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Fairy Tales Under the Microscope: A Modern Critique of Classical Narratives and Their Impact on Children

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Abstract: This paper critically analyses the psychological impact of fairy tales on childhood development. It examines how classical fairy tales perpetuate cultural and gender stereotypes among young generations, while also influencing their emotional and moral development. This paper also discusses how Eurocentric and patriarchal narratives are challenged by modern reinterpretations such as *Frozen*, *Moana*, and *The Princess and the Frog*. This study offers a balanced and inclusive perspective on the popular genre of children's literature while addressing contemporary issues of gender in literature and psychological literary analysis.

Keywords: Fairy tales, Psychological impact, childhood development, children's literature, cognitive and emotional growth.

Introduction

Fairy tales originated in a form of oral tradition (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*; Centre of Excellence). They have evolved as a staple in children's literature in contemporary times. At first, these tales were communal stories that were passed down through generations and weren't meant exclusively for children (Warner 8). These stories served various purposes, including entertainment, moral instruction, and cultural preservation. The oral transmission provided them with flexibility, which allowed them to adapt to the evolving needs of society.

The 17th and 18th centuries saw the rise of print culture. As a result, fairy tales transitioned from oral to written forms, and European authors such as Giambattista Basile, Charles Perrault, and the Grimm Brothers played major roles in recording and standardizing them (Warner 9; Garry & El-Shamy 14). Their collections, like *Pentamerone* and *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, were published in print, making them more accessible to a wider audience, yet making them less fluid at the same time. The Grimm Brothers, particularly, sanitized their stories to align with middle-class Christian values, helping them debut into children's literature (Warner 10).

Animated films from the advent of cinema in the 20th century, especially those from Walt Disney, presented these fairy tales to an even wider audience (BBC; Zipes 35). Even in present times, fairy tales continue to



remain deeply rooted in children's literature. They continually resonate with newer generations through their timeless themes of adventure, morality, and transformation.

This research paper primarily focuses on the role of fairy tales in child development and their influence on cognitive and emotional growth (Knox-Johnson 78; Nicolopoulou 2). Fairy tales are timeless narratives and have long been used as tools for moral instruction and psychological development in children. Their impact on children's developmental processes, however, requires critical examination (Oatley 43; Haase 25). This research also delves into the roles these stories serve in the formation of children's imagination, problem-solving skills, and emotional intelligence, in addition to introducing key criticisms such as concerns about gender roles and stereotypes (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz 718; Rowe 129). This paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding while examining the positive and negative influences and complexities surrounding the use of fairy tales in early childhood development.

The Role of Fairy Tales in Early Childhood Development

Fairy tales foster various aspects of child development and, hence, their implementation makes a powerful impact on the child's psyche (Knox-Johnson 77). They assist in shaping children's worldviews and their perspectives about themselves. They offer emotional support and guidance in addition to stimulating imagination and problem-solving capacity (Oatley 66; Centre of Excellence). Fairy tales function as a vital instrument in early childhood education as they contribute to children's cognitive, emotional, and social growth while guiding them in understanding complex emotions, moral values, and societal norms.

In enhancing cognitive development, fairy tales particularly stimulate imagination and creativity (Garry & El-Shamy 22). The fantastical elements of fairy tales encourage children to think and visualize scenarios beyond the ordinary. This thought process helps in developing abstract thinking as they imagine themselves overcoming complex hypothetical situations. Characters in fairy tales triumph over various challenges and obstacles that require problem-solving and abstract creativity. As children read or listen to their stories, they take inspiration about how to navigate difficulties and achieve resolutions. This process helps children develop cognitive skills such as logic, reasoning, and decision-making, as they learn to apply the problem-solving strategies they encounter in fairy tales to real-life situations. For instance, tales like



Hansel and Gretel teach resourcefulness in the face of danger, while *The Three Little Pigs* emphasizes the importance of careful planning and preparation (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*; Warner 15).

Fairy tales are known to play a crucial role in helping children navigate their emotions by offering them a safe space to explore feelings like fear, happiness, and empathy (Oatley 72). Characters in these stories are often depicted dealing with their emotions, which in reality can be a hard topic for children. They often show scenarios portraying feelings such as sadness after a loss, fear of change, uncertainty about the future, and joy after overcoming hardships. Generally, children identify with these emotions and, as a result, build their own understanding related to emotions (Knox-Johnson 79). Many stories show heroes battling scary situations and dangerous creatures. Fairy tales in these cases become especially useful, as when the characters face their fears and succeed, they teach children how to build emotional resilience. For example, in *Little Red Riding Hood*, the main character outwits a dangerous wolf, providing a way for children to imagine how to handle fear and anxiety in a safe and imaginative setting (Warner 18). This helps children develop courage and emotional strength, showing them that even scary challenges can be overcome.

