What Makes a Woman "Pious and Good": The Function of Several Grimm Brothers' Cautionary Fairy Tales

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What Makes a Woman “Pious and Good”: The Function of Several Grimm Brothers’ Cautionary Fairy Tales

A Thesis by

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ABSTRACT

What Makes a Woman “Pious and Good”: The Function of Several Grimm Brothers’ Cautionary Fairy Tales

by Hannah C. Montante

This thesis explores how several of the Grimm Brothers’ fairy tales, “Little Snow-white and the seven dwarfs,” “The Juniper Tree,” and “Cinderella” exhibit patriarchal expectations of women that fairy tale protagonists strive to uphold, while female villains feel driven to violence and artifice because of their inability to fit into this role. Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm published these stories in nineteenth-century Germany, which was predominantly Protestant and held the belief that women should be nurturing homemakers who took care of their husbands and children. These cautionary tales instruct women on how to behave and appear physically, likely because these stories aimed to help young women secure husbands. In these three of the Grimm Brothers’ fairy tales, evil women — typically stepmothers but also evil stepsisters — are classified as witches who mistreat the child from the man of the home’s first marriage. These witches are portrayed as jealous of beautiful young women who are subservient to men and children, compelling them to compete with the angelic figure. The husband/father abandons their biological child, allowing their new wife to physically and/or emotionally abuse the son/daughter, but they never face repercussions for this negligence. At the end of these tales, protagonists who are dutiful and pious are rewarded by natural motifs, leading to their happy endings, while evil women are punished violently in a public display. Female protagonists are always saved from the villainous witch by a male character – commonly a suitor, but also male family members.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ABSTRACT</th>
<th>IV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND &amp; INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 WHAT ARE THE ROOTS OF THE STEPMOTHER’S EVIL IN “THE JUNIPER TREE”?</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 WHAT PUNISHMENT DOES A “FALSE BRIDE” DESERVE IN “CINDERELLA?”</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 CONCLUSION</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1 Historical background & introduction

While fairy tales are usually thought of as lighthearted stories for children, the tales edited and published by the Grimm Brothers in the 19th century were gruesome stories of revenge and destruction. These stories were originally folk tales, meaning they changed over time as they traveled orally throughout Europe. The tales included fantastical elements but also featured the bleak realities of living in poverty.

As students at the University of Marburg in Germany, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm “proved themselves to be innovative scholars in the new field of German philology by publishing articles and books on medieval literature,” despite dealing with financial problems and their mother’s death, which forced them to take responsibility for their three younger brothers and sister (Zipes). Their friend, the romantic poet Clemens Brentano, asked if they wanted to start collecting folk tales “so he could use them in a book of literary fairy tales,” but “when they realized that Brentano was not going to use the tales” they still published their collection at the urging of another romantic writer, Achim von Arnim (Zipes). In publishing these stories, the Grimm Brothers desired to “trace and grasp the essence of cultural evolution and to demonstrate how natural language, stemming from the needs, customs, and rituals of the common people, created authentic bonds and helped forge civilized communities” (Zipes). Although a common misconception is that all the fairy tales came from lower-class people who could not read, many of the stories came from educated people “whom the Grimms came to know quite well” (Zipes).

The first two volumes of the Grimm Brothers’ Kinder-und Hausmärchen (Children and Household Tales) were published in 1812 and 1815, respectively. While most of the stories feature young protagonists and their families, they were intended for scholars and adults (Zipes). Upon
realizing that the majority of their audience was, in fact, the younger population of Germany, Wilhelm Grimm wove Christian symbols into some of the tales and attempted to make them more age appropriate; however, many still exhibited brutal acts of violence (Zipes). He also removed stories such as “The Hand with the Knife,” “How Some Children Played at Slaughtering,” and “The Children of Famine,” which “have nothing to do with fairies or happy endings. Instead, these are stark narratives about brutal living conditions in the nineteenth century” (Zipes). The Grimm Brothers continued to publish seven editions until releasing their final version in 1857 (Zipes). Since then, translations and edited versions of their fairy tales have been re-released and adapted into other forms of media by countless others.

Many of the Grimm Brothers’ fairy tales function as cautionary tales, which have been used to instruct cultures throughout history. In Off with Their Heads!: Fairy Tales and the Culture of Childhood, Maria Tatar explores “The Pedagogy of Fear in Fairy Tales,” writing,

Disobedience is generally a function of curiosity and stubbornness in the behavioral calculus of most folklore collections, and both vices are repeatedly singled out for punishment in cautionary tales. Such tales, which enunciate a prohibition, stage its violation, and put on display the punishment of the violator, are surely the most openly violent and explicitly didactic of all children’s stories. They aim to mold behavior by illustrating in elaborate detail the dire consequences of deviant conduct. (25)

Tatar refers to the Genesis story of “Adam and Eve” as one of the first known of these stories. After creating Adam and Eve “in his own image,” God instructs Adam not to eat forbidden fruit from the “tree of knowledge of good and evil” (“Adam and Eve: biblical figures”). Adam communicates this to Eve, but she still bites into an apple when Satan in the form of a serpent tempts her, leading Adam to do the same (“Adam and Eve: biblical figures”). Therefore, Adam
and Eve are punished – Eve with painful childbirth and her husband’s dominion over her, Adam with “relegation to an accursed ground with which he must toil and sweat for his subsistence,” and both of them with sickness and mortality (“Adam and Eve: biblical figures”). Because of Adam and Eve’s transgression, later Christian theology speaks of “the concept of original sin… a sin in which humankind has been captive since the Fall of Adam and Eve” (“Adam and Eve: biblical figures”).

Within most of the Grimm Brothers’ fairy tales, characters are penalized for straying from the status quo. The bodies of those who defy social expectations – dead, alive, or in-between – are usually displayed in a gruesome fashion to express specific messages. Fairy tales not only taught children proper manners, but also educated “women with what conventional wisdom perceived as the correct program for making and preserving a good marriage” (Tatar 96). In early nineteenth-century Germany, which was predominantly Protestant, “The legal system, societal attitudes and norms of behavior, and prevalent philosophical ideas were magnified by the relative cultural isolation,” casting “women in the fixed roles of housewife and bearer and nurturer of children, and the attribution of women to sex-determined characteristics such as weakness, emotionality, and dependence” (Hallmark 6). As a female in their father’s household, young women were expected to find a husband who they provided with children. This meant that while they were still young enough to be considered beautiful by society, they needed to act “appropriately” — according to patriarchal standards — to secure a spouse. Otherwise, “Women who did not accommodate themselves to these patterns would indeed be playing with fire” (Tatar 96).

