tall and heavysset as well, and wants to be smaller and shorter like the women she so admires, to the point of turning to magic in order to try and get what she wants. However this backfires on her to some degree, as the queen makes up lies in order to remove Aza who she see's as a threat and while Aza's fate is being decided, she finds the magic potion that the queen was using to become beautiful and drinks some. This makes Aza extremely beautiful which confuses those coming back to tell her what they decided, and makes some of them pause, unsure of the choice made with how beautiful Aza is, since how could someone so beautiful be evil. After being escorted to the dungeon, she later breaks out of the cage she was locked in.

Aza gets help escaping from a guard who later reveals he was sent to kill her by the queen, and his reason for not doing so is how beautiful she is now. "She said you were half ogre. She said we'd all be safer without you. I was going to kill you, but you'd grown so beautiful, I stopped believing her." (224) This is a message that I do not agree with, while it works for the story and in keeping the main character alive, it is not something that should be taught to young girls that are at an impressionable age. That simply by being beautiful, Aza could not possibly be as evil or horrible as she is said to be by those who are afraid of her or want to cause her harm. As Aza remarks, "Beauty had saved me." (225) While the beauty does not last and is only considered beauty by humans, the fact that others no longer believe what they thought to be true

or fact simply because of how beautiful Aza now was is showing the reader that with physical beauty comes a sort of protection that is powerful enough to change the minds of those who wanted to harm them or were scare of them. That being physically beautiful is a pass on how one acts, that when you are beautiful, it does not matter what you might have done, because you are very beautiful and couldn't possibly be bad or evil.

The two main sources I used when analyzing this novel are written by Enicia Fisher and Naomi Wolf who had opposite opinions on the main character Aza, and I find myself agreeing a little more with Wolf's opinion despite how much I enjoy the book as a whole. While Wolf is saying that Aza is not a good role model for the young girls who are reading the story, Fisher believes that Aza is a good role model, and that the final message of the story is what is most important in the end.

Ideally, this premise offers a reconsideration of what "pretty" means, to society and to the heroine, especially to a teenage heroine. By setting up the world of the gnomes as the alternative reality to the world of the Ayorthaians, Levine should be able to let her heroine redefine what beauty means to her while realistically facing the hurtful gaze of others. To make this work, Aza would need to be a spunky, resistant kind of girl, ready to think for herself. (Wolf, first page)

And as Wolf notes, Aza is not that kind of girl, and is an "unusually unattractive heroine" and it is because of her personality that she is unattractive, not her physical appearance. The story includes some subjects that are really important for a book meant for teenage girls to address, such as the main character continually experiencing cruelties and rejection because of her appearance, since not everyone is going to be exceptionally beautiful. But, Aza normally

seems to react with abject self-criticism, which involves a lot of apologizing and paralysis in the moment as well. For a character who is meant to be the heroine, she doesn't have the best of attitudes for a good portion of the story, or the best way of reacting to the situations she ends up in. With the focus on beauty and beauty standards in a story meant for impressionable young girls that are still developing their sense of self and confidence, it doesn't always clearly show that looks are not everything, or show positive ways of coping with being seen or treated as different in a bad way.

But Fisher's opinion on Aza is very different, as she believes that in the end despite the way Aza behaves or reacts to the rude comments and hurtful stares, it still teaches a positive lesson to the young women reading it. "At last, our heroine learns that inner transformation, strength, and dignity are more important than physical beauty, and can transform the way others see her and the way she sees herself." (Fisher, first page.) That all Aza went through during the story was needed in order for her to truly grow as a person, to accept herself and to be accepted by others for who she truly is, not what magic can make her into. While I may not think that the ends justify the means completely in this story, I do have to agree with Fisher that the end is focusing on the right ideas or topics in a good way with how Aza starts to accept herself for who she is, as well as how she looks.

When Aza begins being confident towards the end of the novel in how she acts, in her physical appearance, her skills and the quality of her character instead of lamenting on how she isn't as physically beautiful and petite as those around her, Aza is able to change the way others see her as well. Aza's new found confidence in who she is, her kindness, and her lovely singing voice win in the end, and this is what helps turn her life in a better direction. While it takes some

time to get there and there are some less favorable moments along the way that could be sending the wrong messages to a young reader, in the end Aza is an example of how physical beauty is not everything, and that it is what is on the inside that counts as well as how you carry yourself. This ending shows that the important thing is how you act and treat others as well as yourself, not necessarily how you look on the outside, since it is what is on the inside that truly counts.

In Levine's collection of the short stories from *The Fairy's Return and other Princess Tales*, there is another character that has to face beauty standards, yet does so in a very different way than Aza does. In the short story "The Fairy's Return", the main character is a very kind and happy young girl who is called Parsley as a result of her favorite food being parsley, and she ends up living with a fairy as the fairy's home is the only place parsley grows. The problem with Parsley's physical appearance is not at first obvious when meeting her, as she is a beautiful young girl, if not a little plain looking. However, due to her diet of only parsley, Parsley's teeth are completely green. In the end however, the color of her teeth do not matter, as the loveliness of her smile is enough to sway the hearts of almost all those she comes across, including the fairy, the prince she marries, and the king.