Fairy tales play an important role in a child's social development by showing how people are expected to behave in society (Rowe 134; Haase 40). Through characters and their interactions, these stories often reflect cultural norms and roles, such as expectations about gender, family dynamics, and authority. While some of these ideas may reinforce outdated stereotypes, they still give children a starting point for understanding social roles in their communities. For example, heroes in fairy tales are often portrayed as brave and good, while villains are shown as deceitful or wicked, helping children learn basic ideas of good and bad behavior. Fairy tales also shape a child's sense of right and wrong by teaching them moral values. Stories often portray themes of perseverance, justice, honesty, and kindness, providing children clear examples of how to act. For instance, *Cinderella* teaches the importance of kindness and patience, as the protagonist is eventually rewarded for her good character. Similarly, *The Boy Who Cried Wolf* shows the consequences of dishonesty. Through these stories, children learn important social values like empathy, fairness, and making ethical choices (Warner 19; Garry & El-Shamy 47).

Hence, fairy tales offer a rich learning experience for young minds, helping them grow cognitively, emotionally, and socially (Nicolopoulou 3). By engaging their imaginations, helping them manage their



feelings, and introducing them to social values, these stories play a key role in shaping well-rounded individuals.

Criticism of Fairy Tales in Child Development

Although fairy tales offer important lessons for children's development, they have also faced significant criticism for promoting harmful themes and stereotypes (Rowe 125; Haase 30). Critics note that many fairy tales strengthen outdated gender roles, depict violence, create unrealistic expectations, and display cultural biases. They argue that these factors can influence children's perspectives in negative ways, resulting in skewed ideas about gender, class, and social relationships (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz 714; Zipes 41).

One of the biggest criticisms of fairy tales is how they reinforce traditional gender roles, often portraying women as passive and men as dominant heroes (Rowe 130; Haase 35). In many classic stories like *Cinderella* and *Snow White*, the female characters are shown as submissive, waiting for a male hero to save them or bring them happiness. These stories suggest that a woman's role is to be beautiful, obedient, and in need of protection, while men are depicted as brave, active problem solvers. This kind of portrayal can shape how children see gender roles. Boys might get the message that they need to be strong and assertive, while girls might learn that their worth comes from being passive and nurturing. These outdated ideas about masculinity and femininity can limit how children understand their own identities and what they feel is expected of them (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz 720).

Modern adaptations like *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013) and *Brave* have experienced a growing movement in rewriting and challenging these traditional gender roles in fairy tales. These stories feature strong and independent female protagonists who take charge of their own lives (Haase 42). These updated versions of fairy tales offer a more balanced and empowering perspective, portraying that both girls and boys can be brave, independent, and in control of their own futures (Zipes 102).

Fairy tales are often criticized for promoting the unrealistic idea of "happily ever after," where all problems are solved easily and everyone lives in perfect happiness by the end. This fantasy can misguide children in their pursuits of life and relationships, consequently making it harder for them to face real-world challenges. Children exposed to these stories might feel that problems always have quick and easy solutions. For instance, some common fairy-tale themes like "love conquers all" can create a distorted view of



relationships, making it seem like love and happiness come without significant effort (Levy 37; Rowe 131). This can give children false impressions about what love, marriage, and personal fulfillment really mean. The particular focus on happy endings in fairy tales can sometimes overlook the harsh realities of life's challenges (Oatley 76).

Another major criticism of traditional fairy tales is the presence of violence and cruelty in many of these stories (Warner 22; Zipes 54). Tales like *Hansel and Gretel*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, and the Brothers Grimm's version of *Snow White* include frightening themes such as witch hunts, cannibalism, and harsh punishments. While these stories can be seen as metaphors for overcoming danger, the violent content may have negative effects on children's mental well-being. Exposing young readers to scary or violent themes can evoke anxiety or fear, possibly leading to nightmares or emotional distress (Nicolopoulou 2; Knox-Johnson 80). Critics argue that consuming such content at an early age may desensitize children to violence or skew their emotional reactions to danger and conflict. Although some people believe that facing fears through stories can help build resilience, the level of violence in certain fairy tales may be too intense and overwhelming for younger children. These concerns have sparked debates about whether the benefits of confronting fears in these stories outweigh the potential risks to children's emotional health.