In addition to showing young women ideal models of behavior, the Grimm Brothers’ fairy tales illustrated everything they should not have been. When outlining different types of
antagonists in her book, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms’ Fairy Tales*, Tatar articulates that “The third (and this group easily outnumbers the members of both other categories) is composed of women. These are the voracious cooks, stepmothers, witches, and mothers-in-law with voracious appetites for human fare, sometimes even for the flesh and blood or for the liver and heart of their own relatives” (139). These women are not sensitive to children (typically from their husband’s previous marriage), flipping the traditional narrative of women as maternal protectors and showing the outcome of this behavior. Tatar adds, “Instead of functioning as nurturers and providers, cannibalistic female villains withhold food and threaten to turn children into their own source of nourishment, reincorporating them into the bodies that gave birth to them” (140). Because of their sadistic crimes, these women are usually dealt the worst punishments at the end of their stories – disfigurement and death. In the Grimm Brothers’ tales, “Little Snow-white and the seven dwarfs,” “The Juniper Tree,” and “Cinderella,” natural motifs reward young women who prove themselves as submissive and pious, leading them to their “happily ever after,” while women who do not properly fit into this patriarchal role feel compelled to artifice and violence, causing them to be brutally punished.
2 The angel-woman vs. the monster-woman in “Little Snow-white” – one and the same?

The Grimm Brothers’ fairy tale, “Little Snow-white and the seven dwarfs,” demonstrates a clear picture that tells us which female characters to support and which should be excluded by society. In the opening sentences of the tale, a queen inadvertently cuts her finger while sewing at a window, causing “three drops of blood” to fall in the snow. She observes that “the red looked pretty upon the white snow, and she thought to herself, ‘Would that I had a child as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as the wood of the window-frame.’” This queen has no real role within the story and is never assigned a name, the narrative focusing instead on her future daughter, “Little Snow-white.” Even before Little Snow-white is born, her mother hopes she will be beautiful and innocent, as evidenced by the color white which symbolizes purity. While we learn nothing else about this queen, the tale subtly establishes her as an ideal woman through her desire to have a perfect daughter and by puncturing her own finger. Pricking “a mole or blemish” was a method in the Middle Ages to determine if it “was indeed a devil’s mark” (Sheldon). If the blemish “did not bleed or cause pain to the suspected witch when a small sharp instrument pierced it, then it was the genuine article and proof of a pact with the devil” (Sheldon). The queen’s self-inflicted wound indicates that she is not a witch but rather an innocent woman, as she hopes her daughter will be. She dies when Little Snow-white is born, her death glossed over, and she is soon replaced by an evil stepmother. For Little Snow-white, there is now “no female model for her… except the ‘good’ (dead) mother and her living avatar the ‘bad’ mother” (Gilbert and Gubar 296). Seemingly, no two “good” women can coexist in a fairy tale – a virtuous protagonist is always pitted against another woman who is portrayed as wicked.
After the King remarries, we are presented with Little Snow-white’s stepmother, who is far from nurturing and the antithesis of the young girl’s deceased mother. Like the first wife, this woman is never given a name, allowing us to see the disposable and revolving nature of the man’s wives. The text describes the new Queen as “a beautiful woman, but proud and haughty, and she could not bear that any one else should surpass her in beauty.” In this world, beauty is a matter of the highest importance – so vital that the Queen constantly stands in front of her “wonderful looking-glass” inquiring, “‘Looking-glass, Looking-glass, on the wall, Who in this land is the fairest of all?’” The Queen’s repetitive act of looking in the mirror and painstakingly scrutinizing herself illustrates what women older than Little Snow-white feel is necessary to maintain their looks. The mirror tells the Queen she is “‘the fairest of all,’” which satisfies her because “she knew that the looking-glass spoke the truth.” The Queen trusts the mirror’s words as facts, basing her actions on it. Later, she asks it the same question again, “‘But Snow-white was growing up, and grew more and more beautiful; and when she was seven years old she was as beautiful the day, and more beautiful than the Queen herself,’” causing the mirror to respond, “‘Thou art fairer than all who are here, Lady Queen. But more beautiful still is Snow-white, as I ween.’” Both the third-person narrator and the mirror believe the Queen’s looks are inferior to that of Little Snow-white, launching the Queen into a plot to murder the young girl. She is “shocked” and turns “yellow and green with envy” upon hearing the mirror’s answer. While Little Snow-white is associated with colors that signify youth and beauty, the jealous Queen is compared to colors related to sickness and death, revealing that the narrative voice is prejudiced against older women.

As Snow-white and her stepmother age, the story portrays them as undergoing opposing transformations – one of them coming into her beauty, while the other, moving into mid-life, is
viewed as having a declining appearance. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar write that the tale of “‘Little Snow-white’ dramatizes the essential but equivocal relationship between the angel-woman and the monster-woman” (291), noting that the story’s “only real action–arises from the relationship between these two women: the one fair, young, pale, the other just as fair, but older, fiercer; the one a daughter, the other a mother; the one sweet, ignorant, passive, the other both artful and active; the one a sort of angel, the other an undeniable witch” (292). In addition to having her appearance criticized, the Queen’s role as stepmother likely leaves her feeling perennially inadequate that she is not anyone’s biological mother nor her husband’s first choice of wife. While Little Snow-white’s father, the King, has no active role in the story, Gilbert and Gubar postulate that “His surely is the voice of the looking glass, the patriarchal voice of judgment that rules the Queen’s–and every woman’s–self evaluation” (qtd. in Tatar 154). Because of the overpowering patriarchal ideals in this world, the Queen feels driven to obsess about her appearance, so much so that she can focus only on being the most beautiful woman in the kingdom. In Jeana Jorgensen’s study of one hundred and three of the Grimm Brothers’ fairy tales to see how “bodies… can yield insights into the constructions of gender, age, and other identity factors” (130), she writes that “Almost one-fourth of the adjectives describing women’s bodies have to do with age, specifically the word old,” and “beauty and morality figure prominently in women’s adjectives, with beautiful, wise, evil, ugly, and wicked lacking parallels in the men’s adjectives” (135). As the Queen gets older, the mirror views her as less attractive, and Snow-white, in contrast, is blossoming into her femininity, even at merely seven years old. In a similar study of the Grimm Brothers’ fairy tales by Lori Baker-Sperry and Liz Grauerholz, they find, “Of the tales that contain younger women, 57 percent described them as ‘pretty,’ ‘beautiful,’ or ‘the fairest,’ and on average there are 1.74 references to their beauty. By contrast,
only 5.2 percent of tales that contain older women make reference to their beauty, with an average number of references to older women’s beauty being 0.14” (718). They also discover that “in 17 percent of the stories there are links between beauty and jealousy” (719). These tales depict that female characters undergoing the natural metamorphosis of life should be envious of younger women, which often motivates them to commit horrendous crimes.