I believe that this story in its entirety is a very good example for young girls unlike *Fairest*, of how it is what is on the inside, the personality of a person one might say, that matters more than what you can see on the outside. Since it is noted by several characters when first meeting Parsley, that even with teeth as green as grass, there is no smile more beautiful and sweet than that of kind young Parsley. "King Humphrey IV noticed the color of the damsel's teeth, but he paid more attention to the loveliness of her smile." (313) The morals of this short story that are wonderful lessons for young girls still finding themselves, is that the kindness you

show always finds its way back to you, and that what is on the inside that matters more than how one looks on the outside.

Ella Enchanted

In Levine's story *Ella Enchanted*, I decided to focus on the expectations for woman, obedience, as well as fighting for what you want. The main character Ella was given a "gift" as a baby by an idiotic and self-absorbed fairy, the gift of obedience. This meant anyone could control Ella with an order, and Ella was powerless against it no matter what the order was. While there is no choice for Ella but to follow the orders given, there are times when she finds the loopholes to still rebel in small ways, mainly seen at the start in interactions with her family cook and friend Mandy. Even the most common phrases that are said as a means of expression would be considered an order by the gift, and Ella would be forced to obey it whether or not the person meant it as an actual order. Tell her to hop along, and Ella will literally have to begin hopping on her way until the curse decides she has done as she was told and fulfilled the order. And if the order given was something that would cause Ella or someone else harm, she had no choice in the matter and would have to obey it eventually. The story follows Ella as she grows up and learns the danger of her "gift", finds ways to fight it, tries to get the gift removed, and also grows on her journey of self discovery, relying mainly on herself, the knowledge she has, and kindness shown by strangers when she is kind to them.

Ella is a very positive main character for this sort of story with the obstacles she faces, and Ella works well as the heroine of this fairy tale for how the story is written, especially with the challenges that Ella faces throughout. She makes the best of the situations she is in when

possible, stays as cheerful and positive as possible, never letting her circumstances stop her from being kind and helpful to those who treat her well. Ella even manages to befriend the Prince, and it is not a result of her looks that this connection is formed, but through the kind and genuine personality Ella has, her love for books and knowledge, along with her sense of humor that always makes the story fun to read. While not everyone in the story is kind to Ella, as the story is very similar in some ways to Cinderella with wicked a wicked stepmother and stepsisters, those who do not judge or dislike Ella right away often find themselves being won over by how genuine and intelligent Ella can be. This is important for a story meant for younger girls, since it shows how the way you act and treat others is important, as well as the way you present yourself, and that being beautiful or reserved isn't everything. Sometimes the way to form a connection with another person, is to be yourself and if the other person appreciates and values what you have to offer, then a mutual bond can be formed.

But what strikes me as most important, is that Levine decided on obedience as the gift that would be given to Ella by the empty-headed fairy. There is a lot of literature I have read, as well films and series I have watched where the female characters are expected to be obedient, to follow the instructions given to them by the men in their lives. They are not to question the men or give their own ideas or opinions, simply expected to behave and obey. It is a common enough trope, and they do not get to have much thought of their own, they don't get to have opinions on what they do and are taught to believe that their role in life is to get married, to have children, and to be a good wife and mother. And this is an expectation in *Ella Enchanted* to a degree, as Ella is sent off to finishing school with her stepsisters by her mostly absent merchant father, and she expected to learn manners, as well as how to be a proper lady. And while she does not finish

at the finishing school since Ella is more concerned with finding the fairy to hopefully get her curse removed, the bit we see at the finishing school reminds me a lot of what is taught in cotillion. There is an extreme emphasis on being lady like, not talking or laughing too much or too loud, on keeping opinions to yourself, how you are supposed to walk or sit, as well as how to behave properly at a social event or formal dinner.

So to have the main character be forced into their obedience and fighting desperately to break that curse, to get their freedom not just from the “gift” forced upon them, but also from the expectations of her father and of society, it teaches a really important lesson to young girls. That they can think for themselves, that they can want more than they are supposed to, that what they want and their happiness does matter. Along with the lessons that physical beauty is not everything and that kindness, knowledge, passion and genuine human connection often will matter more than how well you can fit into societies mold. For the young readers that might look up to Ella, it is important to show how she saves herself in a lot of the situations that she ends up in on her journey, using the knowledge she has gained through her love of books, and the different skills she has learned, including an impressive amount of languages that Ella is able to speak almost fluently.