Fairy tales often highlight themes like social mobility, wealth, beauty, and status. Characters like *Cinderella*, who rose from poverty to royalty by marrying a prince, suggest that success is linked to physical beauty and wealth. Stories like these could promote classist ideas that happiness is associated with outer appearances and material wealth. They may encourage the belief that one's worth is based on social class and physical appearance (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz 722). As a result, children may hold external traits like money and beauty to a higher value than inner virtues such as kindness and intelligence (Warner 26). These stories can further shape how younger minds perceive success in shallow rather than meaningful terms.

It should also be noted that fairy tales often rely on supernatural elements to help resolve a conflict and deliver happy endings. Although these components feed into a child's imagination, they might also lead to unrealistic expectations about problem-solving. There are various instances in stories in which characters overcome challenges with the help of magical elements like fairy godmothers, enchanted objects, and spells rather than relying on real-life problem-solving skills and resilience. This can prevent children from



developing crucial problem-solving abilities (Centre of Excellence; Oatley 81). Children may start expecting easy solutions for complex problems, making it harder for them to develop the perseverance and resourcefulness needed to overcome real-life issues. By seeing issues resolved with a wave of a wand, children could miss the lesson that solving problems often requires effort, creativity, and determination.

Another major criticism that traditional fairy tales face is their cultural and racial bias. Classic fairy tales have usually been passed down from European traditions that have long dominated the genre. There is a focus on white, European characters, which limits children's exposure to other cultural experiences, further reinforcing a narrow perspective on the world (Haase 44; Zipes 108). The lack of cultural diversity tends to marginalize non-European cultures, leaving children from other ethnicities feeling the lack of role models to relate to (Garry & El-Shamy 53). The underrepresentation of diverse characters often results in a limited worldview for children. However, recent years have seen the growth of diversified fairy tales featuring new retellings that incorporate African, Asian, Indigenous, and other cultural traditions. These changes aim to make fairy tales more inclusive and reflective of the diverse world we live in (*Coco*, 2017; *The Princess and the Frog*, 2009; *Moana*, 2016).

Psychological Impact of Fairy Tales on Children

While fairy tales are often seen as innocent and delightful, they can also have a profound psychological impact on children. How beauty is depicted and relationships are portrayed, along with the exploration of dark themes in these stories, can alter a child's understanding of themselves and the world around them (Oatley 12; Warner 27). These effects are easily noticeable in issues like body image, romantic ideals and how children process fear and trauma (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz 713; Levy 36).

Fairy tales often perpetuate narrow and unrealistic beauty standards, particularly for female characters. Female characters like *Cinderella*, *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty* are typically portrayed as fair-skinned, slender, and exceptionally beautiful, with their beauty equated to their moral value and worth (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz 720; Warner 28). This kind of emphasis on physical beauty can influence a child's perception of body image and self-esteem from a very young age. These tales can foster unrealistic expectations in terms of beauty in young girls. It can lead to body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem in cases when children feel they fail to match the idealised images presented before them (Knox-Johnson 80). Also, the portrayal of



“ugly” characters as villains in stories like the evil stepmother in Snow White and the witch in Hansel and Gretel, reinforces harmful associations between physical appearances and character, further affecting children’s body image and self-perception (Haase 38; Rowe 134).

The focus of the idea of “love at first sight” often portrays love as something instant and perfect. Love is portrayed as a magical solution to all problems in stories like *Sleeping Beauty* and *Cinderella*, with the prince and princess living “happily ever after” (Levy 38). These can shape children’s understanding in a way that is often misleading about how love and romance actually work in real life. As children transition into adolescence, these ideals can lead to very distorted perceptions about love and relationships. The belief that love is effortless and conflict-free can lead to major disappointment when they face the realities of real-life relations, which, in contrast, require constant efforts, communication, compromise and face many challenges (Oatley 67). Moreover, the overemphasis on the importance of romantic love as the key to happiness overshadows other types of love, like friendships, familial bonds and self-love, that are also crucial in an individual’s life (Levy 40; Warner 30). This narrow view may lead children to overlook the other richer and more complex experiences and connections that life has to offer.