In addition to her beauty, Little Snow-white also proves herself perfect in character. When forced into the forest to escape her stepmother’s wrath, “wild beasts ran past her, but did her no harm,” showing that all parts of nature protect her. She soon comes upon the cottage of the seven dwarves and explains her plight, with the dwarves replying that she can stay with them as long as she “will take care of our house, cook, make the beds, wash, sew, and knit, and if you will keep everything neat and clean.” Snow-white immediately agrees to these duties, demonstrating she is dutifully willing to fulfill this subservient role in order to survive. She is portrayed as a “housekeeping angel in a tiny house,” which “conveys the story’s attitude toward ‘woman’s world and woman’s work’: the realm of domesticity is a miniaturized kingdom in which the best of women is not only like a dwarf but like a dwarf’s servant” (Gilbert and Gubar 295). The dwarves never show appreciation for her house chores, simply expecting them. While Snow-white represents a picture-perfect woman — a docile servant for the men around her — her evil stepmother is the reverse. Annette Schimmelpfennig writes, “From a sociological perspective, the witch was the opposite of the woman’s image as propagandized by the church, ‘the repentant woman who spent her life cloistered or serving men in order to do penance for her original sin’” (29). This characterization is exemplified by Snow-white, illustrating that the Protestant church in the nineteenth century would have considered her a virtuous woman.
Shortly after the mirror’s assertion, the stepmother acts. She enlists a huntsman to “Kill her, and bring me back her heart as a token.” As he is poised to murder the girl, Little Snow-white begins to cry, causing him to kill a wild boar instead. Sympathetic to the girl’s dependence on him for her life, he takes the wild boar’s heart and pretends it is Snow-white’s, so “The cook had to salt this, and the wicked Queen ate it.” This demonic, ritualistic event, in which the Queen attempts to possess Snow-white’s youthful beauty to transform her own appearance, reveals her identity as a witch. Schimmelpfennig explains, “‘It was a common belief that witches engaged in infanticide and cannibalism’” (29). Girardot also states that “In some primitive traditions the cannibalistic ingestion of entrails is associated with the absorption of the power and soul of the victim,” and “the liver (like the heart) is linked in folkloric tradition to desire and strength, as well as being associated with the secrets of witchcraft” (290). In the old world that folk tales populated, the liver was the equivalent of the heart today, viewed as the most critical organ that represented one’s life force.

When the Queen learns from her mirror that Snow-white is still alive, she determines to take action again and transforms her appearance. The Grimm Brothers note that “she painted her face, and dressed herself like an old pedlar-woman, and no one could have known her.” This scene subverts our expectations, as we assume that putting on makeup will make someone more beautiful and improve their prior appearance in some way; instead, the Queen is only able to transform into older, unattractive, and unrecognizable versions of herself, allowing her appearance to reflect her “ugly” personality. Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz find that in the Grimm Brothers’ tales, “Often there is a clear link between beauty and goodness, most often in reference to younger women, and between ugliness and evil (31 percent of all stories associate beauty with goodness, and 17 percent associate ugliness with evil)” (718). In addition, “while
beauty is often rewarded, lack of beauty is punished” (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz 719). If characters with good looks demonstrate wickedness in their character, they are usually disfigured or punished physically later on in a tale, such as the cruel stepsisters in the Grimm Brothers’ “Cinderella.” The story of “Little Snow-white” also demonstrates its disapproval of makeup by associating evil women with artificiality, whereas women such as Little Snow-white are portrayed as naturally beautiful.

The Queen’s transformations call attention to negative beliefs society holds toward the normal process of women aging. Female fairy tale characters are viewed as beautiful and innocent while young, yet, as they age and their beauty fades, they descend into the role of a witch, eventually physically becoming an old, hideous woman who preys upon others in the evilest ways imaginable. Jorgensen writes that in the Grimm Brothers’ fairy tales, “the most frequently used adjective, old, was used solely with women and with hostile characters most of the time” (138). This discriminatory point of view likely stems from historical prejudices regarding older women. In their 1486 book, “Hammer of the Witches,” Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger argue that “Since [women] are weak, they find an easy and secret manner of vindicating themselves by witchcraft” (qtd. in Schimmelpfennig 30). Older women were commonly accused of being witches, likely because they could no longer have children and were, therefore, no longer considered to be of use in society. Diane Purkiss asserts,

By the 1590s, the last decade of Elizabeth I’s reign, the idea of the witch in England had crystallised as an old, very poor woman, lame or blind in one eye, and inclined to lose her temper over personal slights. Her dry, twisted and ageing body was a kind of poison, and she was believed to be able to harm people and animals simply by speaking to them or looking at them.
From then on, ideology associated the age of a woman with her character and physical beauty, or lack thereof.

The objects the Queen tempts Little Snow-white with are telling regarding perceptions of women in relation to their looks. When the Queen, dressed as an old pedlar-woman, goes to the dwarves’ house where Snow-white is in hiding, she pretends to sell “‘Good things, pretty things… stay-laces of all colours.’” Although Snow-white has been warned by the dwarves that her stepmother may come to their house, she decides to purchase one, and “the old woman laced so quickly and laced so tightly that Snow-white lost her breath and fell down as if dead.” Little Snow-white allows herself to be enticed by stay-laces that tighten a corset—a piece of clothing women wear to constrict the size of their waist and call attention to their figure. When the dwarves thwart the Queen’s attempt to kill Little Snow-white, she creates “a poisonous comb” “by the help of witchcraft, which she understood.” Once again, she chooses an accessory she knows will tempt Snow-white due to its ability to enhance a woman’s beauty. The comb as an object of temptation evokes a well-known account of sirens from Greek mythology, who sit beside the ocean, combing their long golden hair and singing to passing sailors. But anyone who hears their song is bewitched by its sweetness, and they are drawn to that island-like iron to a magnet. And their ship smashes upon rocks as sharp as spears. And those sailors join the many victims of the Sirens in a meadow filled with skeletons.

(Homer qtd. in Kabir)

In the works of Homer and other Roman poets, the sirens, sometimes called “Antemusia,” were known as deadly figures who transfixed men (Kabir). They drew sailors in with their siren songs and lured them to their deaths, as the Queen attempts to do with Snow-white. But while the sirens’ faces and voices were beautiful, the bottom half of their bodies resembled birds. This
allusion hints at the Queen’s true nature and the way she has transformed herself into the appearance of someone else – “the shape of another old woman.” She goes to the dwarves’ house again, and while Snow-white turns her away at first, when she sees the object, “it pleased the girl so well that she let herself be beguiled and opened the door.” The “wicked woman” combs Snow-white’s hair and “the girl fell down senseless,” the Queen remarking, “You paragon of beauty… you are done for now.” Gilbert and Gubar write, “The only hint of self-interest that Snow-white displays throughout the whole story comes in her ‘narcissistic’ desire for the stay-laces, the comb, and the apple that the disguised murderess offers. As Bettelheim remarks, this ‘suggests how close the stepmother’s temptations are to Snow-white’s desires’” (295). The stay-laces and comb indicate that Snow-white is not above using material objects to appear even more beautiful, even at her young age. Because she gives into the Queen’s temptations, attempting to enhance herself artificially instead of accepting her natural beauty, Little Snow-white is soon punished by the narrative.

