

Student 1

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ENG 1304

Unit I Summary/Response Sample

### What Exactly Are Stories Telling Our Children?

The article “Fairy tales: a compass for children’s healthy development – a qualitative study in a Greek island” is composed of a study led by multiple experts from pediatric and foreign language departments with quality education and is focused on the impacts of storytelling and fairy tales. Between July 2007 and February 2008, 470 parents of children between the ages three and five were interviewed and asked about their opinions regarding storytelling and how their children reacted towards the stories they were being told. Most parents mentioned that both they and their children enjoyed these magical stories. Some parents stated that they used fairy tales as instructive tools or as a way to help their children overcome anxiety. After collecting enough data, the experts leading the study concluded that storytelling is essential in childhood. They confirmed the positive emotional effect fairy tales have on young children, the valuable lessons they teach them and their impact on the family lifestyle, such as creating stronger bonds between parents and their children. Finally, limitations of the study were noted as well, including the possibly biased interviewees and the lack of the children’s own opinions. Although I agree with the conclusion that storytelling is a critical part of early childhood, I believe that, without proper instruction from parents or other guardians, kids could be guided by the mistaken values that some fairy tales may encourage.

I have been taking early education courses since high school and have seen highlighted the importance of parents reading to their children regularly before they enter grade school. Reading “promotes mental development” and it is essential that children are familiar with words, sentences, and books before entering the school environment (Tsitsani et al. 269). If children are often read to at home, eventually they will be able to recognize and associate sounds with letters and letters with words. This could help ease the radical transition into a classroom and potentially increase their chances of success in the future. I have worked first hand with second graders whose parents cared very little about reading to them, and most struggled a lot more with the challenging curriculum or fell behind. Therefore, storytelling is a necessity for young children to succeed.

Further, the benefits of storytelling are also found in the emotional and psychological aspects of a child. Although the experts attributed these benefits to the mere fairy tales by stating that “they provide young readers with the mechanisms of coping with their inner problems, life’s stresses, and anxieties,” I believe it is the act of telling those fairy tales that brings joy and peace to many children (Tsitsani et al. 267). As human beings, we need to feel that we are loved and not alone. This necessity is heightened during our young ages, and when it is not fulfilled, it can be detrimental to us emotionally. Storytelling, especially by a parent, serves as a time of bonding during which a parent and a child can be completely devoted to each other. I remember, with much fondness, the times my mom read stories with me. I felt loved and I felt safe, not because of the story we were reading, but because my mom was with me. “Storytelling is an experience to be shared between parents and children” and should be encouraged (Tsitsani et al. 270).

Despite the meaningful arguments regarding storytelling that Tsitsani et al presented, their comparison of fairy tales to compasses is questionable. The idea that fairy tales “provide road maps to help children find their pathway to love, power, and privilege” is very romantic, but when we look at some of these fairy tales closely, it is not hard to see that they could be misleading and even harmful (Tsitsani et al. 267). Many fairytales – particularly the princess related ones – contain one common motif: beauty. Although no fairy tale clearly states it, many subconsciously feed the idea that beauty is everything into our children’s brains. The pretty character who also happens to be kind gets the happy ending while the evil, ugly character gets punished. An association between ugly and evil and beauty and goodness is formed in the viewers’ minds, possibly affecting how they interact with people around them.

Though I believe there is a connection between beauty and goodness, it is not the beauty that many fairy tales present. Beauty is very complex and is mostly defined physically in most of these magical stories. A person who is kind and caring can be beautiful regardless of their physical appearance. Whereas, a person who is physically attractive can be ugly on the inside. I think this is a key point many fairy tales fail to address, thus many children grow up believing the only type of beauty that exists is the physical kind. Additionally, it shows that the “beautiful” people succeed while the “ugly” people are punished. Is this the kind of map we want our children to follow? Is this how we want our future society to think? Beauty – the kind that comes from within – can get people far in life, but very few children will be able to make that deduction on their own. It is more common for them to assume that physical beauty is what matters.

Moreover, fairy tales affect boys as well by encouraging the strength ideal. Charming, Phillip, and Florian were all princes who embodied this ideal. By rescuing Cinderella, Aurora,

and Snow White, they created the image of the man every boy should be and every girl should want. Many boys are then pressured to fit this strong and courageous image in order to get the girl. Fear and pain become a luxury they cannot afford. This is further encouraged by society. Men are tough. Men do not feel. Often, this is what some boys grow up hearing, so many push aside their hurt and emotions in order to focus on being the strong prince that is to rescue the damsel in distress. It is their own pressure to be beautiful.

Despite the existence of these dangerous ideas in many fairy tales, the harm they may cause is avoidable if parents are more involved in their children's lives. Author Lori Baker-Sperry wrote in "The Pervasiveness and Persistence of the Feminine Beauty Ideal in Children's Fairy Tales" that "children's media can be a powerful mechanism by which [they] learn cultural values" (Baker-Sperry 724). But, an equally powerful mechanism exists in their lives: the influence of their parents and role models. If a child is exposed to fairy tales and receives no other guidance, it will be easy for him or her to take away all of the wrong ideas. However, when a parent explains the difference between these stories and reality, a child is more likely to believe the parent, yet still be able to enjoy the story.

For instance, as I grew up, I was exposed to very few fairy tales. I mainly remember *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Mulan*, and *The Little Mermaid*. I watched and read them with my mother, who taught me different, unconventional values from each. From *The Sleeping Beauty*, she was careful to explain that it is important to fall in love but it would not be wise of me to expect any man to come to my rescue. She insisted that there was more to life than being a beautiful princess and that I should learn to do things for myself as well. From *Mulan*, she explained that in the world we live in there would be times I would have to make sacrifices for those I loved.

From *The Little Mermaid*, she taught me that, even if Eric and Ariel ended up together, I should be careful to never give up something I love for a man I am not sure will value my sacrifice. Fairy tales contain some important values in them but many are hidden and it is the job of a parent to expose them. It is their job to be the compass that guides their children towards the right path, not the fairy tale's.

Therefore, fairy tales are not bad nor do they have devious intentions, but without wise instruction from the parents and role models, children could be easily manipulated by them and fail to see reality later on. My mom used fairy tales to teach me important values while maintaining my childlike wonder and bliss. Today, I care about my appearance like any other young girl. However, I also know that there is so much more to life than falling in love and living "happily ever after." I was taught to find my own happy ending and discover my value in other things. Finally, the time my mom spent telling me stories was more valuable than the fairy tale itself. Not only was I able to learn to read at a young age and form a strong bond with my mother, but it gave her the opportunity to teach me to become the person I am today.

Works Cited

Baker-Sperry, Lori, and Liz, Grauerholz. "The Pervasiveness and Persistence of the Feminine Beauty Ideal in Children's Fairy Tales." *Gender & Society* 15. 5 (2003): 724. Print.

Tsitsani, P. et al. "Fairy tales: a compass for children's healthy development – a qualitative study in a Greek island." *Child: care, health and development* 38. 2 (2010): 266-271. Print.