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English 1304

Summary Response Sample Essay

Emphasis on Female Qualities

According to Lori Baker-Sperry and Liz Grauerholz' article, "The Pervasiveness and Persistence of the Feminine Beauty Ideal in Children's Fairy Tales", children's fairy tales that put an importance on feminine beauty are more likely to have remained well known than other tales. The feminine beauty ideal is a script on how girls should act and what they should look like, making this the normal attitude and restricting their freedom to step out of the boundaries. Fairy tales with this subject matter often associated being "pretty," "beautiful," or "the fairest" with goodness and good characters are always rewarded. This image in fairy tales is also linked to race and class. The white and economically privileged characters received the most benefits and depicted the people these stories were aimed towards. With the intended goal to teach children morals, values, and social relations, the feminine beauty ideal in fairy tales provided a structure for children to follow. In exploring the survival of certain fairy tales, the authors measured how many times character's physical appearance was referenced and looked to see whether this corresponded with the number of times the tale was reproduced. They found that the top five reproduced tales included *Cinderella* and *Snow White*, which highlight the feminine beauty ideal. Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz' theory correctly states children's fairy tales that get reproduced into movies constantly reference the young woman's physical appearance and the feminine beauty ideal and help maintain gender roles. Although this theory has been true, they neglect to mention that the feminine beauty ideal and gender roles are evolving and today's

movies are emphasizing other qualities such as inner beauty, bravery, and love.

The feminine beauty ideal has a constant presence in retellings of fairy tales; however, this image is beginning to change. According to the authors, the feminine beauty ideal is “the socially constructed notion that physical attractiveness is one of women’s most important assets, and something all women should strive to achieve and maintain” (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz 711). As fairy tales constantly get reproduced into movies, this idea becomes the focal point for all of them, with the movies presenting a young, white, and economically privileged main character. For instance, the fairy tale *Cinderella* has had many adaptations and recreations of the plot featuring a young, beautiful, white, woman. In the most recent version of Disney’s *Cinderella*, which premiered in 2015, Cinderella was played by a woman that captures that ideal just like other movie adaptations such as *A Cinderella Story* and *Ella Enchanted*. However, in Disney’s *Princess and the Frog*, 2009, the main character was neither white or economically privileged, but a young black woman who was below the middle class. Then in 2012, Disney released a new princess named Merida who was Scottish and not your typical princess image. This upcoming year, Disney will release a new princess who is a Pacific islander named Moana. Growing up with mostly white woman in fairy tales pressured me to try and act that certain way and I love how these fairy tales are depicting different diversities that show that anyone can be beautiful no matter what race they are. This shows that diversity is being added to the princess image and expanding the boundary of what it used to be.

Gender scripts are often embedded into fairy tales showing the ways females and males should act; however, fairy tale retellings are transitioning to where females can take on the males’ role. The authors assert that “fairy tales... were intended to teach girls and young women how to become domesticated, respectable, and attractive to a marriage partner and to teach boys

and girls appropriate gendered values and attitudes” (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz 714). In most fairy tales, the main character is a beautiful woman that is saved by a prince. They always end up falling in love with each other. This shows that women must strive to be attractive in order for men to fall in love with them and that they are weak and must be dependent on men to save them. The man’s main role is to save the beautiful girl. In the original *Snow White* fairy tale, the Evil Queen is jealous of Snow White’s beauty which leads to the Queen’s death. Ultimately, Snow White ends up being saved by Prince Charming. However, the two most recent movie adaptations, which both premiered in the year 2012, are *Mirror Mirror* and *Snow White and the Huntsman* which have similarities to the original plot line, but feature Snow White saving herself without the help of a prince. In both of these movies, the man’s main role was no longer to save the girl, but to help her along the way. As someone who grew up loving to watch fairy tales in which the princess was saved by the prince, it was surprising to see two movies come out around the same year in which the princess took on the prince’s role. Movies are moving towards gender roles in which the young woman does not need to depend on a man, but still carry out the idea that beauty has its benefits.

As more movies about fairy tales are produced, we start to see less of an emphasis on the feminine beauty ideal, but more on other qualities that females have. For instance, in the movie *Shrek*, the main character, Princess Fiona, starts out in the movie as a young, beautiful woman, but is then transformed into an ogre. This moves the idea of the main character being beautiful in a different direction and “may begin to challenge the value and meaning of women’s beauty” (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz 725). As Princess Fiona shows her inner beauty as being an ogre, she finds true love without the emphasis on being pretty on the outside showing that you do not have to be physically beautiful on the outside in order to obtain a man. Other movies also

emphasize the woman's courage and bravery such as *Brave* and the new upcoming Disney princess movie, *Moana*. In the movie *Brave*, Merida, the young Scottish princess, defies the old tradition of marrying a man when her parents order her to and ends up making a mistake. With her determination, she soon finds out what real courage is and defines her own fate. In the movie *Moana*, the main character, a Pacific islander, finds her family in trouble and uses her bravery to set out and save them. Both of these movies show that women have other qualities than just being a pretty face. In the popular movie *Frozen*, Anna must go on a quest to save her sister, Queen Elsa, who has run away and caused a wintery storm. In the end, they show that love was most important and used that love to save each other. The feminine beauty ideal is starting to shift where other qualities are taken into account when depicting the main character.

In conclusion, recent retellings of fairy tales are demonstrating qualities that women possess such as inner beauty, courage, and love. This development helps eliminate the idea of fairy tales seen as gender scripts for children to follow and the idea that the only characteristic a woman should have is beauty. This matters because the children who grow up watching these fairy tales will learn that inner qualities are just as important as outer ones. The idea of emphasizing other qualities should be pushed further into more movies because this will widen the definition of beauty and what females' roles are. Furthermore, the feminine beauty ideal and gender roles will become something of the past as fairy tale retellings focus on different qualities.

Work Cited

Baker-Sperry, Lori, and Liz Grauerholz. "The Pervasiveness and Persistence of the Feminine Beauty Ideal in Children's Fairy Tales." *Gender and Society* 17. 5 (2003): 711-726. Print.