The Queen’s final attempt to kill the girl is by way of creating a poisonous apple in her private chamber. She goes “into a quiet secret, lonely room, where no one ever came” to create it, which “Outside… looked pretty, white with a red cheek, so that ever one who saw it longed for it; but whoever ate a piece of it must surely die.” The description of the apple parallels Snow-white’s appearance – white and red materializing in the story again. N.J. Girardot suggests that these recurring colors indicate “Snow White’s own sexual and social maturation involving a threefold unification of the white, black, and red parts of her nature” (285). She begins as the color white – a pure young girl – but as she matures, she loses parts of her innocence and even takes on similar traits to her stepmother. To deliver the apple, the Queen transforms for a third time into a woman whom society would have viewed as unappealing and practically invisible.
The Grimm Brothers continue, “When the apple was ready she [the Queen] painted her face, and dressed herself up as a country-woman.” Girardot explains,

The stepmother, rather than true Queen, reveals herself as she really is (as a lower class peddler, old woman, and farmer’s wife). She is a witch, yet at the same time she is something like the old women of primitive tradition (frequently depicted as a crone or witch) who must torture and “kill” the young initiate if she is to cross successfully the threshold to adult life. Again, the multivalence of the symbolism is important in that the stepmother must become a witch and the agent of death so the final work of transformation can be made possible. (291)

The Queen and Little Snow-white’s roles in the narrative are unmistakably intertwined – as one becomes a witch, the other reaches her prime as a woman.

Because they eventually demonstrate themselves as imperfect, female characters in the Grimm Brothers’ fairy tales are typically punished by each other or nature and violently so. Jorgensen writes that within these stories, “The conflict between the social expectations for these roles and the character’s divided loyalties is thus shown to play out on the body” (138). The Queen convinces Little Snow-white to eat the apple by saying,

“Look, I will cut the apple in two pieces; you eat the red cheek, and I will eat the white.”

The apple was so cunningly made that only the red cheek was poisoned. Snow-white longed for the fine apple, and when she saw that the woman ate part of it she could resist no longer, and stretched out her hand and took the poisonous half. But hardly had she a bit of it in her mouth than she fell down dead.

This scene recalls the Biblical story of Satan enticing Eve with the apple in the Garden of Eden, causing her and Adam to be cast into a world of life and death, as is Little Snow-white. This
significant event leads to Snow-white’s more permanent unconscious state, showing that she needs to be punished for her forbidden desires. Interestingly enough, the Queen tells Snow-white to take a bite from the red side of the apple, a more mature color, and the Queen takes a bite from the white side, representing innocence. In this sense, Snow-white and the Queen trade places, temporarily switching their roles. Gilbert and Gubar analyze that “the Queen and Snow-white are in some sense one: while the Queen struggles to free herself from the passive Snow-white in herself, Snow-white must struggle to repress the assertive Queen in herself. That both women eat from the same deadly apple in the third temptation episode merely clarifies and dramatizes this point” (295). Rather than refusing the Queen’s objects and turning her away, she takes on a more active role through her desire for these objects, illustrating that she is not so innocent after all and in maturing, will likely share similarities with the evil Queen.

Even when Snow-white appears dead from the poison apple, her beauty is still emphasized above all else. Instead of burying her, the seven dwarves “had a transparent coffin of glass made, so that she could be seen from all sides, and they laid her in it.” The Grimm Brothers note, “she still looked as if she were living, and still had her pretty red cheeks.” The preservation of Snow-white in this form forces her into a liminal space between life and death. Instead of physically maturing, the process of becoming a woman is suspended, her youthful beauty and innocence maintained within a glass coffin. The Grimm Brothers write, “she did not change, but looked as if she were asleep; for she was as white as snow, as red as blood, and her hair was as black as ebony.” At the beginning of the tale, Snow-white’s beauty is described in this way before she is born, illustrating that society would rather she looks this way permanently. Gilbert and Gubar remark, “For dead and self-less in her glass coffin, she is an object, to be displayed and desired, patriarchy’s marble ‘opus,’ the decorative and decorous Galatea with whom every
ruler would like to grace his parlor” (296). The preservation of Snow-white in the coffin is similar to that of another princess in a Grimm Brothers’ tale, “Little Brier Rose,” who is also cast into a deep sleep by a witch. In many of the Grimm Brothers’ fairy tales, young women are displayed as objects, much like how young children are preferred in the English proverb that instructs them to be “seen and not heard.” Snow-white as an object is emphasized again when the King’s son comes to visit her. He persuades the dwarves, “Let me have it as a gift, for I cannot live without seeing Snow-white. I will honour and prize her as my dearest possession.” Rather than treating her as a person, he sees her as an object he aims to possess and control.

In her coffin, three birds visit Snow-white – “first an owl, then a raven, and last a dove.” Because Noah sent a dove during the Flood in Genesis VIII 1, doves represent innocence and virtue in the Christian tradition (Moberly). Also sent by Noah, the raven is considered a harbinger of darkness who feeds on death and decay, while the owl appears to be in the middle of the two, with a more positive connotation, but is also a nocturnal animal who lives in darkness. The dove, raven, and owl hint at the three perceived phases of a woman’s development and how society desires women to stay in a dove-like state forever.

Orchestrated by nature, “Little Snow-white and the seven dwarfs” ends happily for the princess. When the prince’s servants are carrying away the glass coffin, they stumbled over a tree-stump, and with the shock the poisonous piece of apple which Snow-white had bitten off came out of her throat. And before long she opened her eyes, lifted up the lid of the coffin, sat up, and was once more alive. “Oh, heavens, where am I?” she cried. The King's son, full of joy, said, “You are with me,” and told her what had happened, and said, “I love you more than everything in the world; come with me to my father's palace, you shall be my wife.” And Snow-white was willing, and went with him.
In many Grimm Brothers’ tales, natural motifs such as trees magically reward virtuous female protagonists. Here, the tree stump that the prince’s servants stumble on brings Snow-white back to life, allowing her to be proposed to by the prince who will protect her from her evil stepmother. Since the prince doesn’t know Snow-white, he bases his “love” for her on appearance alone, and she has never met the prince but is expected to accept his proposal, becoming immediately dependent on him.

Instead of accentuating Snow-white’s happiness, story’s last paragraph emphasizes the Queen’s punishment instead. The Queen is invited to the wedding feast, but when she stands in front of the mirror to check her appearance, she discovers that Snow-white is alive and is the one who is marrying the prince. Out of obligation, the Queen still decides to attend the ceremony; however, when she arrives, she faces a violent end, “forced to put on [the] red-hot shoes, and dance until she dropped down dead.” Girardot writes that “Red hot iron slippers” recall “folk practices of destroying a witch through the magic agency of iron” (297). This tale demonstrates that witches get what they deserve through necessary violence – a punishment displayed for the entire kingdom. Tatar even notes, “An eighteenth-century German version of ‘Snow White’ ends with the cynical observation that ‘revenge can be as sweet as love’” (175). Since we have seen Snow-white experience many murder attempts by the Queen, this is a satisfying ending for us as readers. But as Snow-white ages and is situated into her new role as Queen, replacing the old one, this also appears to be her fate. The patriarchal voice within the tale communicates that as women experience different stages of life, they reveal mental and physical imperfections, leading them to inevitably be replaced by a younger woman who is more desirable and submissive. Incidentally, “In the first edition of the Nursery and Household Tales, Snow White’s mother never dies; her vanity and pride turn her into an ogre who orders her daughter murdered; she then
devours what she believes to be the girls’ lungs and liver” (Tatar 143). When Little Snow-white becomes the new Queen, she will also become desperate to receive the treatment she once did as a younger woman. This system leads female characters to violence toward other women, upholding an endless cycle of destruction while failing to hold male characters accountable for neglecting their biological children.
3 What are the roots of the stepmother’s evil in “The Juniper Tree”?