Many classic fairy tales contain violent or frightening elements, such as the threat of death, punishment, or abandonment (Zipes, *Art of Subversion* 59). Characters often encounter terrifying situations like being chased by wolves, poisoned by witches and being imprisoned in towers. It is argued by some that these darker themes act as metaphors, allowing them to confront their fears in a safe environment, while others argue that they can trigger anxiety and fear among younger and sensitive children (Nicolopoulou 3; Haase 46). The psychological effects of these dark themes can vary based on a child’s age, developmental stage, and sensitivity. Younger children might internalise the dangers depicted in these stories, as they may face trouble in distinguishing fantasy from reality (Oatley 82). For instance, tales like *Hansel and Gretel*, with themes of abandonment and cannibalism, or *Little Red Riding Hood*, where the main character encounters a predatory wolf, can evoke feelings of fear, trauma, or anxiety, particularly if children are unable to process the story’s resolution or moral lesson (Warner 33; Rowe 132). Children’s emotional responses to these themes can evolve as they grow older. Older kids may be able to identify and appreciate the allegorical nature of the darker elements and how they overcome adversity (Zipes, *Irresistible Fairy Tale* 118). However, the intensity



of violence in some stories can still leave lasting impressions, potentially leading to nightmares, anxiety, or an exaggerated fear of particular things or situations (Knox-Johnson 81; Nicolopoulou 4).

While fairy tales can be valuable for cognitive and moral development, it's important to consider their psychological impact on children. These stories can shape how children view themselves, their understanding of relationships, and their emotional resilience. Depending on how they interpret and engage with these tales, fairy tales can influence lifelong attitudes about body image, love, and fear (Haase 48; Oatley 85).

Modern Adaptations of Fairy Tales: Addressing Criticisms

Modern adaptations of fairy tales have risen to the surface in recent years to address some of the most common criticisms aimed at traditional versions, such as the reinforcement of gender and cultural stereotypes and the portrayal of unrealistic love and dependency on magical fixes (Haase 50; Warner 35). Contemporary retellings aim to be more inclusive and progressive, providing children with a comparatively healthier and more realistic view of life, relationships, and individual development (Zipes 120; Joosen 8). By doing so, they help nurture a more balanced understanding of the world and encourage personal growth in a way that feels relevant to today's society.

One of the biggest changes in modern fairy tale adaptations is how gender roles are portrayed, especially when it comes to female characters. In traditional fairy tales, women were often depicted as passive, waiting to be rescued by male heroes. But in recent adaptations like *Frozen* and *Moana*, female characters are shown as strong, independent, and fully capable of shaping their own futures (Rowe 138; Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz 724). In *Frozen*, Elsa and Anna aren't defined by romantic relationships with men; instead, their stories revolve around their personal growth and their bond as sisters (Levy 42). Similarly, *Moana* follows a courageous young woman who sets off on a heroic journey to save her people, showing leadership and bravery without needing a male counterpart to guide her (Haase 53). These modern tales also challenge traditional ideas of masculinity and heroism for male characters. Instead of the hyper-masculine, battle-ready princes from older stories, male characters are now often shown as more empathetic and collaborative. In *Frozen*, Kristoff is a caring and supportive character who respects Anna's independence a sharp contrast to the typical male saviour figure (Warner 37). By presenting more nuanced and balanced models of both masculinity and femininity, these reimagined tales offer children examples of equality, cooperation, and mutual respect (Haase 55).



Modern fairy tale adaptations have also made great strides in embracing cultural diversity and inclusivity. While traditional fairy tales were often centred around European characters and settings, more recent adaptations like *The Princess and the Frog* and *Coco* have introduced diverse characters and stories, highlighting non-European cultures and experiences. In *The Princess and the Frog*, Disney's first Black princess, Tiana, reflects a much-needed shift toward representing African American culture. Set in the lively world of 1920s New Orleans, the story showcases a rich cultural backdrop that had previously been absent in fairy tales (Haase 57; Zipes 62). Similarly, *Coco* celebrates Mexican culture, focusing on family traditions and the Day of the Dead, beautifully highlighting the importance of honouring heritage and ancestors (Joosen12). These modern stories challenge the cultural biases present in older fairy tales by embracing diverse narratives and celebrating the richness of different cultures. They give children from all backgrounds the opportunity to see themselves reflected in these beloved stories, helping to foster a sense of inclusion, identity, and pride in who they are (Garry & El-Shamy 56).