There is one main time when Ella is rescued by male characters including the Prince, but it is not completely a damsel in distress situation since in the end the main reason Ella is able to escape, is because of her curse. Ella is caught by ogre’s who intend to cook and eat her, and a special ability ogre’s have is how persuasive they can be when talking in the common tongue because of the oily way they speak, the persuasive power they are able to create with their sweet and honeyed words. A persuasive power that Ella is able to practice using the ogre’s own

language while the ogre's are sleeping and actually copy, a power that she then uses to convince them that they are full and should take a nap. The only reason she is not bale to run away after having put the ogre's to sleep, is because one had commanded her to not run away and that is not something that Ella can break. Luckily, the Prince and some of his knights appear and are able to restrain the ogre's with Ella's help, and are the ones to give another command to Ella which allows her to leave the clearing. So in the end, neither party truly rescued the other, and Ella did not wait idly for a man to come and save her, she was able to play a very large part in saving herself which is a good thing for young girls to see.

One thing that bothers me and was noted in a secondary source I found, in a quote by the author of *Ella Enchanted* herself no less, is how different the movie is from the book. “ ‘The movies is hugely different from the book, but I think it's a fun movie,’ Levine says. ‘It's a separate experience.’ ” (Levine, first page.) The film turns the story more into a comedy romance, and while it does have its good parts and positive moments involving treating others equally no matter their race, a portion of the story and original message is lost. While it might have the same title, basic plot and characters that are to a degree the same, a good portion of it was changed in order to be more romantic as well as more amusing, something which I thought to be unneeded as there is plenty of humor in the original novel. While the film of *Ella Enchanted* is not a Disney movie, it very well could be with how the story was changed to be something a little more child friendly and with a happier, more fun and entertaining ending. Which also doesn't make sense to me, as the book is not very violent or dark to begin with, there are some more serious or emotional moments like when Ella's mother dies and the funeral for

her, yet nothing is focused on to a degree that the story would be considered not appropriate for younger children.

From the collection of short stories by Levine, I found that the one that connected the most with the themes of *Ella Enchanted* was called “The Fairy’s Mistake”, which also involves a fairy giving a gift that isn’t quite what it was meant to be. Two identical twin sisters Rosella and Myrtle live with their mother in a little village, and encounter a fairy one day. The kind and gentle Rosella helps the fairy and is given a gift in return, while the spoiled, ill-tempered and selfish Myrtle does not, and receives a punishment. But things don’t turn out the way they are meant to, since the gift is having gems and precious stones fall from Rosella’s mouth when talking, and for Myrtle bugs and reptiles appear from her mouth when talking. Unfortunately for Rosella, a passing Prince sees gems fall from her mouth while singing in the garden, and the selfish Prince decides to marry her out of greed.

Throughout the short story, Myrtle figures out how to use her punishment for her own gain, while Rosella suffers from the greed of others, and in the end both sisters work together in a way to make sure both end up with a happy life that they deserve. The way this really connects with *Ella Enchanted*, other than the kind main characters suffering as a result of the “gifts” given to them by a fairy and how greedy people take advantage of that gift, is that both Ella and Rosella are put into positions where they are being told what to do by men in their lives. Then they have to overcome the challenges that this creates for them on their own and at times with the help of others in order to find and gain the happiness that they want, and deserve.

Conclusion

To close, there is still so much more that could be said and analyzed within *Fairest*, *Ella Enchanted*, and the other short stories in *The Fairy's Return and Other Princess Tales*, so many other characters that could be seen as good or bad role models for the young girls reading them. Several of Levine's other novels also have some very important lessons for young girls to be learning as they read, from finding bravery in order to fight for what you love and care about, to how important it is to be smart and cunning, to think before speaking or acting.

However, one of the more important things to keep in mind in general, is how there are very important lessons to be learned in everything that you read, write, or watch, no matter what genre it is, or what age it is meant for. As a twenty six year old, I can still get a lot out of books that are meant for fourteen year olds, since I have a different way of looking at it and more life experience to analyze it in a way that makes more sense related to my life at my age. Every moment and experience can be a teaching moment, but only if you're open to the learning opportunity and don't immediately dismiss it as being too childish to actually contain anything important. The most entertaining programs can be very educational as well, since when you are enjoying something, it is much more likely to stay in your brain where some connection will be formed.

Reading about a young girl being brave and going out on her own in order to find the ending that she wants is important for young girls, since it shows them that there is more to how we are seen by others than how we look. That there is more to the world than doing what is expected of us by others, and letting them control us. That while it is important to listen to your parents and do your best to be kind to all, it is not okay for others to use you in order to achieve what you want, when their actions cause you pain or hardship. Fairy tales may be fun stories that

most see as something to entertain young girls, but they help build up your imagination as well as helping create the foundation of who the young girl is, how she sees the world, and what she thinks her role or place in it is. As I said, the more someone is enjoying something, the more likely they are to be influenced by it, and the more likely they are to remember what happens and the lessons that are learned by the main character. You may not think that it had an impact on you, but everything does to some degree, and fairy tales are no exception.

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