The fairy tale “The Juniper Tree” is one of the darkest in *Grimm’s Children and Household Tales*. This story “conforms to the classic model of a cautionary tale for adults: those who threaten and abuse children become themselves targets of brute violence” (Tatar 213). The beginning of the story presents us with a woman who is “beautiful and pious” and prays “day and night” for her and her husband, “a rich man,” to have a child, establishing herself as a maternal figure immediately. One day, she stands under the juniper tree in front of their home and cuts at the edges of an apple, and “while she was paring herself the apple she cut her finger, and the blood fell on the snow.” Upon seeing this, she wishes for “a child as red as blood and as white as snow,” as does the first queen in “Little Snow-white and the seven dwarfs.” Soon after, the woman becomes pregnant and lush plants grow around their house, with green branches “all closely intertwined,” and “the birds sang until the wood resounded and the blossoms fell from the trees.” Because she is beautiful and pious in her behavior, the woman’s happiness and fertility are connected to the nature around her. This scene evokes the idea of “Mother Nature,” the female personification of nature due to its ability to create and nurture life, and connects to Biblical Eve, the first woman and mother of all living things. But when the couple’s juniper tree “smelt so sweet,” the woman “snatched at the juniper-berries and ate them greedily, then she grew sick and sorrowful, then the eighth month passed, and she called her husband to her, and wept and said, ‘If I die, then bury me beneath the juniper-tree.’” The biased narrative describes the woman as acting “greedily” simply because she feels the need to eat more of their natural resources due to her pregnancy. The man’s first wife cannot stay a young “Little Snow-white”
figure — the ideal woman — forever, so as a woman who has already proven herself as predominantly “good,” the tale spares her from experiencing the feminine life stages that will lead to the final phase as “witch.” Jerilyn Fisher and Ellen S. Silber write that “whenever a female character in the tales articulates physical craving, satisfaction of that appetite leads to her near-death or another’s suffering” (128). Women can pray for children, having their desire met by nature, but if they take too active of a part in their desires, they, or those near them, are forced to deal with the consequences. The woman in “The Juniper Tree” dies after giving birth to their child, a son, because when she holds him, “she was so delighted that she died.” The lives of women in fairy tales are often intertwined with that of their offspring, emphasizing that they are not viewed as having a life of their own. Tatar writes, “As Adrienne Rich pointedly puts it, in childbirth, ‘the mother’s life is exchanged for the child’s; her autonomy as a separate being seems fated to conflict with the infant she will bear’” (223). Now that she has completed her female duty, the good fairy tale woman is replaced by the existence of her son or daughter, causing her to be immortalized as an unattainable woman and mother without having to actually raise her child. She is eventually replaced by a stepmother who fails to live up to her memory, leading this stepmother into competition with the first wife’s biological child.

When the woman’s widowed husband remarries and has a daughter with his new wife, the conflict of “The Juniper Tree” unfolds. The new wife, while she loves her biological daughter, despises her stepson, abusing him with every opportunity because “he would always stand in her way, and she was for ever thinking how she could get all the fortune for her daughter, and the Evil One filled her mind with this till she was quite wroth with the little boy.” The story tells us the Devil himself speaks to her, reminding the woman of her and her daughter’s dependence on her husband’s money and magnifying her fears that they will
eventually lose the fortune to his biological son. Her stepson is also a constant reminder of her husband’s previous marriage and, therefore, of an idealized wife who existed before she did. Once again, a rivalry between two women persists, portraying one woman as perfect (until she isn’t) and another as cruel and wicked. The second wife continuously tortures the son until her abuse escalates one day. Her daughter, Marlinchen, asks for an apple, and the woman gives it to her, but when the girl asks if her brother can have one too, “This made the woman angry.” Soon, the boy arrives home from school, and “it was just as if the Devil entered into her, and she snatched at the apple and took it away again from her daughter, and said, ‘Thou shalt not have one before thy brother.’” She throws the apple into a chest, and as he walks into the room, “the Devil made her say to him kindly, ‘My son, wilt thou have an apple?’ and she looked wickedly at him.” The son obliges, and she feels “forced to say to him, ‘Come with me,’ and she opened the lid of the chest and said, ‘Take out an apple for thyself,’ and while the little boy was stooping inside, the Devil prompted her, and crash! she shut the lid down, and his head flew off and fell among the red apples.” The Devil has possessed the woman and forced her to kill him, turning her most shocking desires into reality. Similarly to the evil Queen in Little Snow-white, this female villain utilizes an apple to lure her victim to his death. Tatar explains that “apples are, by virtue of their biblical function, so closely linked with temptation and deception, it is not surprising that they were smuggled into some versions” of the story (219). Because Marlinchen desires an apple for herself and her brother, the boy is punished. The reappearance of apples in the story also connects to when the man’s first wife is pregnant and becomes “greedy,” leading to her death and potentially the later torture of her son by his stepmother.

After killing her stepson, the stepmother continues to demonstrate the breadth of her wickedness, turning the boy into various morbid forms. She attempts to deceive Marlinchen,
telling her he is still alive, tying his head on his neck with a white handkerchief, and seating him in a chair while holding the apple. Marlinchen asks him for the apple, “but he was silent, and she gave him a box on the ear, on which his head fell down,” letting Marlinchen believe she knocked his head off. Evil women in the Grimm Brothers’ fairy tales tend to be associated with deception and artificiality, while virtuous women are tied to all things natural and life-giving. The mother agrees that Marlinchen is the one responsible for this crime and tells her, “it cannot be helped now, we will make him into black puddings.” Taking the little boy’s corpse, the woman “chopped him into pieces, put him into the pan and made him into black puddings; but Marlinchen stood by weeping and weeping, and all her tears fell into the pan and there was no need for any salt,” seasoning the food with her grief. The gruesomeness of the boy’s murder and transformation of his body into food illustrate that the stepmother is “a differentiator” who “creates a rupture in the ‘natural’ order of things, dividing, segmenting, mutilating, and destroying” (Tatar 219). This strange ritual of cooking the boy’s body and turning it into “black puddings,” with both mother and daughter participating, evokes archetypal images of witches gathered around a cauldron, selfish women who produce chaos. Because women are expected to be nurturing caretakers, the stepmother’s violence combined with the traditionally female responsibility of cooking is all the more shocking. Rather than disposing or getting rid of the evidence of her stepson’s body, she punishes her husband for the boy’s existence by forcing him to unknowingly eat his flesh and blood, her husband responding, “‘Ah, wife, how delicious this food is, give me some more.’” The extreme cruelty of this act reveals the rage the woman feels toward her husband’s previous marriage as well as her and her daughter’s financial reliance on him. His nonconsensual reabsorption of his son, a physical being once a part of him, resembles a reverse transubstantiation produced by the Devil instead of God.
The scene continues by accentuating the father’s enjoyment of the meal to the potential detriment of his family. The Grimm Brothers note, “And the more he ate the more he wanted to have, and he said, ‘Give me some more, you shall have none of it. It seems to me as if it were all mine.’ And he ate and ate and threw all the bones under the table, until he had finished the whole.” Unaware he is feasting on his son, the man demonstrates his selfishness by hoping that no one else will be able to eat the meal’s main course. Since the husband/father has little to no role in the story, this is a rare piece of dialogue we receive from him, forcing us to attribute this behavior to his overall character. Otherwise, he plays an apathetic part within the tale, defined only by his relationship with his wives and children and believing his wife’s explanation that his son “has gone across the country to his mother’s great uncle.” Tatar writes, “Although the fathers of these fairy-tale figures are supremely passive or positively negligent when it comes to their children’s welfare, they remain benevolent personages largely because benign neglect contrasts favorably with the monstrous deeds of their wives” (148–149). While the story punishes his first wife for her “greed” related to their food supply, he is able to eat this meal unapologetically, not considering that the rest of his family may be hungry.