Another major change in modern fairy tales is the shift away from relying on magic to solve problems. While magic still plays a big role in these stories, contemporary adaptations focus more on the value of logical thinking, effort, and teamwork to overcome challenges (Oatley 88; Warner 39). This approach encourages kids to develop real-world skills like resilience and problem-solving, showing them that they can tackle difficult situations through hard work and collaboration. For example, in *Moana*, the protagonist doesn't rely on magical shortcuts to save her island. Instead, her success comes from her determination, courage, and the wisdom she gains from her ancestors (Joosen 15). Similarly, in *Brave*, Merida mends her relationship with her mother not through magic but by learning to understand and work through their differences (Haase 59). These stories teach children that while magic can add excitement to a tale, it is personal growth, perseverance, and working together that lead to true success (Zipes 124).

Modern adaptations also move away from the unrealistic romantic ideals that dominated older fairy tales. Traditional stories often revolved around romantic love, with "happily ever after" tied to marriage or a romantic union. Today's tales shift the focus to themes like self-discovery, friendship, and personal growth,



offering children healthier, more balanced models of emotional development and relationships. In *Frozen*, for example, the story challenges the idea of “love at first sight” by turning the classic prince-saving-the-princess plot on its head. Instead of romantic love, the heart of the story is the bond between two sisters, emphasizing the power of familial love and self-acceptance (Levy 44). Similarly, *Moana* avoids romantic tropes altogether, focusing on her personal journey of leadership and self-discovery without a love interest (Haase 61).

These modern stories promote the message that fulfilment comes from within and from healthy, supportive relationships, not just from romantic love (Rowe 140; Oatley 91). By highlighting emotional growth through friendships and other meaningful connections, they give children a more well-rounded and realistic understanding of love and human relationships (Joosen 18; Zipes 67).

Conclusion

Fairy tales hold a special place in childhood development, acting as cultural touchstones that shape young minds (Warner 42; Zipes 126). While modern versions reflect today’s values, traditional fairy tales still offer valuable lessons when placed in the right context (Haase 63; Joosen 20). Finding a balance between the timeless charm of these stories and modern social norms can enhance their educational and developmental impact (Oatley 95; Rowe 142).

Even though some values in traditional fairy tales are outdated, with proper guidance, children can still learn positive, enduring messages (Nicolopoulou 4; Knox-Johnson 81). These stories also connect kids to past generations, bridging cultural heritage while sparking wonder and moral understanding. Because traditional fairy tales often carry problematic elements like gender stereotypes and unrealistic romantic ideals, parents and educators have a key role in guiding children’s understanding (Rowe 138; Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz 725). They can encourage kids to question why female characters are often passive or how “happily ever after” endings simplify real-life struggles. By fostering discussions about these themes, adults help children develop critical thinking while still enjoying the magical aspects of the stories. This approach allows children to appreciate the moral lessons and entertainment in fairy tales without internalizing harmful stereotypes. With guidance, these stories can become powerful educational tools that inspire both creativity and analytical thinking.



Diversifying the stories children read is an effective way to balance traditional fairy tales with modern values. Folk tales from different cultures, for instance, offer new perspectives, broadening children's views and fostering respect for diversity. Stories from African, Asian, or Indigenous traditions feature different characters, settings, and values that enrich children's imaginations while teaching about inclusivity (Garry & El-Shamy 59). Modern books, like *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls* or *The Paper Bag Princess*, challenge old gender norms and promote resilience, independence, and equality (Favilli & Cavallo 32; Munsch). By incorporating these stories into a child's reading, parents and educators can ensure that kids are exposed to narratives that reflect today's evolving social landscape (Zipes 70; Joosen 22).

By blending traditional fairy tales with modern and diverse storytelling, children can enjoy the richness of classic stories while learning to think critically about their deeper messages (Warner 46; Haase 68). This balance allows them to appreciate the magic of fairy tales while preparing for the complexities of the real world (Zipes 130; Oatley 98).

While we know a lot about how fairy tales shape childhood development, there are still areas that deserve more exploration. One such area is the long-term psychological impact of these stories, especially how exposure to traditional gender roles or unrealistic ideas about love might influence someone's worldview as they grow older (Levy 46; Oatley 100). Another important topic for research is the effect of diverse cultural stories on young children's development. Understanding how narratives from different cultures shape children's social and emotional growth could lead to more inclusive education strategies and offer valuable insights into the universal power of storytelling (Garry & El-Shamy 60; Joosen 24).

In conclusion, fairy tales remain a beloved and influential part of childhood, but as society changes, so too must the stories we share. By engaging thoughtfully with both classic and modern tales and promoting inclusive storytelling, parents, educators, and communities can ensure that fairy tales continue to enrich children's lives in meaningful ways and in tune with today's values (Haase 70; Warner 48).

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