At this point in the tale, Marlinchen fully rejects her mother’s evil, seeking the help of the boy’s deceased mother in nature instead. She “got all the bones from beneath the table, and tied them up in her silk handkerchief, and carried them outside the door, weeping tears of blood,” taking them to the juniper tree. This act makes the tree stir itself, and the branches parted asunder, and moved together again, just as if some one was rejoicing and clapping his hands. At the same time a mist seemed to arise from the tree, and in the centre of this mist it burned like a fire, and a beautiful bird flew out of the fire singing magnificently, and he flew high up in the air, and when he was gone, the
juniper-tree was just as it had been before, and the handkerchief with the bones was no longer there. Marlinchen, however, was as gay and happy as if her brother were still alive. And she went merrily into the house, and sat down to dinner and ate.

Here, Marlinchen establishes herself as the good daughter, reclaiming her to a moral world of clear right and wrong. Marlinchen and the boy’s deceased mother, now transmuted as the juniper tree, assist him in this miracle transformation, allowing him to expose his stepmother’s wrongdoings. As a magical tree with access to the powers of nature, the boy’s biological mother remains a grounded yet angelic figure and is the ultimate foil for her husband’s new wife. Tatar writes,

The mothers serve as progenitors of more than the children—they are the ones who, in their affiliation with origins and endings, generate the action that constitutes the plot and who, through their association with nature at one extreme and with artifice at the other, engender a complex chain of signification. (221)

Without these archetypal women, fairy tales such as “The Juniper Tree” lack a plot or conflict, but female characters who take on active roles often die because of this. The man’s first wife has the ability to bring back her son but not herself, creating a “male savior who puts a decisive end to the step/mother’s nightmarish reign of artifice and duplicity” (Tatar 225). Although the man’s first wife represents nature as opposed to artifice, she is still not saved by the narrative, illustrating that women, as time passes and they reveal their human flaws, are ultimately disposed of in the Grimm Brothers’ fairy tales.

The boy’s suffering leads him to reemerge as a bird, setting him up as a Christlike figure who extinguishes the evil stepmother from the family. His phoenix-like transformation resembles the resurrection of Jesus in the Bible, who came back to life on the third day after he was
crucified. As the voice of truth, he travels through town, revealing his stepmother’s misdeeds through song and collecting valuable objects. He sings to a goldsmith, twenty millers, and a shoemaker and his family

My mother she killed me,
My father he ate me,
My sister, little Marlinchen,
Gathered together all my bones,
Tied them in a silken handkerchief,
Laid them beneath the juniper-tree,
Kywitt, kywitt, what a beautiful bird am I!

The entire town learns of the evil stepmother’s sins through this repetitive performance. The woman is affected by the bird’s song on a telepathic level, sensing the bird coming closer, and when he begins to sing his tune, she “stopped her ears, and shut her eyes, and would not see or hear, but there was a roaring in her ears like the most violent storm, and her eyes burnt and flashed like lightning.” The song causes her to fall “down on the floor in the room, and her cap fell off her head,” and the bird repeats it. Her family ignores the woman’s brutal punishment, rejoicing in the material items the bird gives them that he has gotten from the townspeople – a gold chain and red shoes.

Like the ending of “Little Snow-white and the seven dwarfs,” this tale ends with the stepmother’s physical suffering contrasted with the rest of the family’s joy. She falls “down again as if dead” and remarks,

“Well,” said the woman, and sprang to her feet and her hair stood up like flames of fire,

“I feel as if the world were coming to an end! I, too, will go out and see if my heart feels
lighter.” And as she went out at the door, crash! the bird threw down the millstone on her head, and she was entirely crushed by it.

The comparison of the stepmother’s hair to fire and eventual “smoke, flames, and fire” rising from their house conjures images of Hellfire and the woman’s earlier motivations as persuaded by the Devil. She is killed by a ‘millstone on her head,’ paralleling her murder of the boy and alluding to “Christ’s words on the means for entering heaven: ‘Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; but whoever causes one of these little ones who believes in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea’” (qtd. in Tatar 213). Tatar further explains that the millstone is “an instrument of revenge that punishes adults for injuring the young and innocent” (213). Using the biblical millstone to punish the mother is purposeful, with the boy representing Jesus Christ and illustrating that the evil woman is a threat to Christian morality. The reborn boy is granted Christlike powers – superhuman strength that can defeat evil by hoisting the millstone upon her head.

Now that evil has been eradicated by the boy as a part of nature, he can return to his human form, allowing the family to engage in a celebration. After hearing the woman’s death, Marlinchen and her father go outside, and “there stood the little brother, and he took his father and Marlinchen by the hand, and all three were right glad, and they went into the house to dinner, and ate.” Tatar writes, “The retaliatory murder of the step/mother, which ushers in the return and rebirth of the son, also marks the complete eradication of the mother as a threatening physical presence” (224).

Standard interpretations of fairy tales that reject the mother and move toward the father utilize Freudian theories, but Judith Lewis Herman and Helen Block Lewis argue that the psychoanalytic “interpretation of a young girl’s anger toward her mother (resulting from the inferiority complex the daughter develops), entirely overlooks the male-dominated context in which a growing girl
‘first recognizes what it means to be female in a world where power and privilege are the province of men’” (qtd. in Fisher and Silber). Marlinchen betrays her biological mother, aiding in the effort to kill her and establish her stepfather – the quiet but overpowering patriarchal force – as the permanent ruler of the family. She rejects her mother’s attempt to secure stability for them through the family fortune, instead aligning herself with her father and stepson, making herself dependent on two men. In her young, naïve state, Marlinchen fails to realize she will one day become one of two women – the good mother who dies young, killed by the narrative, or the stepmother, viewed as wicked at the first sign of her flaws and eventually driven to evil because of the impossible nature of living in a male-driven world. As Simone de Beauvoir states in her 1949 book, *The Second Sex*, “since the earliest days of the patriarchy they [men] have thought best to keep woman in a state of dependence; their codes of law have been set up against her” (qtd. in Wilhemssson 171).
4 What punishment does a “false bride” deserve in “Cinderella?”

The Grimm Brothers’ version of Cinderella begins with “the wife of a rich man” falling ill, much like in “Little Snow-white and the seven dwarfs” and “The Juniper Tree,” but in this tale, her daughter Cinderella is no longer an infant. After calling her daughter to her deathbed, the woman instructs the girl to be a perfect angel once she is gone, advising, “‘Dear child, be good and pious, and then the good God will always protect thee, and I will look down on thee from heaven and be near thee.’ Thereupon she closed her eyes and departed.” We do not learn more about the woman, but she is established here as a devout Christian who assures Cinderella that God will protect her if she lives up to specific standards. Cinderella’s father soon remarries, and while she is mistreated by her biological father, stepmother, and stepsisters “who were beautiful and fair of face, but vile and black of heart,” she continues to live up to her late mother’s expectations of her. She “had to do hard work from morning till night, get up before daybreak, carry water, light fires, cook and wash. Besides this, the sisters did her every imaginable injury; they mocked her and emptied her peas and lentils into the ashes, so that she was forced to sit and pick them out again” just to eat. Because “she had no bed to go to, but had to sleep by the fireside in the ashes,” they call her Cinderella, including her own father. Still, she fulfills her womanly duty as promised, completing all of her daily chores and going “to her mother’s grave and wept, and she remained pious and good.”

As do the protagonists in “The Juniper Tree” and “Little Snow-white,” Cinderella finds comfort in nature. While her stepsisters are materialistic, asking their father for “‘beautiful dresses’” and “‘pearls and jewels,’” Cinderella asks only for “‘the first branch which knocks
against your hat on your way home.”” Within the Grimm Brothers’ fairy tales, materialistic attitudes are primarily associated with characters who are “ugly” on the inside, such as the evil Queen from “Little Snow-white” who is obsessed with her mirror and tempts Little Snow-white with unneeded objects that enhance one’s appearance. On the other hand, Cinderella is uninterested in artificial objects, wanting only a twig from a hazel bush so she can offer it to her deceased mother. Her father obliges, bringing her a hazel twig, and she 

thanked him, went to her mother's grave and planted the branch on it, and wept so much that the tears fell down on it and watered it. It grew, however, and became a handsome tree. Thrice a day Cinderella went and sat beneath it, and wept and prayed, and a little white bird always came on the tree, and if Cinderella expressed a wish, the bird threw down to her what she had wished for.

Cinderella’s story frequently makes use of Christian symbology. While stoic in completing her expected responsibilities, she privately expresses her despair at her mother’s grave, crying and praying there three times a day. This perhaps alludes to the three days Christians mourned Jesus Christ’s entombment before he was resurrected. Though her mother is not brought back to life, the girl is encouraged by a white bird, a natural being that supernaturally meets her immediate needs. Tatar says the Grimm Brothers “enact a deceased mother’s undying love for her child by bringing Mother Nature to the heroine’s rescue” (151). Cinderella’s deceased mother is able to intercede through the hazel tree and bird, rewarding her piety and later thwarting the antagonists’ plans.

This encouragement enables Cinderella to tolerate her family’s mistreatment of her until the culminating event of the story, “a festival which was to last three days.” Her stepsisters order her to “‘Comb our hair for us, brush our shoes and fasten our buckles, for we are going to the
festival at the King's palace,”” and she “obeyed, but wept, because she too would have liked to 
go with them to the dance and begged her step-mother to allow her to do so.” Here, the 
stepsisters’ materialistic desires are underscored again, bringing to mind the comb with which 
the evil Queen tempts Little Snow-white. Cinderella proves she is her stepsisters’ dutiful servant, 
but she is emotional about being excluded, so she asks her stepmother to attend with them. Her 
stepmother responds, “‘Thou art dusty and dirty, and wouldst go to the festival? Thou hast no 
clothes and shoes, and yet wouldst dance!’” As, however, Cinderella went on asking, the step-
mother at last said, ‘I have emptied a dish of lentils into the ashes for thee, if thou hast picked 
them out again in two hours, thou shalt go with us.’” Cinderella’s stepmother makes it clear that 
she is an obstacle who intentionally stands in the way of Cinderella getting to the festival and 
requires her to do more labor to attend with the rest of the women of the family. Fisher and 
Silber posit that female protagonists in the Grimm Brothers’ fairy tales are “Trained to regard 
other women as adversaries” and “never find contentment in the company of compassionate 
mothers, other female relations, or friends” (130). While Cinderella’s stepmother is not the direct 
rival for Cinderella’s potential male suitors, she views Cinderella as a threat because she desires 
one of her biological daughters to win the prince’s hand in marriage. Cinderella asks outside 
 sources for help with her stepmother’s demands, calling,

“You tame pigeons, you turtle-doves, and all you birds beneath the sky, come and help 
me to pick

The good into the pot,

The bad into the crop.”

Then two white pigeons came in by the kitchen-window, and afterwards the turtle-
doves, and at last all the birds beneath the sky, came whirring and crowding in, and
alighted amongst the ashes. And the pigeons nodded with their heads and began pick, pick, pick, and the rest began also pick, pick, pick, and gathered all the good grains into the dish. Hardly had one hour passed before they had finished, and all flew out again.

Since she has kept her promises and honored her mother’s memory, Cinderella’s biological mother, through her connection with nature, helps her daughter in the form of the birds. Cinderella demonstrates her steadfast compliance when her stepmother forces her to repeat this process again, but the hateful woman ultimately rejects her requests to attend the ball with the rest of the family. The stepmother herself operates as a patriarchal voice, telling women they are never perfect enough in appearance and character for male approval.

In desperation, Cinderella visits the tree for a third time, which leads her to a plentiful reward. The Grimm Brothers write, “As no one was now at home, Cinderella went to her mother’s grave beneath the hazel tree, and cried, ‘Shiver and quiver, little tree, Silver and gold throw down over me.’ Then the bird threw a gold and silver dress down to her, and slippers embroidered with silk and silver.” The birds who provide Cinderella with elegant clothing and help her pick lentils out of the ashes evoke the supernatural phoenix and the boy in “The Juniper Tree,” who rises from the ashes and transforms into a new version of himself. Notably, Cinderella is portrayed as sharing a similar desire as her stepsisters for material objects, but because she completes her challenges and patiently waits for help through the forces of nature, she is rewarded and, in time, earns her “happily ever after” while her stepsisters are punished. Elisabeth Panttaja infers that “Cinderella wins the battle because her mother is able, through magic, to provide raiment so stunning that no ordinary dress can compete” (90). Cinderella asks nature for help in private instead of openly
demanding material desires like her stepsisters. She hides her request of “Silver and gold,” only asking “As no one was now at home,” as “The Good and True Princess” who “has learned to maintain silence, for she comes to see that her truths would be punished as disruptive” (Fisher and Silber 129). If a female character in one of the Grimm Brothers’ fairy tales wants to express a desire or take action, her efforts must not be seen or heard by the public.

Once Cinderella arrives at the ball, her beauty earns the prince’s unrelenting devotion to her. He “went to meet her, took her by the hand and danced with her. He would dance with no other maiden, and never let loose of her hand, and if any one else came to invite her, he said, ‘This is my partner.’” To hide her identity, she runs away at the end of the evening but returns to the festival the next day in “a much more beautiful dress than on the preceding day.” Cinderella not only tries to hide her attendance at the ball from her stepmother and stepsisters out of fear of punishment, but also demonstrates that she is a modest woman who is not desperate to receive a marriage proposal. On the third day of the festival, “the bird threw down to her a dress which was more splendid and magnificent than any she had yet had, and the slippers were golden. And when she went to the festival in the dress, no one knew how to speak for astonishment.” For patiently living according to patriarchal standards, Cinderella is rewarded three days in a row, becoming more and more beautiful each day. The third night, so she doesn’t escape, the prince “used a stratagem, and had caused the whole staircase to be smeared with pitch, and there, when she ran down, had the maiden’s left slipper remained sticking. The King’s son picked it up, and it was small and dainty, and all golden.” Determined to marry her, the prince tries to hold Cinderella captive against her will, which is presented as normal behavior for men. Since Cinderella is
consistently presented as an ideal woman, her shoe indicates to us that a perfect woman is “small and dainty.”

The prince and his father look for the woman the next day, basing their search on whether a woman’s foot fits into the slipper. Cinderella’s stepsisters are glad, for they had pretty feet. The eldest went with the shoe into her room and wanted to try it on, and her mother stood by. But she could not get her big toe into it, and the shoe was too small for her. Then her mother gave her a knife and said, “Cut the toe off; when thou art Queen thou wilt have no more need to go on foot.” The maiden cut the toe off, forced the foot into the shoe, swallowed the pain, and went out to the King's son.

This telling scene shows that women often feel forced to go to any lengths, even the most extreme, to fit into a prescribed role. The stepsisters are urged by their own mother to inflict violence upon themselves, all so they can marry the future king. Their mother follows the patriarchal agenda but does not realize artificiality will work against her daughters in their quest for a husband. For this action, Cinderella’s stepmother is not punished by the narrative, perhaps because she helps violently “punish” her witchlike daughters. Their self-mutilation does not pay off, leading the prince to take her on his horse as his bride and rode away with her. They were, however, obliged to pass the grave, and there, on the hazel-tree, sat the two pigeons and cried,

“Turn and peep, turn and peep,
There's blood within the shoe,
The shoe it is too small for her,
The true bride waits for you.”
Then he looked at her foot and saw how the blood was streaming from it. He turned his horse round and took the false bride home again, and said she was not the true one, and that the other sister was to put the shoe on.

As a bird reveals truths in “The Juniper Tree,” the first stepsister’s lie is announced by the birds who helped Cinderella, accusing the stepsister of being a “false bride.” Soon, when the other stepsister cuts off her heel to fit into the shoe, the birds also reveal her.

Having returned the two “false brides” to the family’s house, the prince asks if they have another daughter, but Cinderella’s father responds, “No… There is still a little stunted kitchen-wench which my late wife left behind her, but she cannot possibly be the bride.”

While portrayed as nearly as cruel to Cinderella as his new wife and her daughters, Cinderella’s father faces no repercussions for his behavior. Tatar notes, “Even when they violate basic codes of morality and decency, fathers remain noble figures who rarely commit premeditated acts of evil. Stepmothers, however, are unreconstructed villains, malicious by nature and disposition” (151). Cinderella’s father views her as the rest of the family does, a servant girl who is still around simply because her mother died.

Upon discovering that she fits into the shoe, Cinderella is rewarded with the prince’s proposal, the prince exclaiming that she is “the true bride!” She rides off with the prince, headed toward marriage, and is finally able to escape her terrible life. Due to her pious nature and beauty, Cinderella wins the competition for the prince, but rarely are good female protagonists in the Grimm Brothers’ fairy tales able to save themselves. Instead, only women who unceasingly align themselves with the patriarchy are assisted by nature and God to find their “happily ever after” – dependence on a male figure. The stepsisters, having unsuccessfully mutilated themselves to conform, are further punished at the wedding of
Cinderella and her prince when “the pigeons pecked out one eye of each of them. Afterwards as they came back… the pigeons pecked out the other eye of each. And thus, for their wickedness and falsehood, they were punished with blindness as long as they lived.” Like the “happily ever after” scenes at the end of “Little Snow-white and the seven dwarfs” and “The Juniper Tree,” the physical punishment of female villains takes center stage rather than the success of the protagonists. While Cinderella’s beauty is accentuated when she proves herself as a faultless and devout Christian woman, the stepsisters are punished by the same birds who helped Cinderella, transforming them into blind women with mutilated feet. Their physical disabilities now reflect their “vile” personalities and destine them to become diabolical spinsters. Though it was the stepmother who demanded her daughters’ artifice, they are brutally attacked, not only for their “wickedness” but also for their “falsehood” – their extreme efforts to adhere to societal expectations of women and fit into the role of the prince’s wife as demanded by their mother.

In the quest for marital success, Cinderella’s biological mother is not so different from her stepmother after all. As Elisabeth Panttaja writes, the two women “share the same devotion to their daughters and the same long-term goals: each mother wants to ensure a future of power and prestige for her daughter, and each is willing to resort to extreme measures to achieve her aim” (90). Arguably, Cinderella’s biological mother goes to even greater lengths to achieve her mission, since she works from beyond the grave. When Cinderella fits into the shoe and becomes “the true bride,” “she leaves behind the hazel bush, and fully enters the patriarchal world, thus satisfying the conventions of women’s proper role” (Fisher and Silber 122). However, as we have seen in the other Grimm Brothers’ fairy
tales, Cinderella’s happiness will likely not last long because in this patriarchal society, she will either die a good woman or live long enough to see herself become a hideous witch.
Several of the Grimm Brothers’ fairy tales, “Little-snow white and the seven dwarfs,” “The Juniper Tree,” and “Cinderella” act as cautionary tales that instruct proper and unacceptable behaviors of women. These stories were published by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm in predominantly Protestant nineteenth-century Germany, a time that situated women in the role of nurturing homemaker and desired for them to be “good and pious.” While women were young and, therefore, still considered beautiful by society’s standards, they were expected to marry and serve their husbands, providing them with children.

In order to survive and prosper, young female protagonists in the Grimm Brothers’ fairy tales uphold patriarchal expectations of them, while evil female villains are unable to fit into this role and are therefore driven to artifice and violence. Even though male characters often ignore or criticize their biological children, they are never scrutinized, whereas female characters who have been placed in the role of stepmother or stepsister are portrayed as witches. The wicked female character is constantly reminded that she will never compare in looks or character to the man’s first wife as well as his biological child, leading to the story’s conflict. In their defense against the evil woman, female characters are given extra assistance through natural motifs associated with Christianity, provided by their idealized biological mothers who have since passed on. Ultimately pious protagonists are illustrated as deserving of men, their tales leading to a husband or a return to their father, while their rivals are attacked brutally and publicly with disfigurement or death.

While these tales illustrated proper conduct for women during the time they were published, they can also extend to women throughout history and even today. In the age of social
media, ageism is common, sending women messages that they need to make themselves look younger in order to remain appealing in the eyes of society, and women often feel they have to compete with one another, proving their beauty and perfect character, for male attention. The Grimm Brothers’ fairy tales — popular stories such as “Cinderella” and “Snow White,” but also lesser-known tales such as “The Juniper Tree” — propagate messages that have left a lasting impact on cultures around the world.
References


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